

# Martha Ostenso, Literary History, and the Scandinavian Diaspora

Literary history . . . is governed by profound metanarrative designs. It has a didactic purpose that is aimed at constructing an idea of a nation, and it does so by giving it a certain form in both time and space. It requires clarity of origin and precise delimitation. As history, it constructs a past by selecting texts (canonization) and commemorating events so that the nation may be imaginatively shaped . . . into a kind of central protagonist that is born, grows, and reaches a certain maturity. (10)

—E. D. Blodgett, *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada*

**M**igrant and diasporic writers pose particular challenges to the narratives of nation constructed in literary histories. Their critical reputations often reveal the way that historians of literature police the borders of their imagined nations, rejecting certain writers on the basis of ethnic origin or place of residence, and even ignoring particular texts because of where they are set. The exclusionary practices of literary history, and the ability of migrant writers to destabilize constructs of nation and also region, are explored in this article through a case study of Martha Ostenso, a Norwegian-born writer who lived at different times in both Canada and the US. Her first novel, *Wild Geese* (1925), was remarkably successful and won a high-profile American prize.<sup>1</sup> According to the standard narrative of her career presented in Canadian literary histories, Ostenso produced an early classic of Canadian prairie literature, and then abandoned Canada for the States, where she published a succession of inferior books with US settings. Historians of American literature, on the other hand, usually identify Ostenso as a US writer, ignoring her Canadian connection and inscribing

her into narratives of immigrant assimilation or regional literary development. Neither American nor Canadian critics pay much attention to Ostenso's use of Scandinavian material, perhaps because the Scandinavian diaspora disrupts nationalist literary histories by crossing political and cultural boundaries between the US and Canada.

In fact, Ostenso's sixteen novels cannot be easily categorized according to whether they are set above or below the forty-ninth parallel. The assumption of most critics that *Wild Geese* is about a Manitoban community is fair, but is based principally on biographical evidence, since the text itself contains no exact markers of place.<sup>2</sup> Another early novel, *The Young May Moon* (1929), has also been located in Manitoba by critics though, again, its geography is vague. On the other hand, both *Prologue to Love* (1932) and *The White Reef* (1934) are clearly set in British Columbia, but have been ignored by both American and Canadian literary historians, since both groups identify Ostenso wholly with the prairies. Indeed, very few critics show any awareness that Ostenso set books other than *Wild Geese* in Canada, while some misidentify the ones which are set there.<sup>3</sup>

One aim of this article is to initiate critical recuperation of some of Ostenso's neglected novels. The discussion focuses on the three which are set (or probably set) in Canada, since these are most relevant to the context of Canadian literary history, but it also seeks to lay the foundations for broader re-reading of the whole oeuvre. Rather than simply arguing that *The Young May Moon*, *The White Reef*, and *Prologue To Love* should be admitted to the Canadian canon along with *Wild Geese*, I would like to suggest that they—and indeed all the Ostenso novels—are best studied in the context of border crossing and migration. Given the circumstances of her career and the broad range of her fictional settings (from New York to Vancouver Island), it becomes futile to argue about whether Martha Ostenso is a Canadian, American, or Norwegian writer, or which region she belongs to. Clearly, she can only be understood in terms of hybridity or transculture.<sup>4</sup> Her physical and imaginative movements between the US and Canada, between the Midwest and the West Coast, and between Scandinavia and North America inform most of her writing. Also, the texts engage in some detail with immigration, ethnic diversity, and diasporas, problematising traditional categories of nation and race. My discussion, then, revises accepted views of Ostenso's reputation by concentrating on her multiple ethnic, national and regional identification, and moves outward to comment on the strategies of literary history—particularly Canadian literary history—in relation to diasporic writers.

