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A(t) Home on the Frontier: Place, Narrative, and Material Culture in Caroline Kirkland and Eliza Farnham

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Abstract: Particularly during the westward expansion, the frontier was not just a concrete site of conquest, exploration, and settlement but also a space of projection and imagination of (future) possibilities. People not only imagined the frontier in a variety of sometimes incompatible ways. They also used such imaginations to process and order their experience of the concrete, 'real-life' space so that the frontier becomes a space in which both, the lived and the imagined space, overlap and merge. This essay looks at how two popular antebellum writers used material objects and related cultural practices in their narrative construction of frontier space, arguing that, from this perspective, narrative space ceases to be only a property of the text and extends into the object world. Drawing on their own experience of life in the east, Caroline Kirkland and Eliza Farnham use gender- and class-based ideologies of taste and refinement to make the unknown space of the frontier meaningful and familiar, thus turning it from a mere place to live into something like a home. Such a use of material culture in the narrative construction of this space allows both writers to comment on and shape the ideological underpinnings of the frontier and, by extension, take part in the (narrative) construction of future America.

1 Furnishing the Nation's Future Homes

The frontier has always been a special – and especially contested – space in American literature and culture. Apart from being a space of the imagination – both an imagined space and a geographical space onto which imaginations of, e.g. the future of the nation could be projected – it was also a very concrete, lived space for many people. These two spaces, the imagined and what Henri Lefebvre calls the "lived" space (Lefebvre 1991, 39), come together and overlap in the

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autobiographical writings of settlers who wrote about their frontier experience. Looking more closely at such representations of ‘settling the west,’ it becomes clear that even the real-life encounter with the frontier space had an imagined component: As Mary Louise Pratt and others have pointed out, newly ‘discovered’ spaces were routinely seen as being ‘empty’ to justify colonization and claim the ‘pristine’ space for the new inhabitants, ignoring and erasing indigenous people in a narrative of new beginnings (Pratt 1992, 125–126; see also Nye’s contribution in this collection). Hence, more often than not frontier literature features untouched, uninhabited nature that needs to be domesticated to become inhabitable. Moreover, literary and visual patterns of nature representation served not just as models for the representation of this space; as Annette Kolodny has convincingly shown, they also shaped its experience: “In the process of projecting resonant symbolic contents onto otherwise unknown terrains […] women made those terrains their own” (Kolodny 1984, xii). And, as Kolodny, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, and others have pointed out, such imaging and imagining was not just influenced by literary or visual traditions of representation but also by the identity dimensions such as the gender, race, or class of those experiencing and representing the land.[1]

In the following, I will look in more detail at two different accounts of the frontier: Caroline Kirkland’s *A New Home – Who’ll Follow? Sketches of Western Life* (1839) and Eliza W. Farnham’s *Life in Prairie Land* (1846). Both writers were popular and successful and can be considered pioneers, not just in geographical but also in literary terms; particularly Kirkland’s *A New Home* can be considered a ‘first’ as it is generally seen as the first realistic portrayal of frontier life and also one of the earliest female voices that rewrote the predominantly male accounts of the west (Kolodny 1984, 133; Zagarell 2006, 807). Similarly, despite passages clearly influenced by romanticism (Hallwas 1981, 310–311), Farnham’s travel narrative can be regarded as a forerunner to realism, and with *Life in Prairie Land*, she inflected and changed the predominantly ‘male’ genre of the travel narrative according to her own purposes.

Nevertheless, Eliza Farnham and Caroline Kirkland have all but disappeared from the literary maps established by American literary history writing, and only rather recently have they reemerged into the focus of nineteenth-century specialists. Both narratives are usually discussed with regard to their account of frontier life from a decidedly female point of view, including matters of gendered ideologies of domesticity and home or – again rather recently – ecocritical approaches to their narrativization of natural spaces.[2] In this essay, I would like to

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1 See Slotkin (1973); Kolodny (1975, 1984); Georgi-Findlay (1996); or Smith (1970). For a discussion from a geographer’s perspective, see Massey (1994).

2 Kolodny (1984); Georgi-Findlay (1996); Banks (1999); Borup (1999); Obuchowski (2005).

shift the focus to something that has not explicitly been discussed, the intersection of space, narrative, and material culture – objects and practices – in these two texts.[3] Similar to what Henri Lefebvre calls representational or lived space (Lefebvre 1991, 39), this intersection highlights the extent to which our experience of, or living in, space is historically, culturally, and socially formed – not least through narratives about this space, which use material culture as an important way to do so.

