

THE NATIVE AMERICAN OTHER IN *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*

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1. Settling in the Fictional Historical Indian Territory

In *On the Way Home* (1962), the posthumously published diary account of a journey that Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867-1957) made with her husband and daughter from South Dakota to Missouri in 1894, nearly forty years before she was to become the famous and beloved author of her Little House books, she recounts looking at the James River landscape.

We all stopped and looked back at the scene and I wished for an artist's hand or a poet's brain or even to be able to tell in good plain prose how beautiful it was. If I had been the Indians I would have scalped more white folks before I ever would have left it.

We could see the river winding down the valley, the water gleaming through the trees that grow on the bank. Beyond it the bluffs rose high and bare, browned and burned, above the lovely green of trees and grass and the shining water. On this side the bluffs again were gigantic brown waves tumbled and tossed about. (28-29)

As she vividly describes the land she is leaving, Wilder also reveals her complex view of Native Americans. She sympathizes with them for losing their magnificent land and criticizes them for not fighting harder to keep it. She believes they were both violent (scalping white people) and weak (giving up their land too easily). She identifies with them, for she, too, was leaving that land to live elsewhere, but also implies that she is more appreciative of its beauty than they were and assumes that even had they fought harder, they would have had to leave eventually, as if that were their destiny rather than a series of choices made by people living back then.

In "'The Only Good Indian': History, Race, and Representation in

Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*" (2002-03), Sharon Smulders uses the quotation from *On the Way Home* to epitomize Wilder's treatment of Native Americans in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), denying "the real experience of aboriginal Americans in order to validate the assimilation of the American landscape to the civilizing project of frontier settlement" (191). But the Wilder who wrote that diary entry in 1894 was no longer Laura Ingalls, the innocent 1870s protagonist of *Little House on the Prairie*, and had not yet become Laura Ingalls Wilder, the wiser 1930s author of the novel. Scholars tend to interpret the depiction of Native Americans in *Little House on the Prairie* in one of two opposing ways. One, like that of Smulders, sees Wilder as ethnocentrically bound by negative Indian and positive pioneer stereotypes, while the other, like that of Ann Romines in "The Frontier of the Little House" (2002), sees her as open-mindedly trying to value the Native American Other. In this paper I will analyze the treatment of the Osage Indians in *Little House on the Prairie* and demonstrate two main points. First, Wilder's vision of Native Americans is complex, because she presents different views through different characters according to their different personalities and experiences and changing moods, motives, and situations and because she is writing an aesthetically rich novel with "an artist's hand or poet's brain." Second, the novel ultimately offers a positive view of Native Americans marked by the lost chance at communication with them.

Kathy Piehl recounts in *American Writers for Children, 1900-1960* (1983) how Wilder was born in 1867 in the forest near Pepin, Wisconsin, and in 1869 moved with her family to the Kansas Indian Territory. After trying to make a new life on the prairie there, in 1870 the Ingallses moved

back to Wisconsin, despite the Osage having decided to accept a new treaty and move to a new reservation (thus opening their land to legal white settlement). Wilder's first novel, *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932), occurs in Wisconsin in 1872 when her fictional self is four- to five-years old. After publishing this novel, she realized that she wanted to tell children more of the story of her pioneer youth, including her time on the prairie, which meant that in order to age her fictional persona, the second book detailing her life had to occur a year later than the first. Thus the fictional Laura of 1873 and 1874 in *Little House on the Prairie* is older than Wilder was when her family actually lived there from 1869 to 1870. In fact, in *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder* (1998) John E. Miller calls *Little House on the Prairie* Wilder's "fictionalized version of the episode," because she was too young to remember what happened on the prairie and "had to rely on stories related by her parents rather than on her own childhood memories to describe the family's year on the Kansas prairie" (24). Nevertheless, Miller also asserts that "her descriptions of frequent powwows and drums in the night, Indians walking into cabins to take settlers' food and tobacco, and other anxious moments between the settlers and the Indians conform to the historical record" (24). Smulders, on the other hand, finds ideologically motivated historical inaccuracies in *Little House on the Prairie*:

Wilder's emendations ... promote the anti-New Deal myth of self-sufficiency that ... pervades the Little House books.... Because her frontier is more ideological than it is historical, Wilder suppresses or alters those facts of her experience that contradict the self-sufficiency of the Ingalls family, oppose the legitimacy of western settlement, and acknowledge the legal rights of indigenous Americans. (192)

While conceding Smulder's points, in this paper I will complicate them by delineating aesthetic motives for Wilder's fictional prairie and aspects of her novel that undercut its surface ideology.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, why do the Ingallses, including Pa, Ma, Laura, her older sister Mary, her younger sister Baby Carrie, and the family bulldog Jack, move from the Big Woods of Wisconsin to the Kansas Indian Territory? Ma is unenthusiastic about uprooting her family from the woods where they have worked so hard to make a life and they are close to their relatives, but Pa feels oppressed by the influx of newcomers to the Big Woods and wants to live in a country with many wild animals and few people. He has been caught by the idea of the West, where "the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there" (2). Originally that part read, "... and there were no people. Only Indians lived there." But in 1952 Wilder's editor, Ursula Nordstrom, wrote to her about a fan letter criticizing the implication that Indians are not people and asked Wilder's permission to change "people" to "settlers." Wilder replied to Nordstrom, "You are perfectly right about the fault in *Little House on the Prairie* and have my permission to make the correction you suggest. It was a stupid blunder of mine. Of course Indians are people and I did not intend to imply they were not" (Nordstrom 54). Despite the amendment, though, "Only Indians lived there" implies that Indians need not be taken as seriously as Pa's desire to settle in their land.

When Pa moves his family into what is called in the novel "the Western country" (2), "the West" (6), "Indian country" (9), and "Indian Territory" (237), he has moved them into a "fifty-mile-wide Osage Indian Reserve that

ran east to west across two-thirds of the southern part of [Kansas]" (Miller 23). Scholars refer variously to the location of the family: Kansas (Miller), the Osage Indian Reserve (Miller), Indian Territory (Piehl, Smulders), Kansas Indian Territory (Romines). The different ways to refer to where they are settling highlight the complexity of the situation, but Pa knows they are not in the USA. Towards the end of *Little House on the Prairie*, he mentions being "three miles over the [Kansas] line into Indian Territory," which implies that he knows he is illegally settling on Indian land, though he blames the US government for encouraging him to do so (316). In fact, in real life Laura's family was much farther over the border into Indian Territory, twenty miles instead of the three in the novel (Smulders 192), and much nearer to the county seat of Independence, thirteen miles instead of the forty in the novel (Miller 26). The novel fictionally isolates Laura's family from settler neighbors; according to a census taken at the time, Miller lists at least twenty settlers living in the area, while in the novel only Mr. Edwards and Mr. and Mrs. Scott appear as neighbors. Smulders believes that Wilder exaggerates the isolation of her family in the novel to enhance her libertarian ideology (192). And we may speculate that Wilder decreased the distance inside Indian Territory to decrease the impression that Pa is knowingly doing something wrong or illegal. Miller says that the Ingallses were "illegally squatting" (23) in Kansas, words that Wilder never writes. Smulders asserts, "Committed to celebrating the westward progress of American civilization in *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder could not confront the illegality of frontier settlement nor her family's culpability in driving the Osage from their land in Kansas" (193).

In addition to pushing her libertarian, pro-pioneer ideology, however,

Wilder's fictional isolation of her family on the prairie also allows her to develop her aesthetic and thematic goals by, for example, focusing more vividly on gender roles, family relationships, and the sublimity of nature. Laura is appealing because, unlike Mary, she often fails to fit the good girl role that Ma tries to inculcate in her daughters. Laura has bad manners (talking with her mouth full), embraces life with unrestrained joy (singing to prairie birds while eating), is drawn to wild animals (watching wolves in the moonlight), maintains an independent mind (wanting Jack to enter heaven despite Ma's strict Protestant denial), is interested in men's work (helping Pa make the little house's door), and is fascinated by Indians (asking repeatedly to see them). Such character traits have the space to develop and stand out on the fictional prairie, making Laura the favorite of Pa and the reader. The prairie also acts as a vast manifestation of Laura's emotions. At first the prairie is oppressively beautiful, because it is new to Laura and she and her family are so small under the big bowl of the sky (13). After Jack is lost, the prairie is sadly beautiful, the wind grieving, the "enormous" sun "throbbing and pulsing with light," and the sky glowing pink, yellow, and blue below, nothing above (26). After Jack returns and the family settles on the prairie, it becomes richly beautiful, vibrant with insects, birds, and animals, a place "where the winds were always blowing and the grasses seemed to sing and whisper and laugh" (113). And the novel ends with a sublime and romantic prairie, the sky and stars and Pa's fiddle and voice transporting Laura (334-35).