Biographical details are a necessary part of this discussion. Martha Ostenso was born near Bergen in 1900, and her family emigrated to Winnipeg in 1902. Two years later, they moved to the US, living in various towns in the Dakotas and Minnesota, before returning to Canada in 1915. Ostenso studied and taught in Manitoba until her early twenties, and following a period of further study in New York, she returned to Winnipeg to draft *Wild Geese*, which focuses on a remote, ethnically mixed farming settlement. After 1924, she lived entirely in the US with her partner, Douglas Durkin, eventually acquiring American citizenship in 1931. Most of the couple's homes were in Minnesota, but they had a house in Hollywood as well. Ostenso travelled frequently, including three return trips to Norway.

Ostenso's collaboration with Durkin, a Canadian writer of English ancestry but resident for many years in the US, further complicates the attempt to locate the novels in relation to a national canon. Archival sources suggest that the books were generally drafted by Ostenso, often using a plot supplied by Durkin, who then edited the manuscript.<sup>5</sup> It is unclear how far Durkin contributed to *Wild Geese*, though by 1958, as Stan Atherton notes, both authors were prepared to sign a legal document about copyright which contains the clause: "all of the literary works of Martha Ostenso commencing with the publication of *Wild Geese* in 1925 were the results of the combined efforts of Douglas Leader Durkin and Martha Ostenso" (*Martha Ostenso*, 35). Just as the couple's geographical displacements and changes of citizenship challenge models of nationality and citizenship, so their collaboration challenges the boundaries of the authorial self. While bearing this in mind, I will nevertheless refer to the author of the novels as "Ostenso" because it is the reputation of the literary entity called Martha Ostenso, as named on the book covers, that I am interested in.

Whether or not Ostenso can be counted in that vexed category of "Canadian writers," the fact remains that literary historians have underestimated the extent of her engagement with Canada's landscapes and culture by ignoring her later books. At the same time, she cannot be unambiguously identified with a Canadian tradition, since her writing career transgresses national boundaries in various ways. At certain periods, this has damaged her reputation: literary histories written in the mid twentieth century, when the English-derived Tory tradition still had considerable purchase in Canada, usually omit Ostenso entirely. For instance, Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada* (1952) delineates a national theme centring on resistance to American modernity and commercialism, and therefore

privileges conservative writers such as Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Mazo de la Roche, and Stephen Leacock. Ostenso's work was not thought amenable to the mid century nation-building project of Canadian literary history, since she almost erases the international border and inscribes a geography of Minnesota which is largely indistinguishable from her fictioned landscape of Manitoba.

In subsequent decades, a new emphasis on regionalism led to the unearthing and celebration of a prairie realist tradition, and this altered critical evaluations of Ostenso, or at least of *Wild Geese*. By 1965, Pacey had adjusted his ideas, and wrote in *The Literary History of Canada*: "*Wild Geese* . . . is the single most consistent piece of western realism to appear before the novels of Frederick Philip Grove, and has a niche of its own in . . . our literary development" ("Fiction" 678). In the 1983 *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Joy Kuropatwa comments: "While *Wild Geese* has elements of romanticism, it represents a major development in the Canadian movement towards realism" (626). Both these influential encyclopedias co-opt the novel into a narrative of Canadian literary development which follows a rising plot from romance to the supposedly more mature form of realism, and numerous critics have followed this lead.<sup>6</sup> It is, though, equally possible to argue that romance and gothic predominate in the text. Margot Northey, in *The Haunted Wilderness* (1976), calls *Wild Geese* "the nearest twentieth-century counterpart to *Wacousta*" (63), while Daniel S. Lenoski focuses on its "basic mythic impulses and patterns" (284), and Brian Johnson characterizes it as "an uncanny love story" (39). None of these critics questions the Canadianness of the text. Instead of using *Wild Geese* to demonstrate the Canadian progression towards realism, they appropriate it for a different critical project: the elaboration of a Canadian mythology based on man's response to the terrifying power of nature. Both approaches may be aligned with cultural nationalism, since they present the Canadian literary canon in terms of improvement and consolidation.