According to Shirley Wajda and Helen Sheumaker, material culture is "culture made material – that is, it is the physical manifestations of human endeavor, [...] of social, economic, and political processes affecting all of us" (Wajda and Sheumaker 2008, xi). For the purposes of this essay, space-related practices rooted in material culture are those practices that help us to structure, even construct the spaces we move and live in, and they can range from large-scale ones like landscaping to smaller ones such as the decoration of a room. Such practices do more than to simply furnish or organize space to make it inhabitable; they make spaces meaningful as they reflect, negotiate, and perpetuate norms and values that govern people's lives. In this, they are intimately tied up with people's identities: these practices literally and metaphorically help to 'locate' us within the larger frameworks of social and physical space. They are an expression of our preferences and aims, the values and ideologies we live by, but they also restrict us in the sense that they provide a limited and limiting framework within which we live and act (cf. O'Toole and Were 2008, 624).

In many ways, such material culture practices function similarly to narrative practices, particularly if one looks at the ontological dimension of narrative as Margaret Somers (1994) has suggested. Stories, too, are part of our identity, not just in autobiographical writings but in more general and fundamental ways as we experience as well as structure our lives through narrative (cf. Bruner 1991; and Bieger's essay in this Special Issue). Moreover, narratives are always also located in space, which serves not just as background to help bring the story to life but is in central ways entangled with its characters (as well as its readers).[4] Narrative space, therefore, deserves an appreciation beyond its function as what is traditionally called 'setting.' In the following, I use the term "narrative space" to refer to what Ruth Ronen (1986) has called

3 However, see also Daehnke (2003) and Merish (1993), who both analyze the intersection of middle-class domestic ideology and material culture in Kirkland's text.

4 See Ronen (1986); Friedman (1993); Ryan (2014). Massey (2005) also points out that stories are necessarily spatial because of their positioning "in relation to other trajectories and stories" (Massey 2005, 12).

the different "frames" of the story, i.e. the space constructed and used in the narrative, comprising the immediate location of the action and characters as well as those spaces that lie beyond that action and even beyond the boundaries of the story.[5] By necessity, this narrative space is different for each reader because, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, in the act of reading the reader completes it on the basis of her knowledge and experience into a "narrative world" (Ryan 2014, n.pag.) which can thus become productive in Lefebvre's sense of lived/representational space.

In the following, I will show how narrative space is constructed and represented in ideologically significant ways – most notably regarding gender and class – with the help of objects and practices of material culture, i.e. in ways that also comment on the general (real and representational) practices of settling the frontier. There are two major aspects of frontier space that Kirkland and Farnham write about: nature and houses/homes. While in the construction of natural space, material culture and related practices matter in gardening, in the construction of dwelling places, they are even more prominent, particularly for turning houses into homes. As a symbolically laden space, home – bedrock for individual and collective identities – is especially important as it can be taken as a microcosmos of the nation and, moreover, a space that was at the time specifically designated as 'feminine,' i.e. a space of authority for female writers.[6] Writing about the creation of homes on the frontier, these writers could thus actually engage in socio-political matters that were usually considered to be outside their realm of expertise.[7] What emerges here is a cultural production of space according to gender- and class-based ideologies that has implications not just for individual families but for the whole nation.

5 Particularly in the semi-autobiographical writings discussed here, the location of the narrator who tells the story, which Seymour Chatman calls the "discourse space" (Chatman, qtd. in Buchholz and Jahn 2005, 552), is also important in the consideration of the construction of narrative space. Both narrator figures locate themselves on the frontier as well as – in reader addresses, for instance – at a distance from it, *elsewhere*. A discussion of this discourse space, however, would go beyond the scope of this essay.

6 See for instance Nancy Cott's classic *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1997 [1977]), in which she shows how the female domestic sphere became ideologically intertwined with the well-being of the national 'domestic' sphere.

7 Georgi-Findlay (1996) points out that women's position in writing travel narratives was transgressive and ambiguous since they "were traditionally excluded from certain knowledges and discourses" that would help them to claim authority in these matters (Georgi-Findlay 1996, 13). By focusing on 'domestic' matters, Kirkland, Farnham and others could thus transgress such gender-based limitations while still being able to claim authority for their own writing.