2. Desiring the Other: "I Want to See a Papoose"

The most important effect of the family's exaggerated isolation on the

prairie is to intensify the presence of Native Americans there. From the beginning of the novel Wilder establishes them as desired Others for Laura. As the family is leaving the Big Woods of Wisconsin, to compensate Laura for the loss of their little house Pa promises that in the West she will see a papoose, "a little, brown, Indian baby" (6). Smulders points out that by using "papoose" Pa stereotypes Indians into one homogenous group, for papoose is an Algonquin word and the Osage had a different word for baby (193). That is true, but Pa's introduction to Laura of the idea of a papoose also captures her imagination and teaches her that Indians are people with children like her.

Soon after the family reaches Indian Territory and is camping on the prairie, while Pa is off hunting and Laura, Mary, and Ma are eating dinner, Laura asks, "Where is a papoose, Ma?" Ma at first tries to avoid answering: "Don't speak with your mouth full, Laura" (46). But Laura swallows her food and states, "I want to see a papoose" (46).

"Mercy on us!" Ma said. "Whatever makes you want to see Indians? We will see enough of them. More than we want to, I wouldn't wonder."

"They wouldn't hurt us, would they?" Mary asked. Mary was always good; she never spoke with her mouth full.

"No!" Ma said. "Don't get such an idea into your head."

"Why don't you like Indians, Ma?" Laura asked, and she caught a drip of molasses with her tongue.

"I just don't like them; and don't lick your fingers, Laura," said Ma.

"This is Indian country, isn't it?" Laura said. "What did we come to their country for, if you don't like them?"

Ma said she didn't know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn't know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long. Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. (46-47)

Laura intuits that Ma dislikes Indians, which forces Ma to acknowledge her prejudice and then to attempt to divert Laura by criticizing her manners again. But Laura then asks Ma the question that drives to the heart of the family's pioneer project. Rather than answer Laura's question with the troubling truth that their family moved because Pa wanted to live in wilderness while she wanted to stay in the Big Woods, Ma claims ignorance as to whether or not they are in Indian Territory and then implies that white settlement will soon force the Indians out anyway. Perhaps Ma dislikes Indians without having met any partly because they represent the prairie to which Pa has moved the family against her will. The passage initiates the ironic concept of the novel that "good" girls like Mary are averse to Indians, while "bad" girls like Laura are attracted to them, Wilder making it obvious that good and bad are complex terms because Laura is so much more appealing than Mary.

The next day Pa moves his family to where they will build their new house, and when Laura explores an odd tunnel in the prairie grass, she feels someone watching her. Laura is more sensitive than Pa to Indians, for she has sensed their presence in the tunnel, while he dismisses it as "some old trail" (55) and builds the little house right next to it, a serious error because it turns out to be an important trail used by the Indians when they have returned from seasonal camps elsewhere. That evening Laura resumes her

quest for a papoose, this time asking Pa when she would see one. Pa answers that he does not know, because you can only see Indians if they want you to see them. This satisfies Laura for the time being, because she senses that Pa does not dislike Indians and is knowledgeable about them, for he knows "all about wild animals, so he must know about wild men, too. Laura thought he would show her a papoose some day, just as he had shown her fawns, and little bears, and wolves" (55-56). To view certain human beings as animals may seem demeaning, but Pa and Laura respect animals and would prefer to live among them than among civilized people. And the papoose remains for Laura an identifying link between "wild men" and herself.

As time passes, Laura grows impatient to see a papoose. While Pa is building the roof of the little house, he sings, "One little Indian, two little Indians, three little Indians" and says, "No, only two," because the sun has browned Laura and Mary. Pa's playful comment spurs Laura to ask, "Pa, when are we going to see a papoose?" (122-23) Ma reacts as before, expressing disapproval and correcting Laura's manners. "Goodness!" Ma exclaimed. "What do you want to see an Indian baby for? Put on your sunbonnet, now, and forget such nonsense" (123). Ma avoids saying papoose, as if speaking an Indian word would uncivilize her. She links wanting to see a papoose with bad manners and forgetting "such nonsense" with good ones. While Ma values the sunbonnet for protecting a civilized woman's white skin, Laura hates it for limiting her vision of the world to a tunnel. She dons it only at Ma's command. Ma forces Laura to wear the sunbonnet as part of her attempt to distinguish herself and her family from Indians, an attempt that the novel criticizes as narrow-minded

through Laura's resentment at having her world restricted. Despite Ma's efforts, Laura continues to imagine papooses and Indians and to relate herself and her family to them: "This was Indian country and she didn't know why she didn't see Indians" (123). Later when Pa hunts a panther to protect his daughters, Laura asks "if a panther would carry off a little papoose and kill and eat her, too" (262).

3. Fearing the Other: "Indians in the House"

Laura has been waiting to see a papoose for months when suddenly a pair of male warriors visits the little house while Pa is off hunting. Laura and Mary are outside comforting Jack, who must be chained while Pa is gone to prevent him from attacking Indian passersby, when the dog stands up, growling, neck hairs bristling and eyes glaring red at two "tall, thin, fierce-looking men" (134). Laura shivers with terror: "there was a queer feeling in her middle and the bones in her legs felt weak" (135). When the men enter the house where Ma and Baby Carrie are, Laura wants to release Jack so that he can kill them. When Mary talks her out of doing that, Laura summons all her courage and runs into the house, only to find "the naked wild men" standing by the fireplace while Ma is cooking. Rather than cornbread, however, Laura smells something awful and hides behind a plank of wood leaning against the wall. Her curiosity battles her fear, as she repeatedly peeks out from behind the wood to examine the Indians.

First she saw their leather moccasins. Then their stringy, bare, red-brown legs, all the way up. Around their waists each of the Indians wore a leather thong, and the furry skin of a small animal hung down in front. The fur was striped black and white, and now

Laura knew what made that smell. The skins were fresh skunk skins. A knife like Pa's hunting knife, and a hatchet like Pa's hatchet, were stuck into each skunk skin. The Indians' ribs made little ridges up their sides. Their arms were folded on their chests. At last Laura looked again at their faces, and she dodged quickly behind the slab.

Their faces were bold and fierce and terrible. Their black eyes glittered. High on their foreheads and above their ears where hair grows, these wild men had no hair. But on top of their heads a tuft of hair stood straight up. It was wound around with string, and feathers were stuck in it. (139-40)

When Laura peeks out from behind the wood at the Indians, one of them looks right at her: "Two black eyes glittered down into her eyes. The Indian did not move, not one muscle of his face moved. Only his eyes shone and sparkled at her." He makes "two short, harsh sounds in his throat" and is answered by the other Indian making "one sound like 'Hah!'" (140) After finishing "every crumb of the cornbread," one Indian makes "harsh sounds in his throat" at Ma, who looks at him without saying anything, and the Indians leave the house and walk away across the prairie (141). When Pa returns from hunting, and Ma tells him that two Indians came and ate cornbread and took his tobacco and that she was afraid, he assures her that she did the right thing because, "The main thing is to be on good terms with the Indians. We don't want to wake up some night with a band of the screeching dev--" (144). Ma silences him to avoid frightening the girls, but ironically the chapter ends when Pa speaks in a frightening voice to Laura because she had almost released Jack. His anger at Laura, nearly as shocking to her as the Indian visitors, is due to his believing that the

Indians would have killed Jack, "And that's not all" (146).