Very different readings emerge when *Wild Geese* is incorporated into American narratives of literary maturation. Mary Dearborn, in a 1986 discussion of immigrant American women's writing, argues that the "overwhelming message" of *Wild Geese* is "that American identity for the daughters of immigrants is contingent on defiance of foreign fathers and ancestral identity" (74). This is because the protagonist, Judith Gare, rebels violently against her father, who Dearborn assumes is a Norwegian (though the Gares' ethnicity is left indeterminate in the text).<sup>7</sup> It would, however, be

possible to argue, conversely, that Judith embraces her Old World heritage by marrying Sven, who is clearly identified as Norwegian, and bearing his child. Dearborn ignores this potential reading because she is using *Wild Geese* to illustrate her theory that the story of Pocahontas' acquisition of an American identity to replace her ethnically marked one is obsessively reiterated in the national literature. Janet Casey, on the other hand, in her forthcoming book *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America*, offers a very persuasive reading of Ostenso in the context of her American peers. While acknowledging the difficulty of categorising *Wild Geese* in terms of literary mode or national tradition, Casey productively compares it with other bestselling farm novels by women: Edna Ferber's *So Big* (1924), Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *The Time of Man* (1926), and Gladys Hasty Carroll's *As the Earth Turns* (1933). These texts are set in a variety of locales, and Casey argues that their success with readers across America reveals that the broad appeal of rurality transcended regionalist distinctions. Only one critic reads Ostenso in relation to a transnational group of North American women authors: Alexandra Collins classes her with Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Ethel Wilson, suggesting that Wilson inherits from Ostenso a sense of the land "as the source of personal renewal" on the one hand, and "as the mysterious, predatory force which pervades human actions" on the other (68-69).

Nearly all published discussions of Ostenso are limited to *Wild Geese*. Pacey writes: "Martha Ostenso's later novels . . . were almost all set in the northern United States, and were more or less unsuccessful attempts to repeat her own achievement in *Wild Geese* ("Fiction" 678). The balance of this sentence equates the American settings of the later novels with their supposedly "unsuccessful" nature, and this view has hardened into a critical commonplace. Kuropatwa is equally dismissive: after mentioning Ostenso's relocation to the US, she remarks: "Besides *Wild Geese*, Ostenso published over a dozen volumes of fiction [and] a collection of poetry." Neither critic even counts up the exact number of novels Ostenso wrote, or observes that any of them concerned Canada. These examples are indicative of the general tendency of Canadian literary histories to present *Wild Geese* as an isolated masterpiece, the brilliant production of a precocious girl who subsequently became corrupted by the lure of American markets.<sup>8</sup> But in fact, when the Ostenso novels are considered as a group, any simple demarcation between serious fiction and "potboilers" becomes untenable. These books belong to the troublesome realm of the middlebrow; they depend—to a greater or

lesser extent—on the conventional structures of popular fiction, yet they also diverge from such models in interesting ways, thereby disrupting cultural hierarchies.

The few critics who have read the later novels agree that *The White Reef* and *The Young May Moon* are two of Ostenso's best books, whereas the other "Canadian" novel, *Prologue to Love*, is a little formulaic and overstrained, though still of some interest.<sup>9</sup> In all these texts, race is a fluid category, and ethnic identities can—to some extent—be chosen and negotiated. Nevertheless, a logic of assimilation determines the larger movement of the plots; the same is true of *Wild Geese*, and this aspect of Ostenso's fiction has enabled critics to align her writing with a normative WASP perspective, ignoring her often troubling explorations of identity and difference. The following brief account of *Prologue to Love*, *The White Reef*, and *The Young May Moon* reflects on their complex inscriptions of ethnicity, nationality, and place, and tests the possibilities of reading them in relation to Canadian and Scandinavian literary and historical contexts.