2 Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home*: Domesticating the Frontier

The Kirklands relocated to the Michigan frontier in 1837, where they owned over 1,300 acres of land. However, for a variety of reasons (among them the economic depression and the fact that they themselves became victims of land fraught) their endeavor proved unsuccessful, and in 1843, the Kirklands returned to New York City. This disappointment might have been part of the reason why Kirkland chose to write about the frontier in a sort of 'corrective' tone, which stood in stark contrast to the overly enthusiastic perspective of booster literature or the romanticizing approach of adventure novels at that time. Although Kirkland admits that there occasionally "be glosses, and colorings" of her own pen, she sees her sketches as "an unimpeachable transcript of reality" and lays claim to a realist perspective.[8] Throughout the loosely connected chapters of her narrative, the narrator relates the clash between her own expectations, based chiefly on travel literature, novels and other material she read about the west, and everyday frontier reality. During her first visit to the region, for instance, she admits "I desired much to be a little sentimental at the time," an emotion that quickly gives way to a more sobering look and the realization that such romanticizing pictures "gave me but incorrect notions of a real journey through Michigan" (6). The frontier space created in that literature clearly appears to be a fictional one which – in Kirkland's view – is in need of correction in order to prepare future settlers adequately for what is in store for them. Thus, Kirkland's own 'setting' attempts to be a more realist depiction of the frontier; yet she also maps her own idealized frontier onto it, which becomes clear in the two major spaces she writes about: nature and the domestic space.

Nature in Kirkland's narrative is never the dangerous wilderness depicted in the popular adventure novels of the time. Rather, it is an edenic place perfect for the use by human beings. Moreover, her descriptions suggest that it is an 'empty,' pristine space and Native Americans rarely enter Kirkland's frontier. This space of beauty is routinely contrasted with the mundane aspects of actual frontier life. Access to this place, for instance, is only possible via rough roads which feature "mud-holes," something which makes the inadequacy of 'city habits' painfully obvious. With characteristic self-mockery, the narrator Mary Clavers (Kirkland's pen name) comments on her fashionable "paper-soled shoes" as very "sensible things" for the woods (6). Similarly, other items of (eastern) material culture are

8 Kirkland (1990), 1. If not otherwise marked, all quotations in this subchapter will come from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

unsuitable here: to attempt a journey into the wilderness with a "buggy," albeit stylishly genteel in an urban sense, leads only to trouble, something that can be avoided with a more practical "heavy lumber wagon" (6); fashion and elegance have to give way to practicability and common sense. Yet, although the wagon appears here as a practical object, it can also be read as a symbol of a simpler life focused on 'core virtues' and stripped of the fashion fads that many Americans found characteristic of urban life. In this sense, the frontier becomes a 'corrective' space balancing exaggerated refinement with simplicity.

Connected to this is the 'domestication' and use of untouched nature. Rhubarb, egg-plants, and melons grow just as well as roses, geraniums, or hyacinths, and it is well worth putting some effort into creating a garden, both for decorative purposes (flowers) and practical ones (vegetables). Although it is quite difficult to set up a comfortable home, even simply an adequate shelter, on the frontier, Kirkland emphasizes the importance of gardening beyond the purposes of growing food. In her eyes, well designed gardens are a sign of refinement and taste, which can be detected in the pruning of shrubs and the display of 'elegant' flowers just as much as in the interior decoration of houses (74). In her descriptions of frontier gardening practices, Kirkland takes up the widespread idea that housing arrangements – including the garden – would influence inhabitants in positive or negative ways.[9] Thus, the narrator spends time on her garden, sowing seeds and planting whatever she can lay her hands on (78–79). Rather than being simply 'natural' objects, the bulbs, seeds, and plants come to bear culturally significant meaning and values such as taste and refinement. Still, many of Clavers' neighbors do not care for "yaller lilies" (79), and as one of her female neighbors phrases it, "she never know'd nobody make nothin' by raisin' sich [sic!] things" (80). Clearly, gardening is to a large extent a class-based practice as it takes both time and material resources, something which many settlers simply could not afford. Clavers, however, reframes this as a matter of taste, implying that those who do not have a garden simply do not want one, lacking the ability to see its (obvious) advantages.