Wilder's description of Laura's perception of the men is vivid, alien, and frightening, with undercurrents of humor and familiarity. This is the first time in the novel that Laura feels so much fear; even when the family crossed a swollen river on their way to Kansas and they were almost swept away to destruction, she was only excited. For Laura to be afraid of the Indians and sure that they will harm Ma and Baby Carrie to the point of wanting Jack to kill them, reveals that in addition to being influenced by Jack's rage and shocked by their semi-nude and male appearance after she has been imagining genderless Indian babies, she must have absorbed negative ideas about Indians from the adults around her. Perhaps because she has been taught to view Indians as wild animals, she feels as if two panthers had entered her house. That Laura feels no guilt over wanting Jack to kill the men, despite their only eating cornbread and taking tobacco, and that the lesson she receives from Pa is not to try to understand different cultures but instead to obey him, reveals something wrong in her family's approach to Native Americans.

The scene is another example in the novel of Laura, despite her fear, being sensually attracted to the Wild Male. Wilder prepares for the maleness, fierce aspect, association with animals, glittering eyes, and pointed heads of the Indians with earlier descriptions of sublime wolves and charismatic Pa. When wolves are surrounding the little house in the moonlight, Laura watches the one sitting opposite her: "Everything about him was big--his pointed ears, and his pointed mouth with the tongue hanging out, and his strong shoulders and legs, and his two paws side by side and his tail curled around his squatting haunch. His coat was shaggy

gray and his eyes were glittering green" (96). And while Pa builds the little house's chimney, Laura watches Ma and him running their hands through his hair to make it stand up so that he looks like the wild man he was when courting her (114-15). Pa frequently gazes at Laura with eyes shining with affection. And the Indians' shining and sparkling eyes express their charmed appreciation for the fearful and curious little girl. A feature unique to the Indians is their near nudity. Given Protestant America's cultural taboos on children seeing nude adults, the Ingallses take their baths separately, and Laura has probably never seen a naked man, not even Pa, another reason why the visiting men so alarm her. Smulders interprets the men's skunk fur loincloths as representing their "bestiality," "rank animalism," and threatening sexuality (197). Romines finds in the scene fears of interracial rape of white women (*Constructing* 65). But we may also read their skunk fashion as signaling their peaceful intentions, as when hikers wear bells while walking through bear country, for skunk scent warns away predators and people, and it would be difficult to launch a sneak attack in fresh skunk skins.

The Indians' restraint is remarkable. White people have come to their land and cut down trees and built houses and hunted animals without asking permission or offering payment. Although the men could do anything they want to Ma and the girls, they probably want to see how the Ingallses live and probably feel that they deserve cornbread and tobacco. According to Francis W. Kaye, the men are behaving in ways "consistent with the customary landlord-tenant relationship that the Osage had established with at least some squatters" (133), ways described by eyewitness accounts of visits by local Indians (Smulders 197). But, as Smulders

says, "just as Wilder does not contextualize corn and tobacco as products of native agricultural ingenuity, she does not recognize Pa's trapping as poaching nor acknowledge the deprivation visited on indigenous peoples by the appropriation of their land and game" (197). Pa says that he wants to be on good terms with the Indians (and so does not mind their taking his tobacco), not because he feels like an intruder in their land who owes them something, but because he wants to avoid "screeching dev[ils]" attacking his family. That Pa refers to the Indians as devils complicates his apparent good feelings towards them elsewhere in the novel.

Despite obvious differences like language and nudity, Wilder provides clues that Indians and white people are not as different as Laura and her parents believe, which in turn makes us regret that the two cultures fail to communicate in a mutually enriching way. Laura sees that the Indians use hunting knives and hatchets like Pa's, but the information does not familiarize the men to her. Apparently in Indian culture men wander around hunting while women stay home, but Laura does not realize that those are Pa and Ma's roles too. Laura views the men eating Ma's cornbread down to the last crumb as an estranging feature, even though her family is also careful not to waste food. The Indians make sounds that we but not Laura identify as language, albeit one her parents have never bothered to learn. After the Indians eat the cornbread and one makes "harsh sounds," probably expressing thanks or appreciation, Ma does not try to communicate with the Indians due to her fear and prejudice. She is sick after the visit. She describes the Indians as thieves for taking Pa's tobacco rather than as similar human beings with similar pleasures. Both Ma and Laura view the Indians as foreign intruders rather than as local

hosts.

4. Learning about the Other: "Indian Camp"

Laura's encounter with the Indians does not traumatize her, for she continues wanting to see a papoose, and when, three chapters later, Pa announces that he will take his daughters to an abandoned Indian camp, she claps her hands with excitement. Ma, who always tries to discourage Laura's interest in Indians, objects, arguing that the distance and heat are too great, but Pa wins the debate by identifying his family with the local people: "This heat doesn't hurt the Indians and it won't hurt us" (173). The description of the prairie is sensual: "The air was really as hot as the air in an oven, and it smelled faintly like baking bread. Pa said the smell came from all the grass seeds parching in the heat" (174). Like an anthropologist, Pa examines and explains the Indian camp to his daughters, pointing out camp fire ashes, tent-pole holes, bones gnawed by dogs, grasses eaten by ponies, and moccasin tracks left by adults and children (175-76). He analyzes a cooking site:

Pa read the tracks for Mary and Laura. He showed them tracks of two middle-sized moccasins by the edge of a camp fire's ashes. An Indian woman had squatted there. She wore a leather skirt with fringes; the tiny marks of the fringe were in the dust. The track of her toes inside the moccasins was deeper than the track of her heels, because she had leaned forward to stir something cooking in a pot on the fire.

Then Pa picked up a smoke-blackened forked stick. And he said that the pot had hung from a stick laid across the top of two upright,

forked sticks. He showed Mary and Laura the holes where the forked sticks had been driven into the ground. Then he told them to look at the bones around the camp fire and tell him what had cooked in that pot.

They looked, and they said, "Rabbit." That was right; the bones were rabbits' bones. (176-77)

Pa describes the domestic scene so that the girls can visualize it and engages them in the lesson by asking them to identify the bones from the cooking pot.

Suddenly Laura notices pretty beads lying here and there in the dirt of the camp, and she and Mary forget about everything but finding red, green, white, brown, and blue beads. Pa helps them gather beads until it is nearly sunset, when he leads the girls back home, where "The beads [are] even prettier than they had been in the Indian camp" (179). Laura's pleasure in the sparkling and shining beads becomes bittersweet when Mary says, "Carrie can have mine," and Ma pointedly waits for Laura to work through her desire to keep her pretty beads until she finally says, "Carrie can have mine, too" (179). Ma compliments both girls and has them make a bead necklace for Baby Carrie, but Laura feels that if she looks at Mary she will slap her for being "such a good little girl" (181).

The beads have various meanings. They symbolize Laura's fascination with Indian culture, but she and Mary abandon Pa's anthropology lesson to search for beads, which they want more for their magical beauty than for their association with Indians. For that matter, why have the Indians left beads on the ground? Their men have carefully picked up and eaten each crumb of cornbread, so is food more valuable than beads to them? No one

in Laura's family asks such questions. Moreover, although the beads are Indian possessions, they look prettier in the little house than in the Indian camp. That must be due to Laura feeling at home in her little house, but it also asserts that Indian items are more beautiful when taken into white culture. In Laura's house the beads assume new meanings: symbols of the appropriation of the items of the Other (complicated because glass beads were of white manufacture) and symbols of the feminizing of the civilized western female (the necklace paralleling the china lady that Ma displays above the fireplace). Good Mary is quick to give her beads to Carrie, whereas bad Laura wants to keep hers, which shows the older girl's generosity and lack of interest in Indians. Ma wants Laura to turn her beads into a necklace for Carrie to teach her not to be selfish, but also to remove Indian culture from her.

Despite losing her beautiful beads, the chapter ends with Laura remembering the "wonderful day," confident that "she could always think about that long walk across the prairie, and about all they had seen in the Indian camp" (181). Nevertheless, although Pa's anthropology lesson implies that the Indians are humans like his family, he doesn't overtly state the connections between both cultures: keeping dogs and horses, eating mostly animal meat, having similar roles for men and women, and liking pretty beads. And because Pa and his girls visit an abandoned camp rather than an inhabited one, an opportunity has been lost, for Mary and Laura could not meet Indians or make friends with Indian children. The beads are an unintentional compensation to the Ingallses for cornbread and tobacco that highlights their lack of interest in learning about the living Native American Other. The implication that the best interactions between whites

and Indians occur when Indians are absent belongs to the strand in the novel of the appreciation of the vanished Indian, which appears again when Pa and Ma play and sing a song called "The Blue Juniata."