*The White Reef* and *Prologue to Love* are never included in surveys of BC writing, and this further demonstrates that the artificial structures of literary history can be maintained only by strategic exclusions. Ostenso is generally categorized as a pioneer of prairie realism, and her knowledge of British Columbia derived only from visits and not from residence there. Therefore, it seems that literary historians cannot accept her as an author of authentic West Coast fiction. Yet in fact, these two novels do offer a sustained engagement with the social and physical landscapes of western Canada.<sup>10</sup> *Prologue to Love* concerns a girl named Autumn, who returns from Europe to her home in the Okanagan Valley and falls in love with the son of her dead mother's lover. Although predictable in its plot, it offers a valuable portrait of a prosperous BC ranching community. The many descriptive passages are rather saturated with metaphor, but they do successfully render a localized landscape, which, in some chapters, is made recognizable not only by actual place names (Kelowna, Kamloops, Lake Okanagan) but also by the careful identification of trees, flowers, breeds of farm animal, and so on. Other scenes take on a more mythical resonance:

On the slopes that streamed into the valley like smooth reddish cascades in the low sun, more than seven thousand head of sheep moved in bands, twelve hundred to a band. At dawn the herders had started them from home on the trek up the mountains to the very margins of the eternal snows, in the relentless, lonely quest for grass. (82)

The sight of the herd fills Autumn with “a strange, nameless nostalgia, a yearning of racial memory” (82), and this is one among several intensely visual scenes which are used in the service of the novel’s preoccupation with themes of class, race, and empire. Autumn’s “inscrutable awareness of remote ages when primitive man had driven his flocks upward into sweet hills” (82) relates to her desire for an uncorrupted man who is in tune with the natural world and traditional ways of life. Immediately following this scene, she rides in search of Bruce Landor, a neighbouring rancher who is hard-working, physically strong, and “purposeful,” though also sensitive to the beauties of the local landscape (46). Bruce, whose very name links him with land ownership, corresponds to the Canadian nationalist ideal. In his innovative study *White Civility* (2006), Daniel Coleman argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, literature—especially popular fiction—celebrated a particular kind of national type:

What has come to be called “the Northern myth” was central to this figuration of Canada as a testing and improving ground for effete European manhood. According to this myth, the rigours of life in a stern, unaccommodating climate demanded strength of body, character, and mind while it winnowed away laziness, overindulgence, and false social niceties. (24)

Bruce’s rival for Autumn is the foppish, cocktail-drinking, “impeccably tailored” (38) Florian Parr, who has been educated in England and is associated with a decadent, excessive European modernity. Autumn’s inevitable choice of Bruce over Florian implies the victory of the Canadian type over the degenerate European.

*The White Reef* is considerably more sophisticated than *Prologue to Love*. It is about an unmarried mother who is rejected by her lover and by her self-consciously respectable community, and subsequently behaves with proud resentment. This novel, too, is explicitly marked as Canadian: the setting for the main action is a fishing village on Vancouver Island. Though a maritime environment was not Ostenson’s habitual milieu, it is evoked with some success. The coastal landscape is often described in a highly romantic mode, but at certain points, there are more precise and localized accounts of vegetation, landforms, and marine life.

While *Prologue to Love* concentrates on Canadians of British descent, *The White Reef* represents a more diverse community, including Native Canadians, immigrants of Chinese, Scandinavian, English, and Irish origin, and even some supposed Spanish ghosts. The Chinese and Native characters are regarded with hostility by the more conventional inhabitants

of Heartbreak Cove, who also seek to exclude particular people from their society by associating them with racial otherness. A mentally disturbed character is treated in this way: "They said Ethan Ashe was half Indian, from the north end of the island, but nobody really knew" (6). But the novel's heroine, Nona Darnell, declares: "I think there's something grand about Ethan," explaining: "Whether he's crazy or not, he clings to a hope, and that's something!" (72). Nona, with her "deep and impious strain" (57) and unconventional behaviour, is perceived by her neighbours as a threat to the moral consensus of their community, an anxiety they express in racialized terms: "If she felt like it she'd marry six Chinee belly-cutters and keep 'em—right here in the Cove" (5). The narrator, however, firmly aligns Nona with admirable Scandinavian values; she and her brother Jorgen are half-Irish and half-Norwegian, and her closest friend is the Norwegian Ivar Hansen. These three are the most generous and courageous characters in the book, and several of their Scandinavian neighbours are also sympathetic, and do not condemn Nona for her extramarital pregnancy. She gradually redeems herself in the eyes of the community through her devoted performance of female nurturing roles in relation to her father, brother, and son.