Kirkland's account of the frontier stands in contrast to the perilous natural spaces depicted in adventure novels à la Cooper as the wilderness in and of itself is not dangerous. Rather, it is the vices from civilization that turn the frontier into an unsafe place so that, in her view, domestication is necessary to turn the frontier into an environment that will help to improve *the settlers*, a process that is clearly gendered. While male practices connected to settling the frontier, especially land speculation but also agricultural practices, do not necessarily lead

9 A.J. Downing's *Cottage Residences* (1842), for instance, emphasizes the importance of gardening as a 'genteel' practice that helped to improve both the environment and its inhabitants.

to an improved space in the sense that Kirkland is looking for, female practices, particularly those connected to what one could call 'female material culture,' will ultimately lead to a frontier space that helps improve its inhabitants. Women's "hand of refined taste" (74) will turn the raw space of the frontier into a space of home that will not just shelter its inhabitants but have a positive influence on them as the exposure to and use of certain objects will ultimately help settlers to absorb that influence. Such a view was in tune with beliefs that emerged parallel to the increased availability of consumer objects in early nineteenth-century America. While exaggerated consumption or the consumption of the wrong things (e.g. certain popular literary genres or fashion) was believed to have a negative influence, moderate consumption of 'proper' consumer goods began to be considered not just as beneficial but even necessary.[10] In a somewhat circular argument, items such as furniture, carpets, clothes, pictures, and books were thought to improve people by exerting a positive influence on their morals and taste, while at the same time being a sign of the 'good' taste and morals of those who consumed them (cf. Bushman 1992). Again, such items of middle-class culture are not simply functional but become highly ideological, an ideology that helped to establish middle-class norms and values as the standard so that proper behavior came to equal a middle-class way of life.

In Kirkland's narrative such class-based ideas of refinement and propriety clash systematically with frontier culture, particularly in the domestic realm. In numerous situations, Kirkland's narrator has to discover that her expectations regarding spatial arrangements, furnishings, and comforts – embodied by objects and practices – are in need of revision. Traveling to her new home, for instance, Clavers discovers that her hotel is "a log-house of diminutive size" (Kirkland 1990, 8) and looks in vain for a private room for herself to sleep in. In the end, she has to make do with sleeping in the small attic, together with "all the men and boys" who live there and quite literally surround her bed, which is separated only by "[s]undry old quilts" that "serve as a partial screen" (9). Her trials continue in the morning when she finds out that instead of a proper wash-dish she needs to use an iron skillet in front of the house to wash herself. The spatial arrangements she knows from home – the clear separation of public and private, inside and outside space according to certain practices – do not apply here. Moreover, the usual categories with which objects are ordered according to function and space are also much more flexible than Clavers is used to: A pan that also serves as a makeshift wash-basin clearly disrupts her sense of propriety. Material culture,

10 Numerous advice books such as Eliza Farrar's *The Young Lady's Friend* (1836), which advised young women on proper behavior and household management, including the consumption of clothes and furniture, flooded the market during that time.

here, is not simply part of a realistic setting but becomes highly meaningful in the narrative construction of space: what settlers use and how they use it helps to 'locate' them within the social sphere, particularly with regard to class.

Moving into their own house, the Claverses realize that they have brought far too many possessions to fit into the limited space of a log-house. In front of her neighbors, the narrator retrieves "myriads of articles […], many of which though ranked when they were put in as absolutely essential, seemed ridiculously superfluous when they came out" (42). When her precious "delicate japanned tables" (42) are unpacked, indispensable for any respectable middle-class parlor, one of her neighbors comments incredulously that "they'll do better for kindlin's than any thing else, here" (43). The decorative set of tables, whose lacquered style and décor suggests cosmopolitan taste and an appreciation of the beautiful to the narrator, become a completely different object on the frontier, reduced as they are to being fire-wood since there is literally and metaphorically no place for them. The conditions on the frontier force the narrator to revise both her usual standards regarding the set-up of (home) space and the meaning and relevance of hitherto vital objects to furnish it.

Yet, while Mrs. Clavers revises habitual standards of living, she does not completely discard her customary middle-class principles. In fact, the setting up of her own home serves as a contrast to other houses she visits. Thus, as much as she mocks her own naivety regarding standards of comfort and propriety on the frontier, she disdains those of her neighbors who do not live up to what she considers as a minimum standard. Visiting the house of one of the more seasoned settlers, Mrs. Clavers comments in detail on the disorder that seems to reign there, ranging from the motley assortment of clothes at the wardrobe to the tasteless decoration of the walls with "large broadside sheets" and "caravan show bills" that feature circus advertisements (13). Here, too, the usual categorization of objects regarding their use and proper space is hopelessly disrupted: "iron spoons, a small comb, and sundry other articles [are] grouped with the like good taste" (13), a pot is used to wash the dishes, a chair serves as a place for drying them, and both mother and daughter dress and get ready right where dinner is prepared and served (14). The settlers' organization of space, particularly their use of material objects, is incongruent with what Clavers is used to. However, despite her realization that the frontier necessitates a different use of both space and objects, the narrator criticizes the lack of refinement in frontier communities. Such a refinement, best spread by the proper use of certain types of objects, would in her eyes be much needed to ensure a prosperous future development not just of the west but also the whole nation.