5. Playing the Other: "The Blue Juniata"

Two thirds of the way through the novel, Laura's family is settled on the prairie, little house completed, vegetable garden established, and friends of their few white neighbors made. And yet stress assails the family, due to the increased presence of the Indians, who have returned from another seasonal home and cross back and forth in front of the little house on their daily business. Pa admits that the fault is his for building the family house next to the Indian path, but he ignores the larger fault of squatting on their land. Ma sympathizes with the family bulldog: "Jack hated Indians, and Ma said she didn't blame him. She said, 'I declare, Indians are getting so thick around here that I can't look up without seeing one'" (227). No sooner has she said that than Ma sees an Indian standing in the doorway. After Pa prevents Jack from attacking him, the two men eat dinner and smoke tobacco together in companionable silence. Mary and Laura are mesmerized by the man's stillness, bare chest, feathered scalplock, and beaded moccasins. After the meal and the smoke, the Indian speaks to Pa, but Pa can only say, "No speak" (229). After the Indian leaves, Pa compliments him, saying, "that Indian was no common trash," and identifies him as an Osage, the first mention of the tribal name in the novel. Pa then regrets not having learned the French that the Indian has tried to use as a common language: "I wish I had picked up some of that lingo" (229).

We may marvel at the arrogant ignorance of settlers like Pa moving onto Osage land without learning their language, let alone the French the Osage had learned through alliances in the 17th and 18th centuries (Hoxie 449). Romines contrasts the Indians' "mastery of French" and "cosmopolitan civility" with "the limitations of the unilingual Ingallses" (*Constructing* 71). We may appreciate Wilder's attempt to individualize the tribe of the Indian by writing accurate details about him like the name of his tribe, his scalplock, and his use of French. Although we may also admire Pa for his friendly hospitality and appreciate that he, unlike Ma and Jack, does not hate the family's Indian neighbors, as Smulders puts it, "Pa's Americanisms ('lingo' and 'common trash') reveal a disrespect for the other" (198). Nonetheless, Pa defends the Indians from Ma's view of them as vermin. After she complains, "I don't like Indians around underfoot," Pa says, "That Indian was perfectly friendly... And their camps down among the bluffs are peaceable enough. If we treat them well and watch Jack, we won't have any trouble" (229-30).

The next day Pa again prevents Jack from attacking an Indian and explains, "Well, it's his path. An Indian trail, long before we came" (230). Therefore Pa chains Jack up night and day, sacrificing the freedom and morale of his dog for the sake of peaceful co-existence with the Osage. Later, while Pa is out hunting, two "dirty and scowling and mean" Indians visit the little house (232). One man picks up the bundle of furs that Pa is planning to trade for a plow and seeds and carries it to the door, but when the other says something to him he drops the furs on the floor, and the pair leaves. The narrator does not explain that the second Osage must tell the first not to take the furs, nor does she point out that Native Americans

often felt that they deserved gifts from white settlers as a reciprocation for land use (Smulders 197). When Pa hears what happened, he soberly says "that all was well that ended well" (234). Such scenes show Pa trying to accommodate the Osage and to keep Ma on an even keel.

In the context of these stressful encounters Pa plays and Ma sings a popular mid-nineteenth century song called "The Blue Juniata." Of the many songs in *Little House on the Prairie*, this is the first one that Pa plays and Ma sings together, and it is the first one about Native Americans.

That evening when Mary and Laura were in bed, Pa played his fiddle. Ma was rocking in the rocking chair, holding Baby Carrie against her breast, and she began to sing softly with the fiddle:

"Wild roved an Indian maid,
Bright Alfarata,
Where flow the waters
Of the blue Juniata.
Strong and true my arrows are
In my painted quiver,
Swift goes my light canoe
Adown the rapid river.

"Bold is my warrior good,
The love of Alfarata,
Proud wave his sunny plumes
Along the Juniata.
Soft and low he speaks to me,
And then his war-cry sounding

Rings his voice in thunder loud
From height to height resounding.

"So sang the Indian maid,
Bright Alfarata,
Where sweep the waters
Of the blue Juniata.
Fleeting years have borne away
The voice of Alfarata,
Still flow the waters
Of the blue Juniata." (234)

Although Pa and Ma know "The Blue Juniata" by heart, Wilder does not disclose their motives for performing it. Presumably Pa knows many romantic songs without Native American elements, for earlier in the novel he plays for Ma "So Green Grows the Laurel." So why does he choose "The Blue Juniata" now? Is he trying to calm Ma by playing a romantic, beautiful, and melancholy song? Is he telling her that he loves her through this song about an Indian maid and her warrior-lover? Is he trying to encourage Ma to be brave like Alfarata? Is he trying to ease Ma's prejudice by making her imaginatively become Alfarata? Is he escaping from his guilt at squatting in Indian Territory by playing a song about an Indian in which white people and the problems they bring to Indians are absent?

As for Ma, is she expressing a desire to rove like a man (arrows and canoe being typical male Indian items)? Or to be an Indian? Or fulfilling Pa's desire that she be a wild and roving Indian maid and be his manly and tender Indian lover? Ma could not sing the song if her dislike of Indians

were all consuming. That she sings it softly with Baby Carrie at her breast implies that she is not upset by her encounter with "dirty" Indians earlier in the day. Baby Carrie's presence at Ma's breast, however, also counters Ma's assumption of the persona of the wild and roving Alfarata, and her singing the song shows that for Ma Indians removed and civilized into a white woman's song (written by Mrs. S. D. Sullivan) are more appealing than Indians in their raw, masculine, and alien reality living in the same place and time as her family. In that sense, the Indian presence in the song is equivalent to that in Baby Carrie's bead necklace. Moreover, in the last stanza of the song, Alfarata's voice is silenced, "borne away" by the "fleeting years." Although she is "wild," "bright," "strong," and "true," she has died long ago (and is a fictional character anyway). Fitting the third of the three Indian stereotypes cited by Smulders, the good Indian, the bad Indian, and the vanishing Indian, Alfarata serves "to translate fear of the Indian into nostalgia" (Smulders 198). In this view, even as Ma and Pa imaginatively become Alfarata and her warrior lover, the song promises them a time without real Indians in their lives.

The private romantic performance of "The Blue Juniata" inspires eavesdropping Laura to disturbingly question her family's pioneer project in Indian Territory. When Laura asks where the voice of Alfarata went, Ma is unpleasantly surprised: "Goodness! Aren't you asleep yet?" (235) Instead of giving Laura an answer like, "It's a song about an Indian woman who lived and died a long time ago," Ma says, "she went west.... That's what Indians do," despite the song saying nothing about where Alfarata went (236). Ma here expresses the white rationalization for Indian removal: destiny. Laura asks why Indians move west, to which Ma replies, "They

have to," so that Laura asks why they have to, to which Pa replies, "The government makes them, Laura.... Now go to sleep" (236). But Laura ignores Pa's command: "can I ask just one more question?" After Ma corrects her "can" to "may," and after Pa interrupts her as she is trying to ask her question, Laura, bravely persistent in the face of her parents' displeasure, asks, "Will the government make these Indians move west?" Pa says, "Yes," explaining, "When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That's why we're here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we're here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?" (237) Laura asks yet another difficult question, "But Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to--" and Pa has had enough: "No more questions, Laura.... Go to sleep" (237). This is the only time in the novel that Pa loses his patience with Laura and strictly silences her.

Although critics like Smulders use Pa's answer to Laura, that early white settlers like the Ingallses naturally get the best Indian land, to demonstrate Wilder's support of the myth of righteous pioneer settlement of the west, in fact Laura wins the argument, forcing Pa to silence her with his parental authority. That moment parallels others when Ma uses her parental authority to correct Laura when she is being a "bad" girl, Wilder writing such scenes so as to make the reader side with Laura. That is, it is at least as possible to read the end of the scene as a critique of the pioneer right to Indian land expressed by Pa as it is to read it as an endorsement of such a sentiment. Although Laura does, apparently, go to sleep finally, a thoughtful reader would continue thinking about the scene, wondering

what has made the usually patient Pa so upset and whether his short-tempered explanation is flawed. If Pa is unreasonable to Laura, he may be unreasonable to Indians. Because Pa feels uncomfortable to consider his settling (or squatting) from the Osage point of view, he sternly silences Laura. Ma and Pa enjoy imagining the "Indian" view in a romantic song (or an abandoned camp), but not in their real life situation when doing so would question their settling on the prairie. This shows Wilder's honesty (revealing an unpleasant side of her beloved Pa) and Pa's partial goodness (allowing Laura to ask such questions and becoming upset by them). The typical Protestant settler patriarch would permit no such questioning from his daughter and would be completely confident of the justness of his action, believing, for example, that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," as do the Ingallses' neighbors, the Scotts (211).