*The Young May Moon* is set in a prairie town called Amaranth, and while it is not clearly situated in the US or Canada, internal and archival evidence does, on balance, suggest a southern Manitoba location.<sup>11</sup> As Atherton suggests, it might be grouped with the texts set in the northern US, under the heading "border novels" (*Martha Ostenso*, 31). Novels such as *The Mandrake Root* (1938) and *O River, Remember* (1943), explore the diasporic Scandinavian settlement, which itself crosses the boundary between Manitoba and Minnesota, and *The Young May Moon* also has Scandinavian resonances. The narrator notes that the "first pioneers" in Amaranth were "Germans and Scandinavians" (15), but as in *Wild Geese*, the ethnic origins of the minor characters are clearly identified, while those of the protagonists are occluded. Judith in *Wild Geese* is probably partly Norwegian, but this is never explicitly stated, and the ethnicities of Marcia Vorse and Paul Brule in *The Young May Moon* are similarly unfixed. This permits all three to explore and test different allegiances and identities.

Marcia is repeatedly identified with non-charter group immigrants. She passionately loves her husband, Rolf Gunther, who is evidently of German descent, but after his death, she becomes increasingly aligned with Scandinavians. The name Vorse contains a suggestion of "Norse," and the text explicitly links her with Norse mythology:



Already the inhabitants in the flats looked at her askance and with an expression of almost superstitious mistrust in their eyes when she came down from the hillside, the wind whipping her skirt smooth against her limbs, slashing her black hair into wild locks about her cheeks, and blowing at the boy she led as though he had been a fairy child. The eyes followed her with wonderment and doubt all the way to the door of Karl Stormo, the Norwegian truck farmer, whose daughter Haldis was looked upon with curiosity because it was she who cared for Marcia Gunther's boy on days when Marcia went into the town to work. Old Jens Stormo, Karl's aged father, who knew things others did not know, out of the mists of his Norse lore, had said that the woman on the hill was a Valkyrie and that her rare singing on nights of rain or very clear starlight was an omen that bore hearing to. (153)

Marcia's remote hilltop house emblemizes her socially marginal position as well as her moral superiority to most of her neighbours. Although her black hair suggests that she is not Scandinavian (or at least, not wholly),<sup>12</sup> she is nevertheless allied with the Norwegian characters, sharing their strength and generosity as well as their difference from the rest of the community.

Marcia's untamed quality is rendered in racialized terms. Hearing of a group of Romanies camping near the town, she reflects on the "magic" in the word "Gypsies" (212), and goes to watch them covertly:

Their women moved facilely about in the tattered, eternal carnival of their brilliant skirts; their brown, frowsy children played on the ground, belly down. Their horses stood, meek and thin, like ghosts of old trees, with heads bent and backs sagging. And the dark boy with the red bandanna kerchief about his neck played on the violin.

She did not know how long she crouched there, flat against the rock . . . With all the life of her being she wanted the dark youth and his sullen, beautiful mouth. (213-14)

But her eroticized longing for freedom is only momentary. It is a fantasy of identification with an exotic other, almost a fantasy of reversion to a belly-down, sensual race. It passes by as quickly as the gypsies themselves, leaving Marcia with the recognition that her future is really in Amaranth, and in a new marriage, in alignment not with dark gypsies but with pale Nordics. Despite their previous mutual hostility, she has fallen in love with Paul, the local doctor. Paul's status as a social outsider is, once again, imaged through associations with foreignness: "His voice . . . was dark with mystery. It had been mellowed in foreign places where Paul Brule had striven to mould his accents to fit a dozen alien tongues. Marcia liked it best when he talked of strange cities" (31). Paul and Marcia first begin to move towards one another, and to be integrated into the society of Amaranth, when they work together to save the life of a dangerously ill neighbour. They transform the

community, to some extent, with their qualities of tolerance, compassion, and energy. More importantly, they are themselves transformed, learning to temper their wilder impulses, accommodate themselves to communal norms, and engage with others. Finally, both Marcia and Paul overcome their deathly absorption in lost love affairs; the theme, as in *The White Reef*, is one of escape from obsession with the past.