Settling the frontier, as Kirkland makes clear throughout her narrative, should not be reduced to the mere matter of turning wilderness into farms – as

her sketches show, it is not so much the land that needs domesticating as the (uneducated) settlers themselves, something for which the creation of a community and particularly a home is essential. This – in turn – can only be achieved through a proper material culture: objects and practices that range from gardening to the furnishing of the house. In tune with contemporaneous middle-class ideology, Kirkland asserts the necessity of consumption, however small-scale, to ensure the proper furnishings and decoration of the settlers' private spaces. While concessions need to be made because of the simplified character of frontier life, certain standards have to be upheld: cleanliness, order, and even refinement can and must be established for the future of the frontier to be successful. Thus, Clavers closes her narrative with the proud observation that the good example of settlers like herself has improved her village society as "some few [have] carpets and shanty-kitchens; and one or two, piano-fortes and silver tea-sets" (187). Material culture on the frontier is improving and with it the settlers; yet, the aim should not be to reproduce eastern urban culture on the frontier since too many "conveniences and refined indulgences of civilized life" might "make us proud, selfish, and ungrateful" (183). In her view, then, the frontier is certainly not (yet) an ideal place but it is a place which affords the chance to start anew and to remake American society at large, a process in which women must take center stage. One way for her to do so is to create a narrative (frontier) space, in which she makes the un-homely, unfamiliar space of the frontier more familiar with the help of objects and practices of eastern middle-class culture. Thus, the use of material culture serves to domesticate and order the unruly space of the frontier by furnishing it with the well-known accoutrements of a middle-class home.

3 Eliza Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land*: At Home in Nature

Eliza Woodson Farnham moved to the Illinois frontier in 1835 to live with her sister Mary Roberts and her husband in Groveland, Tazewell County (McKinney 2008, 130–131). After her marriage, she and her husband moved to Tremont and, later on, to Peoria. When her husband went on an exploration to Oregon, she stayed behind but started to travel around and visit friends in Illinois until, in 1840, the couple returned to New York. It was not until several years later (1844–1846), when she worked as a matron in Mount Pleasant State Prison, that Farnham wrote *Life in Prairie Land* (McKinney 2008, 134). Probably based on her diaries (McKinney 2008, 134), the book is part-autobiography, part travel writing, and part nature writing.

Many of the issues that Kirkland addresses are also present in Farnham's sketches, particularly the critical look at practices of housekeeping. Yet, her focus lies on nature as a space of (divine) beauty, spiritual renewal, and freedom, which stands in contrast to the domesticated spaces that she describes. Moreover, while Kirkland places decided emphasis on the process of settling on the frontier – how to make a new home there – Farnham's sketches strike the reader as more of a travelogue, an account of her experience traveling in Illinois – and specifically getting to know its natural space – rather than settling down there. In Kirkland, nature is beautiful but becomes even more beautiful when its settlements turn it into a domesticated garden. In contrast, and although she, too, appreciates middle-class practices of gardening, Farnham considers wild nature as sufficiently beautiful and even divine.

Nature in Farnham is first and foremost beautiful and inspiring, something to be admired. Indeed, remembering seeing a prairie for the first time, Farnham recalls:

> I can never forget the thrill which this first unbounded view on a prairie gave me. I afterwards saw many more magnificent – many richer in all elements of beauty, many so extensive that this appeared a mere meadow beside them, but no other had the charm of this. (26)[11]