6. Hating the Other: "The Minnesota Massacre"

Some two-hundred pages into the novel, while Pa is away the Ingalls' neighbor Mrs. Scott visits the little house and expresses her dislike of Indians:

"Land knows, they'd never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that'll farm it. That's only common sense and justice.... The only good Indian [is] a dead Indian.... I can't forget the Minnesota massacre. My Pa and my brothers went out with the rest of the settlers, and stopped them only fifteen miles west of us. I've heard Pa tell often enough how they--" (211-12)

Ma interrupts Mrs. Scott to prevent her from telling Laura and Mary lurid

details about the Indian depredations on white settlers, but she neither affirms nor condemns Mrs. Scott's biases. When Laura asks what a massacre is, Ma says that Laura "would understand when she was older" (212). Wilder is going as far as she deems possible in a book for children, mentioning "massacre" in an unsettling context and telling inquisitive child readers to wait for understanding until they are older.

The conflict referred to by Mrs. Scott is a landmark in the history of relations between Native and European Americans. There are many accounts of it written from the white perspective, in which it was a massacre, or from the Native American one, in which it was an uprising. Any people are likely to remember having bad things done to them more vividly than to remember doing bad things to others, and that is especially true of 19th-century white settlers, who convinced themselves that they had more right to Indian land than Indians, because, ignoring evidence of Indian farms, they believed that only they "worked" the land. Therefore the settlers were more inclined to fear being wrongfully attacked by devilish savages than to try to understand why Indians might do such things. Pa at least knows why Indians could become angry enough to attack white people, as evidenced by his strategy later in the novel to prevent his bellicose white neighbors from building a provocative stockade. Making the same point with which Laura so upsets him in "The Blue Juniata" scene, Pa says that Indians "had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks," and then he asserts that the presence of US soldiers in two area forts will prevent Osage from attacking the settlers (284). Pa's view of Indians, then, depends on the situation, but never becomes hatred like that of the Scotts.

According to *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) by Dee Brown and *Chronicle of the Indian Wars: From Colonial Times to Wounded Knee* (1993) by Alan Axelrod, in 1862 a tribe of Dakota Indians in Minnesota became violently angry because of their forced removal onto a narrow reservation, the failure of US government appointed agents to implement key components of the treaty, the movement of thousands of settlers onto their reservation land, their unhappiness at not being able to live their traditional way of life, and the threat of starvation. All those factors came to a head in June when the US agent refused to give the Indians money owed to them because, he claimed, the Civil War rendered dubious the validity of US paper money. When the Dakota asked for food to avoid starving, the white trader in charge said, "If the Indians are hungry, let them eat grass or their own dung." In that context, four young Dakota tried to steal a settler's chicken and when confronted by him killed him and six other settlers, including two women. When the commanding officer of the US army in the area demanded that the four men surrender for punishment, the Dakota chief Little Crow realized that he could not prevent the angry members of his tribe from fighting and so declared war on the USA. During the conflict, which lasted a few months, Little Crow and his warriors attacked a fort, a town, and patrolling US soldiers, while smaller groups of Dakota outside Little Crow's command roamed around killing settlers. For a time the Dakota fought the US and settler forces to a stalemate, but eventually President Lincoln was able to send enough soldiers to Minnesota to force them to surrender. When the war was over, three to eight hundred white settlers had been killed, the largest number of white settler casualties in US history, along with a smaller number of US

soldiers and hundreds of Dakota. The US army had captured six hundred male and 1,400 female members of the tribe. Thirty-eight Dakota were hanged for participating in massacres, the largest mass execution in US history. When the remaining incarcerated Dakota, mostly women and children, were moved to another fort, white Minnesota settlers mobbed and stoned them and killed some of them, including a child they snatched from its mother and beat to death before her eyes. The conflict gave the US the excuse to void all treaties with the Dakota, to move them to a different reservation out of the state, and to take all of their remaining land without paying for it and give it to settlers. When the first Dakota left by steamship, crowds of white Minnesotans saw them off, throwing stones at them and shouting, "Exterminate or banish!"

When Mrs. Scott refers to the "Minnesota massacre" as if to explain her hatred of Indians, then, Wilder invokes a traumatic incident barely ten years old at the time *Little House on the Prairie* takes place, reducing the complexity of its causes and ramifications to a massacre by generic Indian savages of innocent whites, including women and children. The Indians who "massacred" settlers, however, were Dakota in Minnesota, not Osage in Kansas, and did not harm Mrs. Scott's family. And although Mrs. Scott is a caring person who nurses Laura's family through a serious bout of malaria, she is also ignorant (and an object of Pa's mild derision) for believing that eating watermelons causes malaria. Her husband, who also believes that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" (284), is depicted as a foolish man when he ignores Pa's advice to check for bad air in a well they are digging, thereby nearly killing himself and Pa. Careful readers who remember the Osage earlier visiting the little house without attacking

Laura's family may take the Scotts' hatred as being an ignorant prejudice.

Nevertheless, the invoking of massacre begins a suspenseful movement in the latter third of the novel that alienates the Osage from Laura's family while the tension between them builds unbearably. During one night, Laura's family is woken by a scream that Pa thinks is Mrs. Scott in trouble and Ma thinks is an Indian massacre in progress. That Ma and even Pa first believe what turns out to have been a panther's cry is Mrs. Scott in dire straights shows the extent to which they are fearing an Osage attack, despite Pa's reassuring words to Ma: "I keep telling you they [the Osage] won't make any trouble. They're perfectly quiet and peaceable down in those camps among the bluffs" (255-56). Pa knows panther screams, for he imitates one to entertain Laura and Mary in *Little House in the Big Woods*, so if he were not letting the tense atmosphere affect him, he would understand immediately that Mrs. Scott is not in trouble. In the "Indian War Cry" chapter, different tribes gather to debate whether or not to attack the white settlers in the area. The Osage stop visiting the house, Pa makes more bullets for his gun than Laura has ever seen him make, he admits that he must act unafraid, Jack is constantly enraged, and the Ingallses cannot work or sleep properly. The drumming, dancing, and increasingly loud war cries last for five days and nights, making life worse than a nightmare: "A nightmare is only a dream, and when it is worst you wake up. But this was real and Laura could not wake up. She could not get away from it" (292).

Luckily for the Ingallses, the potentially violent crisis is defused when the Osage and their leader, the tall silent Indian with whom Pa has earlier shared dinner and tobacco, prevail upon the other tribes not to start a war.

As the chapter ends, Pa learns the name of the Osage chief, Soldat du Chêne: "'That's one good Indian!' Pa said. No matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian" (301). Smulders uses this plot development and comment by Pa to argue that Wilder is writing another of the three major Indian stereotypes, that of the good Indian who permits white people to take his land, for in the next chapter the Osage leave Indian Territory to move farther west. And yet because Pa has shared food and tobacco with Soldat du Chêne and said that he was "perfectly friendly" (229) and has communicated via sign language with another Osage about hunting the panther in the area (262), we sense that Pa does not mean that the only good Indian is the Indian who helps him settle in Indian land.