The history of Scandinavian immigration is an important context to novels such as *The Young May Moon*, *Wild Geese*, and *The White Reef*.<sup>13</sup> Almost three million Scandinavians emigrated to North America between 1830 and 1930, settling mainly in the prairies. The 1858 Fraser River gold rush, together with the extension of the Canadian Pacific Railway, drew some of these immigrants further west. They came lower in the social hierarchy than English- or Scottish-descended settlers, but as Protestants, were preferred over southern and eastern Europeans, who were mainly Catholic. Anti-Catholic nationalism was an important strand in the North American nativist movements around the turn of the century, and the American Protective Association, which Scandinavians in Minnesota joined in large numbers, was soon extended into Canada. In 1916, Madison Grant, an important American nativist thinker, published *The Passing of the Great Race*, which divided Europeans into three so-called “races”: the Alpines, whom he described as a breed of peasants, the Mediterraneans, who at least showed artistic tendencies, and the Nordic, whom he called “the white man par excellence” (qtd in Higham 156). Grant argued that Mendel’s laws suggested that these three races could not successfully blend, and that the immigration of Mediterraneans and Alpines, and especially Jews, should be discouraged, in order to keep America’s Nordic stock pure. (Grant used “Nordic” in an inclusive sense to mean those originating in Britain and Ireland, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia.) This kind of thinking led to the “Nordic Victory,” that is, the 1924 US immigration quota law favouring northern Europeans.<sup>14</sup>

Many literary texts reproduced or explored notions of racial types. In some North American fictions, especially those by immigrant writers, the various Scandinavian nations are distinguished as separate types, but more often, they are combined in undifferentiated images of fairness, vigour, healthiness, and cleanliness, together with independence and integrity, culture and literacy, high temper, and an uncompromising nature. These supposed ethnic traits fed directly into Canadian eugenicist thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eugenicists traced a common

ancestry for English and French Canadians to their Norse antecedents, theorising that the passions for liberty and justice, together with high intelligence, were essentially Nordic, and therefore already present in Canadians' inheritance (see Coleman 148). This logic is worked out in several of Ostenson's texts. The values and characteristics associated with a Scandinavian heritage are celebrated, and many of her main characters embody them, and in some cases bear affinities with Norse mythological types.<sup>15</sup> Yet it is not always the actual Scandinavian characters who possess these traits; rather, they are assigned to white characters of various ethnicities who can be identified with a nationalist Canadian ideal.

Coleman points out that expansion-era nationalist optimism was inclusive in that immigrants of various ethnicities were encouraged to aspire to become A1 Canadians, but it was culturally racist in that it required assimilation to white, often British-derived norms. He discusses Nellie McClung's *Painted Fires* (1925), which concerns a Finnish immigrant to Canada, Helmi Milander, who is continually thwarted in her attempts to find work, accommodation, and friends by Anglocentric, patriarchal power structures. The novel laments this treatment, but also shows that "the non-English immigrant can, by dint of hard work and conversion to Protestant values, overcome this adversity to become the ideal empire-making, future-oriented, western Canadian" (Coleman 147). Ostenson likewise requires her Scandinavian characters, admirable though they are, to adjust to Anglocentric ideals of civility. Judith in *Wild Geese* gradually brings her violent, passionate nature under control, and becomes feminized, finishing up as the embodiment of healthy, contented maternity while retaining a strength of character which associates her with the imperial mother figure.<sup>16</sup> Nona in *The White Reef* similarly overcomes the hatred, anger, and shame which she has cherished for six years because of her abandonment by Quentin, the father of her child. She eventually realizes that her refusal to forgive is destroying them both and that, since they are still in love, it is right that they should marry. A comparable pattern is discernible in *The Young May Moon*: while Marcia is probably not Scandinavian, she is identified with Norwegians, and she shares the passionate, defiant attitudes of Nona and Judith. She, too, adjusts herself to dominant social values, resists her desire to escape (symbolized by the gypsies), and eventually remarries.