The impression this prairie makes is so awe-inspiring that she and her brother can only remain silent: We "were lost in contemplation of the sublime spectacle which lay before us. We had no inquiries to make. Nature spoke to us in her own unequivocal language" (27). As in her first encounter with the prairie, nature will provide 'answers' to her throughout the text. Yet, as John Hallwas (1981, 310) observes, such romantic notions of the landscape are disrupted by the more mundane aspects of the frontier landscape when shortly afterwards the road disappears and their wagon's "fore wheels sank in the place he [the horse] had just occupied" and gets stuck in the mud (Farnham 2003, 27). Nevertheless, in Farnham's narrative, nature emerges as a space of spiritual renewal (e.g. 44), which not only functions as a home (45) but will provide betterment for everybody (145). In her descriptions of nature, Farnham's affinity to New England transcendentalism, particularly to one of its key texts, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836), becomes obvious.[12] Echoing Emerson's idea of nature as a place to experience the divine, she writes that "my cathedral should be the overhanging cliff, my temple the eloquent shades" (134). For her, as for the transcendentalists, true spirituality can only be found in nature.

11 If not otherwise noted, all quotes in this section are taken from Farnham (2003) with page numbers in brackets.

12 See John E. Hallwas (1981) for a comparative reading of Farnham and Emerson; see McKinney (1998) for a focus on the text's structure as a typical transcendentalist characteristic.

Moreover, anticipating some of Henry David Thoreau's ideas expressed in *Walden* (1854), Farnham regards nature as a space superior to urbanized eastern culture. When Farnham discusses life on the frontier with her sister Mary, the latter remarks that it is both the beauty and the freedom which the prairies afford that she cherishes. Living close to nature, Mary explains, people's "selfishness […] softens into greater harmony with the good, the true, and the beautiful in creation" (54).[13] Furthermore, nature provides

> [f]reedom from want, […]; freedom from social trammels; freedom from the struggles of an emulation founded in vanity or other vitiated desires; from the myriad forms of ruinous and slavish excess […]. (55)

Nature, in Farnham's account, emerges as a contrast to civilization that can heal social vice and excess. Moreover, and again similar to Thoreau, nature is a space of learning superior to the tried and tested canonical knowledge that is usually taught. Commenting on the regret many settlers feel with regard to the education of their children, Farnham's sister emphasizes that "I could better educate a child here, with a great volume of nature to expound to him, than in the pent city, with all its dusty libraries and elaborate preparations" (145). Studying nature means studying and participating in God's creation, an experience that will lead to an improved character (cf. also 131; 217). However, the natural world is not just a space of contrast to civilization, a space of untamed wilderness. The narrator's descriptions throughout the book characterize it as a space of shelter and 'home' in many ways. The prairies "spread their green carpets," decorated with a colorful floral pattern (42); grass blades look like a "chain of gems" and when moved by the wind, they turn into "diamonds, rubies, emeralds" and the like (45). The "prairie puts on its richest garb" in early summer, a time when nature in general "has cleaned house […], got her furniture and ornaments arranged" and awaits her deserved admiration sitting "complacently in her easy chair" (47). In these descriptions, nature is personified; it is a living space that affords shelter, even a home for those who are willing to 'give up' city habits, offering a truly natural 'material culture,' complete with refinement and learning.[14]

Despite such references to material culture, Farnham appreciates nature above all in its 'untouched' state: Whenever she looked onto her favorite prairie, she "wished in my selfishness that it might remain unchanged; that neither buildings, fences, trees, nor living things should change its features while I live"

13 Hallwas convincingly argues that this passage was directly influenced by Emerson's *Nature* and, possibly, by William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Ages" (Hallwas 1981, 312; 315–317).

14 Still, nature is not a benign space but can also be dangerous and fatal (e.g. 127; 173–174; 177–180).

(26–27). Her stance toward settlement is ambiguous: On the one hand, she realizes that "[l]ands, boundless in extent, exhaustless in fertility, […] accessible in all their parts" (268) will be settled by the ever-growing numbers of westward moving people in search of new opportunities and the Jeffersonian vision of an agricultural paradise. On the other hand, many of her descriptions of nature show her regret about such developments since such settlement will possibly destroy some of the very features that she cherishes so much about the land. This might also explain one of the main differences to Kirkland's narrative. While both are similar in their humorous descriptions of frontier life and also in their class-based evaluation of the settlers' domestic life, Farnham's narrative seems much more detached and less keen on changing those aspects of life that she finds distasteful. In contrast to Kirkland, whose narrative ends with a positive appraisal of how the 'domestic frontier' changes for the better, Farnham leaves the frontier at the end of her narrative feeling sorry for the loss of nature. She, too, promises a bright, unparalleled future for this part of the country, yet not because of carpets or piano-fortes but because of the grandeur of the land itself, a grandeur that she certainly managed to capture and preserve in *Life in Prairie Land*.