A more troubling flaw in Wilder's account of her family's time on the prairie is her ignoring the historical fact that the settlers were more likely to massacre the Osage than to be massacred by them. The closest Wilder approaches this is when she has Pa, in an act parallel to Soldat du Chêne's, talk his nervous neighbors out of building a provocative stockade. Even here, though, Wilder casts the settlers as potential victims rather than aggressors. In his review of Wilder's novel, "Little House on the Osage Prairie," Dennis McAuliffe, Jr., whose great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother were among the Osage made to sign a treaty to leave their land during the time when Laura's family was squatting there, provides vital information that Wilder leaves out. By quoting reports to the US government made in 1870 by the US agents appointed to represent the Osage, he demonstrates how five-hundred pioneer families like Laura's illegally moved onto the Osage reservation land, built cabins near their

camp, stole their corn and horses, burned their fields, robbed their graves, defrauded them, and formed vigilante groups that forced them to leave their homes at gunpoint or murdered them, all of which contributed greatly to the Osage decision to sign another treaty selling their land to the US government. McAuliffe, Jr. admits that no evidence proves that Laura's Pa participated in such depredations. Moreover, even had Pa been involved, he would probably not have talked about it to his daughter, who was too young in Kansas to remember much from her time there anyway. As she grew older, Wilder would surely not enthusiastically recognize any signs that her beloved Pa had been involved in such things. Although we need not expect Wilder to depict Pa, say, burning some Osage out of their homes, however, she could cast the situation more complexly and accurately, and leaving the potential massacring with the Osage supports what Anita Clair Fellman calls "the mythology of the American frontier" (48). Although it may be impossible to know the degree to which Wilder distorts the historical record from ignorance or ideology, it is clear that her novel ultimately does not depict the Osage as inhuman savages good only when dead.

7. Losing the Other: "Indians Ride Away"

Wilder follows the "Indian War Cry" chapter, in which the Osage become terrifying Others, with the "Indians Ride Away" chapter, in which they become sympathetic Others. Pa is about to begin his daily plowing when he calls Ma, Mary, and Laura to come look at a long line of Indians riding by the little house into the west. As Soldat du Chêne leads his people away, Laura admires his pony, unencumbered by bridle, "trotting

willingly, sniffing the wind that blew its mane and tail like fluttering banners.... as if it liked to carry the Indian on its back" (304). When Jack growls, Pa strikes him "for the first time in their lives" (304). As Soldat du Chêne approaches the little house, Laura's "heart beat[s] faster and faster" and she carefully observes him from his "beaded moccasin" to his "fierce, still, brown face" (304-05). Although Pa salutes him, Soldat du Chêne ignores him as if he, the family, and their little house are not there. As more Indians pass by, Laura shouts, "See the pretty ponies!" and claps her hands (306). After a time, her interest shifts to the Indian women and children, seeing them for the first time in her life: "Little naked brown Indians, no bigger than Mary and Laura.... All their skin was out in the fresh air and the sunshine. Their straight black hair blew in the wind and their black eyes sparkled with joy" (307). Laura has "a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl.... to be bare naked in the wind and the sunshine, and riding one of those gay little ponies" (306). Then she sees her first papoose.

Laura looked straight into the bright eyes of the little baby nearer her. Only its small head showed above the basket's rim. Its hair was as black as a crow and its eyes were black as a night when no stars shine.

Those black eyes looked deep into Laura's eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby's eyes, and she wanted that one little baby.

"Pa," she said, "get me that little Indian baby!"

"Hush, Laura!" Pa told her sternly.

The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes.

"Oh, I want it! I want it!" Laura begged. The baby was going farther and farther away, but it did not stop looking back at Laura. "It wants to stay with me," Laura begged. "Please, Pa, please!"

"Hush, Laura," Pa said. "The Indian woman wants to keep her baby."

"Oh, Pa!" Laura pleaded, and then she began to cry. It was shameful to cry, but she couldn't help it. The little Indian baby was gone. She knew she would never see it any more.

Ma said she had never heard of such a thing. "For shame, Laura," she said, but Laura could not stop crying. "Why on earth do you want an Indian baby, of all things!" Ma asked her.

"Its eyes are so black," Laura sobbed. She could not say what she meant.

"Why, Laura," Ma said, "you don't want another baby. We have a baby, our own baby."

"I want the other one, too!" Laura sobbed, loudly.

"Well, I declare!" Ma exclaimed.

"Look at the Indians, Laura," said Pa. "Look west, and then look east, and see what you see."

Laura could hardly see at first. Her eyes were full of tears and sobs kept jerking out of her throat. But she obeyed Pa as best she could, and in a moment she was still. As far as she could see to the west and as far as she could see to the east there were Indians. There was no end to that long, long line. (308-10)

The family continues watching until the end: "that long line of Indians slowly pulled itself over the western edge of the world. And nothing was

left but silence and emptiness. All the world seemed very quiet and lonely" (311). It is dinnertime, but neither Pa nor Laura can eat, and Ma is "so let down" that she does not "feel like doing anything" (311). The chapter ends with Laura still "looking into the empty west where the Indians had gone," still seeming "to see waving feathers and black eyes and to hear the sound of ponies' feet" (311).

Being so obviously the climax of the novel, the scene is read by scholars according to their view of Wilder's depiction of Native Americans. Smulders finds "perversities" (199) in the scene and criticizes it for aestheticizing (198) the tragedy of Indian removal. She is correct to a degree, but any literary tragedy is aestheticized. That Wilder includes the scene and depicts the Ingallses' absorption in the "drama" and depression at its outcome shows that she is trying to do more than pleasurably depict exotic Indians passing away. It would be more perverse if Pa were to notice the Indians approaching and then simply continue plowing. For that matter, Wilder could remove any trace of Native Americans from her novel, as she does in *Little House in the Big Woods*, about which the Modoc writer Michael Dorris says, "Excuse me, but [aren't] we forgetting the Chippewa branch of my daughters' immediate ancestry, not to mention the thousands of resident Menominees, Potawatomis, Sauks, Foxes, Winnebagos, and Ottowas who inhabited mid-nineteenth century Wisconsin?" (1820-22) In *Little House on the Prairie* Wilder, unlike most popular authors and filmmakers of the first half of the 20th century, must have felt an obligation to imaginatively witness and show Indian displacement rather than to hide it offstage. Given the time in which Wilder wrote her novel (the 1930s) and the time in which it is set (the 1870s) and its primary target audience

(children), the depiction of the Osage departure is admirable, despite her ignoring the violent and lawless participation of the pioneers in it. Wilder expresses the tragic nature of the scene when Laura sobs uncontrollably for the first and only time in the novel because she will never see the baby again and when her family (even Ma) watches the departure with respect and awe and feels "so let down" after the Indians vanish, leaving "nothing" (311). As Wilder signifies happy times for the Ingallses by describing tasty family meals, so she signals their shocked time by showing them unable to eat anything. Although the very next chapter begins with a sense of relief, "After the Indians had gone, a great peace settled on the prairie" (312), the Osage departure and Laura's finding and losing a papoose powerfully express the sense of a lost chance at communication with the Other.

Smulders also criticizes the scene because Laura's desire for the papoose "objectifies the Indian as other, as chattel to be owned. Apprehended as 'it,' the child thus resembles the pretty beads scavenged from the Indian camp and unwillingly relinquished to Baby Carrie" (198) and is a "horrific" and "unspeakable aggression" (199). But Wilder differentiates Laura's desire for the baby from her desire for Indian beads or a doll or a pet. First, Laura notices Soldat du Chêne's moccasin beads without wanting them or even remembering her Indian camp beads. Second, the bright-eyed Indian ponies look at Laura, but she does not desire them. Third, she and the papoose exchange "deep" eye contact incompatible with objectification. Laura's referring to the baby as "it" may derive from her not knowing its gender. Because only its head is showing above the basket, Laura cannot see its body. It is difficult to determine the gender of a baby who is not nude and is not wearing gendered clothes. That Laura refers to

the baby as "it" reveals that she is seeing the baby as gender-free rather than that she is seeing it as an object. And this meshes with one meaning of Laura's desire for the baby as a representative of Indian culture: although Osage adults have gendered roles and clothes, their children are naked and are to Laura enviably free from restricted clothes and roles like those forced upon her by Ma.

