Where the World Is Not

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Adams, Jane, 78
aesthetic/practical dichotomy. See practical/aesthetic dichotomy
aesthetics: Arnold’s influence on, 67, 165n30; Ellison on, 134, 139–40; overview of, 164n21; and race in *Invisible Man*, 133–35
Als, Hilton, 177n47
*American Dilemma, An* (Myrdal), 178n60
*American Genesis* (Hughes), 25
Anderson, Benedict, 147n21
Anthony, William A., 70
anti-Semitism, 74, 167n53
Arendt, Hannah, 7, 56–57
Aristotle, 164n21
Arnold, Matthew: critique of science, 67, 68, 166n43; on culture, 23, 31, 71; *Culture and Anarchy*, 30; influence on aesthetics, 67, 165n30; influence on Du Bois, 112; New Humanist and, 162n11
art: Cather on value of, 98–100, 106–8, 173n54, 174n57; disputes over purpose and definition of, 10–11, 148n34; Du Bois on, 109; Ellison on individuality and, 123–24, 125, 126–27. See also literature
*Art as Experience* (Dewey), 54
art-for-art’s sake movement, 164n23
*Artist in American Society, The* (Harris), 164n21
“Art of Fiction, The” (Ellison), 8, 146n22
Attridge, Derek, 146n21
Auden, W. H., 176n35
Baker, Miss: artful living of, 54–56, 58; description of, 157n24; as representing new social order, 42, 59, 155n11; romance between Grannis and, 43, 44–45, 47–50, 55, 155n6, 156n16; transformation of, 47–48, 49–50
Baldwin, James, 179n69
Balibar, Étienne, 147n21
Baym, Nina, 172n41
*Beast in the Jungle, The* (James), 145n17
*Beautiful and the Damned, The* (Fitzgerald), 14
Bell, Alexander Graham, 25, 36, 39
Bell, Clive, 14
Bellow, Saul, 145n17
Benston, Kimberly W., 177n55
best-science elitism, 34, 37, 153n45, 154n48
Blake, Roddy, 97–98, 99, 105
Bledsoe, Dr., 131–32
Boorstin, Daniel, 151n6
*Bostonians, The* (James), 145n17
bottom line, definition of, 159n44
Bourne, Randolph, 17
Bradley, F. H., 160n7
Brooks, Van Wyck, 17
Brother Jack, 128, 132, 133, 135, 137
*Brown v. The Board of Education*, 179n75
Bush, Vannevar, 151n3
Byrn, Edward W., 145n13
Caird, Edward, 160n7
Caird, John, 160n7
Callahan, John F., 143n5
Carnegie Corporation, 178n60
Cather, Willa: anti-pragmatism of, 64–66, 67, 161n7, 163n18; anti-Semitism in works of, 74, 167n53; classical liberal education of, 62–63, 161n11; on conventional world and artists, 27; critique of science, 67–70, 72; individualism supported by, 93–100, 122–23, 176n37, 176n39; influence on Fitzgerald, 61; “Light on Adobe Walls,” 99; “Nebraska,” 95, 96, 173n1; New Criticism and, 98, 173n54; opposition to commercialism, 6, 76, 77–81, 83–85, 87, 118–19; opposition to “propaganda” in literature, 70, 106–8; resistance to vocational education, 79, 85, 169n7; reviews of women’s fiction, 83, 170n25; “The Singing Tower,” 167n53; support for Norris’ work, 41–42, 155n9; on value of art, 98–100, 173n54, 174n57; versions of meaning, 103–6. See also “Escapism” (Cather); Professor’s House, The (Cather)

Cavell, Stanley, 144n11
Cecil O’Neill, Rose, 83, 170n25
Changing Conceptions of Education (Cubberly), 171n27
class system, 10, 12–14, 15
Cliff City tribe, 100–106
Clifton, Tod, 136
collective invention, 19
collectivism: Cather’s opposition to, 6, 76, 77–81, 83–85, 87, 118–19; Du Bois’ opposition to, 118–19; individuality and, 82; in The Professor’s House, 6, 31–32, 51, 71, 77–78, 85, 169nn7–8; universities and, 77–79, 85, 169n7
Conrad, Joseph, 165n34
Coolidge, Calvin, 81–82, 170n19
Cooper, James Fenimore, 154n51
Crane, Dr., 159n3
Crisis, The, 109
Cubberly, Ellwood P., 171n27
culture: as abstract, 37, 38; Arnold on, 23, 31, 71; democracy and, 30–31, 34, 106; Du Bois’ concept of, 111–15, 119, 134; Eliot on, 28; end of exclusivity of, 34–35, 39, 75–76, 87, 100–106, 164n20; mass-market, 83, 96, 170n26; practicality vs., 73–74; purely cultural studies, 77, 78, 79–81, 83–84; and sublimation of individuality, 81–82