Despite these differences regarding the role and function of nature, Farnham's sketches also contain passages on the domestic space of the frontier that echo Kirkland's in many ways, and she remarks on similar aspects of frontier life, ranging from the necessity to lodge with strangers to frontier fashion and issues of housekeeping. Farnham, too, relates her 'hotel' experience as rather unpleasant because standards of cleanliness, food quality, and propriety do not apply to frontier lodgings (see, e.g. 187; 192; 197). Even with more private lodgings, which the narrator has to use before moving into her own house, Farnham's experience is rather negative. Moving into the house of a Quaker family, she takes with her expectations of "order and neatness" as well as a "tolerable prospect of comfort," particularly as the location of the house "is really quite beautiful" (72). However, all these hopes are disappointed: The "elysium" is "unequivocally filthy" and inhabited by a couple and their children, none of whom is dressed properly or behaves according to standards of propriety (73–75). Clothes are improper, dirty, torn or simply absent, and the children, magically drawn to the narrator "clad all in white of the most unsullied purity" (74), not only 'inspect' her in detail but also start fingering her dress, shawl, and gloves (75). Moreover, in the midst of chaos and dirt, the "lady hostess" kneads dough and "the principle object of the woman's labor seems to be to distribute this brown coating [ashes from the fire] fairly through the mass" of dough (73). Humorously, Farnham relates her disgust and outright panic at having to stay there, making "a random estimate of the number of days one might subsist without food" but really getting nowhere with this (75). Tellingly, once she and her husband leave the house, nature appeases

them, "pure and beautiful here as elsewhere" (75), a purity that stands very much in contrast to the 'corruption' of frontier civilization.

Besides the dreadful prospect of eating, there are other things that the narrator has to contend with. The room she has to sleep in contains three beds, flour barrels, an unused tin oven, chairs, a bundle of fabrics, broken dishes as well as "all descriptions of loose litter" (77). As in Kirkland, privacy and cleanliness as well as the proper use and decoration of space (however limited) is an issue here, and Farnham proceeds to 'correct' this by creating her own private space within this room. She cleans the room, has some things moved elsewhere and, most importantly, partitions off her own space with the help of a quilt. Complete with a little carpet, a mirror, a makeshift toilet table and her books, she domesticates and refines this raw frontier space into something of a middle-class retreat, which protects her from her ill-mannered and unrefined hosts. Here, too, objects do not just have a practical function but are carriers of class- and gender-based ideologies, which help the narrator in the construction and display of her identity and its appropriate spatial surroundings.

Her own debut as a housekeeper comes with its own problems and, like Kirkland, she has to overcome unexpected obstacles to domestic bliss. Seeing it for the first time, the narrator detects that the house's interior is "picturesquely ornamented with broken crockery, soiled sheets of wrapping paper, rifled boxes, and crates" (92). Creating a home she has to make do with what she has and improvise to handle limited space and lack of furniture. Since she does not have a bedstead yet, she has to use an improvised straw bed, which, she points out, serves just as well. Here, Farnham explicitly comments on frontier practices of consumption: "One does not go out to select sofas, chairs, bureaus, toilet stands, mirrors, carpets, tables, etc., but to take such as can be found, and consider it lucky to find one article or set of the kind required" (94). Moreover, she emphasizes that "[t]he question, too, is not how much you shall buy, but how little," adding that her own "injudicious purchases gave me much trouble" (95) since they do not fit anywhere. Still, she acquires "some parlor chairs, a mirror, and bureau," which help to turn her frontier house into a "respectable" home (95).

Hence, in spite of such differences in the use of space and a different material culture on the frontier, the narrator underlines that the practices and objects necessary to create a proper domestic sphere, a 'true home,' are still essentially the same. The material goods available on the frontier might be more limited and related practices have to be adapted; yet, a proper home – defined by middle-class standards of refinement, cleanliness and the like – can and must be created on the frontier. However, this emphasis on the proper home, echoing many of the ideologies of true domesticity that would grow in significance over the next decades, is somewhat undercut by Farnham's frequent celebratory descriptions

of nature.[15] Human standards of housing and behavior can fail as the narrator's detailed descriptions of frontier settlements show; nature's own standards of beauty, her 'spirituality' in contrast can always be relied on as a 'true home.' In this sense, the space of nature can only be corrupted by humans; left alone nature is – literally and metaphorically – divine.