Ostenson's privileging of "white civility" has doubtless contributed to the gradual canonization of her work (or at least, of one of her books) in Canada. She has found greater acceptance than many writers from visible

minorities or more recently established diasporic communities. Yet in order to incorporate her work into nationalist myths of pioneering and settlement which are largely predicated on whiteness or, more precisely, Britishness, critics have downplayed Ostenso's subtle explorations of race, ethnicity, culture, and inheritance,<sup>17</sup> instead identifying generalized themes of tyranny, isolation, and male-female conflict as her major preoccupations. Most critics also seek to inscribe *Wild Geese* into a pioneer tradition by concentrating on its man-versus-nature tropes and imaginative engagement with landscape,<sup>18</sup> yet very few attend to the implications of its setting in a Scandinavian immigrant community.<sup>19</sup>

To date, Ostenso has been co-opted into nationalist narratives of Canadian, and occasionally American, literary history, but on the basis of an extremely selective reading of her work. I think that her oeuvre needs to be read as a whole, and in relation to several contexts, including western Canadian literature, American rural writing, and Norwegian and Icelandic mythology. In particular, the Ostenso novels should be compared with other North American writing about Scandinavian families. A literary context for Ostenso's cross-border writing about Scandinavian migrants might be provided, for example, by Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), which concerns a Swedish family in Nebraska, or *The Song of the Lark* (1915), about a Scandinavian American opera singer; Sinclair Lewis' *The Trail of the Hawk* (1915), about second generation Norwegians in Minnesota; Laura Goodman Salverson's *The Viking Heart* (1923), a narrative of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, or her autobiography, *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* (1939); Nellie McClung's *Painted Fires* (1925); Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), which focuses on Swedish prairie settlers;<sup>20</sup> and Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927), about Norwegian immigrants in Minnesota. Comparisons with such a group, including writers of American and Canadian citizenship, and Scandinavian, non-Scandinavian, and even (in the case of Grove) pretended Scandinavian origin, would enable a more nuanced understanding of Ostenso's place as a migrant writer of multiple cultural affiliations.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Heather Milne for invaluable comments on an earlier draft, and Janet Galligani Casey for helpful discussions of Ostenso and for sharing her unpublished work.

- 1 It was a contest for the best American first novel, sponsored by *The Pictorial Review*; Dodd, Mead, and Company; and Famous Players-Lasky. Ostenso beat 1,389 competitors to win \$13,500, an unprecedentedly large sum for a literary prize. On the prize, and its effect on Ostenso's reputation, see Hammill.