Culture and Anarchy (Arnold), 30

Dahl, Robert A., 146n18
“Dangers of Work, The” (Huxley), 14–15
democracy: Auden on, 176n35; Cooper on, 154n51; culture and, 30–31, 34–35, 106; Dewey on, 19; The Great Gatsby and, 10, 11, 20, 21, 149n38; invention and, 9, 34–35, 38–39, 147n29; Khan on, 147n30; Lawrence on, 35; science and, 34; William James on, 21

Democracy and Education (Dewey), 116

Democracy in America (Tocqueville), 146n18
democratic desire, 6, 146n18

Democratic Hope (Westbrook), 20–21
Deneen, Patrick, 145n15
Dewey, John: Art as Experience, 54; backing away from idealism, 62, 161n10; concern with thought/ action dichotomy, 43–44; The Golden Day, 19; on individuality, 84; on intelligence, 38; Liberalism and Social Action, 72; on manual labor, 116–17; on philosophy, 62, 63, 161n8; on science and the public, 39; on separation of means and ends, 54, 158nn38–39; on vocational education, 78, 86–87; on workers’ actions, 121
Dickenson, Emily, 172n41
Diggins, John Patrick, 3, 161n9
discrimination. See racial discrimination
double consciousness, 125

Drift as Mastery (Lippman), 46–47
INDEX ★ 191

opposition to commercial values, 118–19; opposition to social segregation, 117; on the practical/aesthetic dichotomy, 112–15, 116, 121, 123; pragmatic philosophy of, 109–10; references in Invisible Man to, 129, 177n58; The Souls of Black Folk, 110–11, 114–15, 125; on vocational education, 113, 114

Duchene, Father, 101, 102, 104

Eby, Clare, 9, 155n11

Edison, Thomas, 25, 35, 151n13, 165n36

education: and exclusivity of culture, 75–76; liberal arts in medieval schools, 169n10; purely cultural studies and, 79; “Talented Tenth” and, 119, 120; Thoreau on, 82. See also vocational education

elective system at universities, 152n25

Eliot, Charles William, 28, 37, 38, 70

Eliot, T. S., 164n27

Ellison, Ralph: aesthetic theory of, 134, 139–40; “The Art of Fiction,” 8, 146n22; criticism of, 125, 126, 176n46, 177n47, 178n65; Du Bois’ influence on, 7, 110; on individuality and art, 123–24, 125, 126–27; on Myrdal’s study, 178n60; philosophical pragmatism of, 125–27; “The World and the Jug,” 126; WPA and, 169n12. See also Invisible Man (Ellison)

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 3, 34, 143n9

“Escapism” (Cather): criticism of reformist agendas in literature, 70; on culture and economics, 81, 169n16; on individualism, 123, 176n39

Ethnicity and Cultural Authority (Williams), 174n4

exchange and money, 87–100, 173n53

Fahlberg, Constantin, 165n36

Farrell, Frank, 146n21

Fisher, Dorothy Canfield, 171n30

Fitzgerald, F. Scott: The Beautiful and the Damned, 14; birth of, 24; Cather’s influence on, 61; “Head and Shoulders,” 17, 150n53; Norris’ influence on, 155n11. See also Great Gatsby, The (Fitzgerald)

Franklin, Benjamin, 25

Garber, Marjorie, 146n21

Garrity, Jane, 14–15

Gatsby, Jay: as an indictment of pragmatism, 15–17; faith in democracy, 10, 11, 20, 21, 149n38; pragmatic philosophy of, 1–3, 11, 144n12; as a threat to the class system, 13–14, 15