Ann Romines is at least as convincing as Smulders in arguing that the scene represents inter-cultural possibilities that help to make the novel a "complex cultural frontier" ("Frontier" 36). She sees Laura as "trying to broach possibilities of a shared lifestyle and a shared life between the European American and Native American children," as "reaching toward an extended family that she might share with both her white sisters and an Indian baby," and as "yearning for a life of expansion, inclusion and acculturation" ("Frontier" 38). Perhaps those are truer of author Wilder remembering her childhood than of her six-year-old persona in the novel, but Laura is attracted to the Other-ness of Indians, to their black eyes and hair, freedom, nudity, and horses, an attraction that culminates in her desire to be an Indian girl and then to possess an Indian baby. Although Laura is "naughty" for wanting for a moment to be an Indian child naked and free in the sunshine, the novel has established a context in which naughty Laura is more appealing than good Mary. Laura becomes aware that children in Osage culture may live more enjoyably than she is able to live as a "good" girl in hers. Ma, of course, is appalled by Laura's behavior. She cannot understand why Laura would want an Indian baby so desperately instead of being satisfied with her own (white) baby sister. She even tries to deny Laura's desire: "you don't want another baby." Although Pa

tries to silence Laura, he accepts her desire and reasons with her: "The Indian woman wants to keep her baby." Romines argues that Laura's desire for the baby is "suggesting a *delight* in difference that may even move toward the heightened multiplicities of *jouissance*. Laura resists her parents' and her culture's prescription that she cannot have both babies; she resists the prohibitions on plurality and acculturation" (*Constructing* 78). Her desire for the papoose derives from her desire for something different than what she has in her own culture and family, from her awareness that the baby is both Other and human like herself, and from her inchoate maternal instincts. When the baby goes away forever, Laura is so devastated because she is sensing lost possibilities.

What explains the Ingallses feeling "let down" and empty to the point of being unable to eat after the Osage have left? It is not conscious guilt at being partly responsible for the departure, for they feel no guilt in the next chapter, and Pa has stated that white settlers like his family deserve the best land. It seems more an inarticulate awareness that an entire way of life and an entire people (Others though they were) has left their world, along with the possibilities of communication with those people. There have been moments of communication, as when an Osage uses sign language to tell Pa about hunting a puma. But in the climactic scene, when Pa salutes Soldat du Chêne the Indian ignores him, and when Laura and the papoose look deeply into each other's eyes, she loses it forever. Wilder's criticism of Manifest Destiny cannot be obvious because of her Pa's complicity in it and because of her desire to depict a largely positive vision of American pioneer history, but it is there nonetheless.

The resolution of the novel contains an echo of the Osage departure, for

several pages later Laura's family leaves the land as well. When Pa hears from Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott that soldiers are coming to evict the settlers from Indian Territory, he angrily decides to uproot his family from the little house and life they worked so hard for a year to make: "I'll not stay here to be taken away by the soldiers like an outlaw! If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn't sent out word it would be all right to settle here, I'd never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory. But I'll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We're going now!" (316) He decides to leave the next morning without consulting Ma, who is quietly devastated: "Ma didn't say anything. She went into the house and looked around, at the dishes not washed and the bed only partly made, and she lifted up both hands and sat down" (319). Usually Pa is careful and frugal and respects nature and animals, but he is so upset that he leaves the plow behind: "Now the wagon was loaded. The only thing they could not take was the plow. Well, that could not be helped. There was no room for it" (324). But it could be helped. Pa's pride and desire to live as a free, independent, and mobile king--not any rational reason--make him move the family so soon. If he would wait to see if the soldiers really come to make the settlers move out (which the US government never actually had soldiers do), he would have time to trade the plow for money or useful things to help his family move again. It is distressing to imagine how many animals in the Osage land Pa killed to make the tall pile of furs to trade for the plow that he discards so rashly. The link between the Ingalls and the Osage, both apparently forced by the US government to leave their homes and yet both heroically journeying elsewhere to make new lives, weakens when we recall that the former voluntarily move from their home

of one year, while the latter must move from their home.

And yet even at the conclusion of her novel, when, en route to some unknown destination where they will build another little house, Laura's family is camping out on the prairie, Wilder subtly invokes Native American themes. By the fire beside the wagon Pa plays and sings a rousing freedom song ("And we'll rally round the flag, boys... Shouting the battle-cry of Freedom!"). Then, to make the excited Laura "drift [to sleep] over the endless waves of prairie grasses," he plays a "softly and slurringly ... swinging rhythm" and sings:

"Row away, row o'er the waters so blue,
Like a feather we sail in our gum-tree canoe.
Row the boat lightly, love, over the sea;
Daily and nightly I'll wander with thee." (335)

As the song expresses Pa's love for Laura and Wilder's love for her Pa and both Laura and Wilder's pleasure at wandering freely as a girl with her family, it also invokes the Native American Other, for Pa will wander with Laura in a canoe. The novel closes, then, with Pa playing Indian with Laura as he earlier plays Indian with Ma.

8. Reading or Avoiding *Little House on the Prairie*

Wilder's working title for *Little House on the Prairie* was "Indian Country," and she referred to it as her "Indian juvenile," for the Osage were central to her conception of the novel (Romines *Constructing* 60). To suit the precedent established by the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, in what was becoming a *Little House* series, however, Wilder's publisher had her change the title to *Little House on the Prairie* (Romines

Constructing 260). The change from the working title to the published one shifts the focus from the Native Americans in the novel to the little house (and all that it symbolizes about family love, safety, white civilization, and pioneer heroism) situated on a prairie belonging to no one and open to anyone. Presumably Wilder could have fought to keep her original title or could have included Little House in it and yet maintained an Osage presence, as with, say, *Little House in Indian Country*. That the Osage are the most important element in Laura's experience of the prairie and in Wilder's writing of it and yet vanish from the working title to the published one (which probably strikes most readers as an inevitable rather than an inaccurate title) underscores some of the complexities of the novel.

According to different characters and situations, *Little House on the Prairie* depicts various white views of Indians: because Indians are savage animals or alien rivals, the only good Indian is a dead or vanished Indian; because Indians are free and noble, they are to be admired; because Indians are different, they are Other; because Indians are good and bad and have their own way of life, they are people like any others; and so on. The novel also depicts various views of settlers: intolerant of Indians or interested in them; brave and persevering, ignorant and flighty, resourceful and careful, wasteful and reckless, and so on. Unlike mainstream 1870s visions of Indians and 1930s popular culture depictions of them, *Little House on the Prairie* provides some accurate details identifying its Native Americans as Osage and as human beings rather than only stereotyping them as savages. Wilder gives--and even through Laura critiques--a reason for the Osage exodus: when white people settle in Indian land, they and the United States government make the Indians move West. Moreover, she has the departure

of the Osage in her novel leave Laura and her family depressed rather than celebratory. The experience of Laura and her family with the Osage remains a complex, thought-provoking, and moving one whose powerful sense of loss cannot simply be reduced to family hagiography, white superiority, or Manifest Destiny.

I have discussed how scholars read the depiction of Native Americans in *Little House on the Prairie*, but how do children and adults in general read it? To answer this question, I read reviews and discussions of Wilder's novel by adults and children on literary Web pages for children, *Amazon.com*, and adult blogs. *The Spaghetti Book Club*, "the largest site of book reviews written and illustrated by kids for kids," for example, features several favorable reviews of *Little House on the Prairie* by boys and girls age seven to ten. Tara highlights Laura's interest in Indians: "Laura is so excited to meet the Indians. She would always say, 'Ma, Pa, when will we meet Indians?' Will she? I will not tell you, but the book will!" Sydney focuses on the part where Indians "come to steal most of their food," although Wilder does not use the word "steal," and the Osage do not take most of the family food. Ashley says, "The Indians cause some trouble" for Laura's family, unaware that the Ingallses are responsible for that "trouble" by moving to Kansas. According to Anna, the Ingallses "meet some Indians, and they all become friends," which does not happen. The Indians are absent from the review of John. Most of the children mention the Indians, then, but none write about the Indians from their point of view, and they are more interested in and accurate about pioneer family life and moving scenes like the disappearance and reappearance of Jack. That is understandable, for they are children and the novel is

narrated from Laura's point of view. Therefore, adults who want children to read *Little House on the Prairie* and to learn about the pioneer era from both white and Native American points of view should explain to them the complexities and historical context of the novel.

Few of the customer reviews of *Little House on the Prairie* by sixty adults and thirty-nine children posted on *Amazon.com* and giving the book a 4.5 star average (of a possible five stars) refer in detail to the complex depiction of the Osage. The two reviews found "most helpful" by most customers are typical. The first, by a man named Mark Baker, sets the stage of the story, mentions that Laura wants to see a papoose and probably will, given "the many Indians in the area," and says that the book is still popular after seventy years because it is both "an entertaining and enlightening look at a bygone era." In the second, Bluemamma cites the "beautiful," "poetic," and "crystal clear" language of the novel that "is a joy to read aloud," the vivid details of daily life on the prairie, the "beautifully drawn characters," all of which impressed her when she first read the book as a child. But now as an adult reading the novel to her seven-year old daughter she is struck by

how quintessentially American this book is. It's the kind of book that makes you think about our heritage, and makes you proud to be American.... Laura and her family keep facing hardships and meeting them head on.... You often hear the words "pioneer spirit" used to describe America's best values, but after you read *Little House* that's not an empty phrase. You, and the child you read it to, understand it in your heart.