4 Frontier "Culture Made Material"

If material culture is "culture made material" (Wajda and Sheumaker 2008, xi), then frontier culture is in many ways very different from the nineteenth-century middle-class culture of eastern, urban America. This difference cannot simply be reduced to a matter of availability or the range of objects used on the frontier, but it expresses at times a very different set of ideologies, which mark a 'deviation' from the dominating middle-class culture, something that both Eliza Farnham and Caroline Kirkland worry about. To them, the frontier is a dangerous place not because its wilderness is dangerous and in need of domestication but because its inhabitants are. This is a clearly gendered perspective that questions the dominant myth of (male) freedom attached to the frontier, particularly considering texts such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), in which the refined, almost effeminate Heyward is shown to be unfit for life on the frontier. Both authors highlight male unwillingness to acknowledge this need for a more civilized – and civilizing – material culture. However, although home and homemaking are a space of authority for women in the nineteenth century, it is decidedly not just the men who are in need of the positive influence of the domestic sphere; Kirkland and Farnham relate stories of women who (inexplicably) refuse to be good housekeepers. It is especially these examples that show how in the uncontrolled and uncontrollable frontier space, the usual standards and norms of domesticity – complete with standards of proper behavior, education, and knowledge – become contested and are in need of (re)assertion, something which, in their view, particularly women are equipped to do. As becomes clear in their narratives, the frontier cannot be properly domesticated without objects and practices that help to embody the norms and values of the society that seeks to make it a (future) 'home.' Constructing shelters that keep out the rain is not sufficient and can only be the first step in the process of domestication,

15 Repeatedly, Farnham emphasizes her freedom in the unrestricted space of frontier nature, a freedom that is not just meant metaphorically but also refers to the mechanisms of social control that pertained especially to women (e.g. 54; 213).

much of which is material-based. Both writers emphasize that furnishing domestic spaces – particularly on the frontier – should not just be about practicability or comfort but that much more is at stake. Proper furniture and appliances but also decorative items are not just a sign of propriety and taste but also help to instill these in their users so that their lack on the frontier is worrisome in more than one way. As the frontier is a space of possibility, a space where the future of the nation 'materializes,' it needs to be closely watched to make sure that its inhabitants develop in the 'right' way. As middle-class culture came to be considered as the standard, and as it was more and more dependent on material objects and practices, it is not surprising that in a place where material items were rare and hard to get, middle-class culture seemed especially vulnerable. In addition to a certain scarcity of resources, the dominance of settlers with a different class background also served to put middle-class (material) culture and its ideologies into question – Kirkland in particular worries about 'unruly' settlers more committed to displaying their own equality and freedom than proper middle-class 'accessories.' Despite scarcity of resources and the necessity to adapt to frontier conditions, it is not surprising, then, that both writers insist on the importance of material culture and its practices, as they help to order and domesticate the disorderly space of the frontier into a home, refined, comfortable, and visibly aligned with genteel culture and ideology.

It is also not surprising that Kirkland and Farnham put their focus on the domestic space. Using the domestic domain – in the eyes of nineteenth-century gender ideology women's 'natural' space of expertise – as focus not only helps these writers to transgress limits into literary terrains that were considered predominantly male (e.g. the travel narrative or nature essay). It also helps them to extend their expertise into the realm of the political and social space of the frontier, likewise a space that was usually considered a male domain. Their writings – based on personal experience – became significant in areas that went beyond the usual focus of 'women's writing.' Both Farnham and Kirkland use their narrative to express their ideas about society and its future, not just by giving humorous advice on feasible preparation for future settlers but also by an extensive critique of (male) practices of settlement, ranging from land speculation to house-building to the destruction of nature. Thus, their narratives become part of the construction of the frontier – imagined and 'lived' – which emerges as a space that is, as Doreen Massey has it, "a simultaneity of stories so-far" (Massey 2005, 9). From this perspective, narrative space ceases to be a mere property of the text but clearly extends into the world of objects and 'other' narratives. Moreover, by creating a public, critical voice to be heard in discussions about the frontier, both authors managed to turn their texts into marketable commodities, thus turning narrative space – metaphorically their vision of what the frontier should look

like, literally in the form of the book they could sell – into a valuable resource for themselves to further their literary careers. The (usually male) frontier, in their writings, is thus a space much in need of women, who, in fact, become central participants in the political and social emergence of the west, both in the concrete environment of the frontier as well as in writings about it.

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