- 2 Arnason comments that Ostenson “did teach in a farm community near the narrows on Lake Winnipeg. . . . Residents of the area can still identify the farm and can name the characters on whom the novel is supposedly based” (Afterword, 303). Some textual details, such as the prevalence of flax and the style of fishing (with a pole and net), suggest Canada rather than the US; also the character of Malcolm has a Scots Cree heritage which is more common in Manitoba than Minnesota. There is, however, no direct reference to Canada. Keahey suggests this might be due to Ostenson’s interest in the American prize: “[A]n explicit rural Manitoba setting may have been regarded as too ‘regional,’ in the ‘merely local’ sense, for Ostenson’s ‘international’ aspirations” (15).
- 3 This is understandable, given the ambiguity of some of the settings, but certain critics do read carelessly. Hesse, for example, asserts that two of Ostenson’s later novels, *The Dark Dawn* and *Prologue to Love*, drew on her Canadian background (47). In fact, in *The Dark Dawn*, one character travels northwards to North Dakota, and another has “whimsically gone up to Winnipeg, in Manitoba” (240) to study.
- 4 The term “transculture,” coined by Fernando Ortiz, a scholar of Afro-Cuban culture, is often used in Canadian literary theory as an umbrella term for First Nations writing, migrant writing, and *métissage* texts. Transcultural writers draw on at least two cultures, often focusing on mediation and exchange rather than resistance.
- 5 See Arnason, Afterword, 305; “Development,” 132; Atherton, *Martha Ostenson*, 3.
- 6 Arnason (Afterword; “Development”), Harrison and Thomas, among others, emphasize the realism of *Wild Geese*, though they do acknowledge elements of romance.
- 7 MacFadden and Lawrence both argue that the Gares are probably Norwegian. They cite fairly convincing evidence relating to the narrator’s mythological references and the Gares’ domestic customs, as well as the likely origins of their name, but other critics have read the Gares as English (see, for example, Harrison 101). Judith’s mother, Amelia, was brought up a Catholic, which makes it unlikely that she, at least, is Scandinavian.
- 8 Compare Mount’s argument about expatriate Canadian writers living in the US during the 1880s and 1890s, who were “celebrated at home when they were needed, dismissed as not Canadian enough when they were not, and selectively repatriated and reinvented after their deaths as contributors, whether as founders or footnotes, to a discretely Canadian literary tradition” (253-54).
- 9 See Atherton, “Ostenson Revisited”; Atherton, *Martha Ostenson*, 14; Thomas.
- 10 An interesting comparison for these texts would be Frances Herring’s BC books, such as *Canadian Camp Life* (1900). Combining fiction with history and travel narrative, Herring’s work “provides insight into early British Columbian culture, and more specifically, into the symbolic position of white femininity in the formation of a British Columbian social imaginary at the turn of the twentieth century” (Milne 107).
- 11 Several characters visit a place usually designated “the city,” but once named as Chicago (157). On the other hand, Atherton, having consulted family papers, is confident that the novel is set in Manitoba, and there is a real Amaranth near the Lake Manitoba Narrows. But Atherton’s speculation that Ostenson’s Amaranth is based on Brandon, since it has a college (“Ostenson Revisited,” 65 n16) is doubtful, since the fictional town has a “few hundred” inhabitants (15), whereas the 1931 census gives Brandon’s population as 17,000.
- 12 Nona in *The White Reef* has black hair, inherited from an Irish father, but her mother was “a white-haired Norwegian” (13).
- 13 On Scandinavians in North America, see Norman and Runblorn. Cf. the early twentieth-century accounts of Danish author Aksel Sandemose, who visited Scandinavian settlements in western Canada in 1927 (see Hale).

- 14 Also known as the Johnson Act, this legislation imposed quotas based on the 1890 census. Maximum annual immigration from each country was two per cent of the number of foreign-born American residents of that nationality in 1890. The purpose was to privilege the northern European groups which had made up the bulk of early immigrants, and discourage the newer waves of immigration from the Mediterranean and eastern Europe. In fact, though, the quotas severely reduced immigration from the whole of Europe. In 1929, a new system fixed the total number of immigrants to be accepted each year, allocating a proportion to each nationality according to the current US population breakdown.
- 15 Scandinavians were, statistically, the most literate among immigrant groups. Lewis gives a literacy rate of 99.8 per cent for Scandinavian immigrants to America in 1909 (9).
- 16 On the imperial mother in the Canadian context, see for example Devereux, Henderson.
- 17 Only Keahey emphasizes these aspects of Ostenso's work (15-19).
- 18 For thematic accounts of *Wild Geese* and its perspectives on landscape, see for instance Harrison 107-14; Hesse; Johnson; Lawrence; Lenoski; Northey; Pacey, "Fiction"; Thomas. See Hammill for a fuller list.
- 19 A potentially productive approach to Ostenso is initiated in a graduate thesis tracing the influence of Icelandic saga on *Wild Geese* (McFadden).
- 20 Among these authors, Ostenso is usually compared only to Grove, and the basis of the comparison is invariably their evocation of the relationship between humans and the prairie environment, rather than their depiction of Scandinavian diasporas.

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