Bluemamma, who never mentions the Osage in her substantial review,

proudly embraces the "mythology of the American frontier" that is only part of Wilder's complex vision.

Most of the adult *Amazon.com* customers uncritically like *Little House on the Prairie* for its "authentic" historical details of prairie life, inspiringly adventurous and indomitable pioneer spirit, close family ties, spunky and pure Laura, and simple and beautiful language. Most reviews that acknowledge the Osage lump them together with other adversities faced by Laura's family, as when one man says that he admires manly Pa helping his family survive "Flooded creeks, Indians, fire, disease, wolves, weather, more wolves." A few adults distinguish the Osage from the other challenges, one man liking the novel because it depicts the "increasingly resentful and intrusive" Osage negatively: "So many modern portrayals of frontier Indians show them as saints; this is a more realistic portrayal of how Indian culture might seem menacing from the perspective of a lone family on the prairie." One adult writes that the novel "is a snapshot on how the white people pushed the Indians to acts of desperation and how the Indian 'problem' was understood by the white settlers." One woman cites the controversy about Wilder's depiction of the Osage: "This book has been banned in many libraries for racial content; it actually shows how settlers of the time felt. Some were prejudiced, some weren't. Even within the same family there were often differences of opinion."

Most *Amazon.com* child reviewers like *Little House on the Prairie* for its adventure, for its historical period details, for Laura, for the moving disappearance and reappearance of Jack, for the humorous Christmas scene, but not for its Indians. The few that mention Indians view them as aggressors and thieves and place them with other dangers like malaria and

fires. A few children, however, do thoughtfully consider them. One child writes that, "Indians ... almost stole important supplies," but "I also learned that lots of people went west and forced Indians to move farther west." Another child glimpses the complexity in the novel by saying, "I learned that there are different types of Indians." And one child writes:

This book gives a very realistic view of a young white girl living in the time and place that she did. Laura and her family were, at times, kind of racist against the Native Americans. When I first read this book, I was very disappointed at that but now I realize that Laura was just a very ignorant girl who has been taught to fear them. So if you read this book, you should understand that these people lived in a very different world from us, not just in terms of electricity and modern inventions, but also socially.

That review, and the one by the last woman cited above, are the only two of the ninety-nine that focus on the racism in the novel and try to understand it in its historical context.

Almost all the reviews of *Little House on the Prairie* that I read on the Internet are positive, including those that mention Indians. The parents or librarians among the reviewers enjoy sharing the novel with children. The few reviews that rate the book lowly do so because it is boring rather than because it depicts the Osage in an inaccurate and racist light. Significantly, none of the reviews call the Osage by their tribal name. The Internet reviews demonstrate why some Native Americans are disturbed by the popularity of Wilder's novel and want children to avoid it. Dennis McAullife, Jr.'s review of *Little House on the Prairie*, for example, appears in the "Books to Avoid" section of the web page of *Oyate* (the Dakota word

for people), the Native American organization "working to see that our lives and histories are portrayed honestly" in books for children and young adults. His review is illustrated by a red line running through the novel's cover picture. He cites devastating historical evidence to prove that if anyone was massacring anyone, it was white settlers like Pa massacring Osage. And yet McAullife, Jr. is less convincing about the text of *Little House on the Prairie* itself, comparing Pa to "Charles Manson" and to "a surfing bum" and saying that Wilder depicts Osage men "almost mockingly." Not being Native American, perhaps I am too willing to give Wilder credit for what she accomplishes in her novel and too unwilling to take her to task for what she fails to do, but I find more respect than mockery in her depiction of the Osage.

American Indians in Children's Literature is a sophisticated and helpful blog dedicated to "critical perspectives and discussion of American Indians in children's books, the school curriculum, popular culture, and society-at-large" and run by a Pueblo woman named Debbie Reese. Among myriad topics, Reese has initiated a discussion about whether or not to teach *Little House on the Prairie* to children. Several people have responded to this topic and said that the negative views of Native Americans in the novel should disqualify it from elementary school classes because even if teachers were to provide the Osage point of view and to teach the accurate historical background, children would love Laura's character and family so much that they would view the Indians as scary or turn a blind eye to the novel's racism. Reese focuses on the negative images of Indians in the book and concludes,

Those portrayals can and are defended by saying that is what people

really thought about Indians at that time.... Certainly, newspapers created and affirmed those ideas. And, some lawmakers likely believed those images to be true. People used to think the world was flat. We learned that was not the case, and we don't teach "the world is flat" to children. Should we still teach books like *Little House on the Prairie*? What it has is a very strong bias against American Indians. And, it is rife with attitudes that Indians are less-than-human, not smart, etc. etc. What is at the root of the American embrace of the story told in *Little House*? Why can't we let it go?

Reese recommends teachers not to use the novel in elementary school classes (although she does use it in her college classes, lending her students secondhand copies to avoid supporting the Little House empire). I believe that of course we should not teach children that the world is flat, but that to demonstrate how worldviews change over time, we should teach children that people of a certain era thought the world was flat. Similarly, we could use *Little House on the Prairie* to teach children to reject the ignorance, prejudice, and greed by which many white Americans once believed that the only good Indian is a dead Indian. Wilder's novel could be an avenue to teaching children the real history of Indian removal and westward expansion so as to introduce them to the often dark complexity of history, life, and human nature and to inspire them to learn more about Native Americans. Other reasons for introducing children to the novel are its rich style, sublime nature, family ties, and gender themes. It may be too easy for me, a white man, to say this, but I believe that the novel does not have a "strong bias against American Indians." Although it does depict attitudes "that Indians are less-than-human," it mostly discredits those and also

depicts attitudes that Indians are fascinating, noble, free, and human. It seems as if the Native Americans who read *Little House on the Prairie* and are moved to expose its racism and to urge people to avoid it are understandably upset by the terrible actions of the USA towards their ancestors in real life and as a result tend to somewhat exaggerate the flaws of the novel.

Another blog, *Becky's Book Reviews*, focusing on children's and young adult literature, seems more balanced in this debate. In her review of *Little House on the Prairie*, Becky, a white woman, expresses her reservations about the novel's discriminatory depiction of Native Americans, but then decides that it is better to use the book to "examine the past critically and discuss it" than to try to rewrite American history by purging it of racism by banning Wilder's book. Becky also says that in evaluating a work of historical fiction, we must take into account its context, for "it is a snapshot of both the events (when the story takes place) and a snapshot of when it was written." She believes that *Little House on the Prairie's* literary virtues and cultural opportunities outweigh its racist elements. And that children may read the book without becoming racists, especially if their parents and teachers discuss the novel with them and provide them open-minded environments in which to grow.

For better or worse, the Little House empire, comprised of the eight novels by Wilder translated into over forty languages and including related books and paraphernalia by her or about her or inspired by her, like "cookbooks, songbooks, date books, trivia books, calendars," the television series from the 70s and 80s, and novels by other authors about Wilder's daughter and mother, is here to stay (Miller 1). To answer Reese's

question, "Why can't we let it go?" *Little House on the Prairie* is such a well-written, compelling, and integral part of American popular culture that many children and adults will likely continue reading it. Therefore, I would like to see more balance and complexity in the ways in which it is read. Readers who find in it pure expressions of the best American values through its authentic depiction of pioneer life and history, should be aware of its complications of that life and history through obvious and subtle racism and ethnocentrism. And to balance the white view of Wilder, they should read historical novels for children written from the Native American perspective, like Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999), and should teach children or learn from adults about the unfair tragedy of US treatment of Native Americans. Readers who find in *Little House on the Prairie* pure expressions of the worst American values through its ideologically distorted pro-pioneer depiction of settler life and history should try to recognize its attempts to transcend hate and ignorance and if possible should teach children or learn from adults about its considerable aesthetic virtues. That Wilder's novel may be read in various ways is a testament to its rich complexity and to that of US history and culture.

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