Gatz, Henry, 1, 2–3

Gatz, Jimmy. See Gatsby, Jay

Gayle, Addison, Jr., 177n46

Geertz, Clifford, 7

gender transitions, 46–48, 49–51, 52, 156n19

generalism vs. specialization, 29, 30, 152n27

German Philosophy and Politics (Dewey), 116

Gilman, Daniel Coit, 30

Gilmore, Michael, 92, 93, 172n40

Godin, Benoît, 31

“Going to Meet the Man” (Baldwin), 179n69

Golden Day, The (Dewey), 19

Gould, Benjamin A., 152n20

Grafton, Anthony, 144n11

Grannis, Old Mr.: artful living of, 54–56, 58; personal fulfillment from invention, 53–54, 56; as representing new social order, 42, 59, 155n11; romance between Miss Baker and, 43, 44–45, 47–50, 55, 155n6, 156n16; transformation of, 47, 48–51, 66

Great Gatsby, The (Fitzgerald): denunciation of pragmatism, 15–17; domain of utility in, 13–14, 15; faith in democracy, 11, 20, 21, 149n38; inherited class privilege in, 10, 12–13; invention in, 3–4, 18, 19–20; nativist modernism in, 10–11, 148n33; romanticism in, 1–3, 73, 167n51

Green, T. H., 160n7

Harper, Philip Brian, 174n34

Harris, Neil, 164n21

Harris, William Torrey, 160n7

Harvey, David, 142
Hatch Act, 171n31
“Head and Shoulders” (Fitzgerald), 17, 150n53
Heart of Man (Woodberry), 162n11
Hegelianism, 160n7
Hemingway, Ernest, 145n17
Hochman, Barbara, 155n11
Hoeller, Hildegarde, 155n11
Hoffer, Eric, 176n38
Hollinger, David, 149n37, 165n29
Hollis, Oliver Wendell, 163n16
hope, 142
Horowitz, Irving Louis, 146n18
Horwitz, Morton, 163n16
Howe, Irving, 126–27, 133, 178n66
Howells, William Dean: The Rise of Silas Lapham, 145n17, 156n16; role in genre of realism, 163n17
Hsu, Husuan L., 155n6
Hughes, Thomas, 25, 26, 151n13
Human Condition, The (Arendt), 56–57
humanism, 29, 152n27
Hume, David, 164n21
Huxley, Aldous, 14–15
Huysyn, Andrew, 170n26
idealistm: conception of truth, 62–63; departure of, 62, 161n9; Dewey’s backing away from, 62, 161n10; history of, 62, 160n4, 160n7; literary criticism based on, 162n11; in The Professor’s House, 60, 61–62, 64–66, 159n3; realism and, 161n7
identity: national, 176n45; race and, 121–22, 124, 125, 127–31; socialization of, 79, 168n5
imagination, 71, 72, 73
individuality: Cather and, 93–100, 122–23, 176n37, 176n39; commercialism and, 82; culture and sublimation of, 81–82; Dewey on, 84; Ellison on art and, 123–24, 125, 126–27; and race in Invisible Man, 127–33, 135–37, 139, 179n70; “Talented Tenth” and, 120–21; Washington and, 121–22
Inkster, Ian, 145n13
intellectual history: Grafton on investigation of, 144n11; literature and, 4–5, 146n21
intelligence, 38
invention: conflict between science and, 24–26, 28, 33, 36–37, 152n19; cultural anxiety and, 23; democracy and, 9, 34–35, 38–39, 147n29; in The Great Gatsby, 3–4, 18, 19–20; history in America of, 8, 145n13; independent vs. industrial inventors, 24–26, 35–36, 39–40, 151n9, 151n11, 168n57; intelligence and, 38; isolation and, 26–27, 31, 153n33; in McTeague, 39–40, 42–43, 45–48, 52. See also science
Invisible Man (Ellison): Invisible Man as one of the Talented Tenth in, 129, 132, 137, 177n58; practical/aesthetic dichotomy in, 133–34, 137–38, 139; prelude of, 7; race and aesthetics in, 133–35; race and individuality in, 127–37, 139, 179n70
Jack, Brother, 128, 132, 133, 135, 137
James, Henry, 145n17, 165n30
James, William: on change, 142; criticism of Hegelianism, 160n7; “Head and Shoulders” and, 17, 150n53; on pragmatism, 3, 4, 13, 17–18, 160n4; “The Social Value of the College Bred,” 21; on Woodberry, 162n11
Jewett, Frank, 154n53
Jim Crow legislation, 178n62
John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America (Stein), 164n21
Johns, Adrian, 28
Johnson, Charles, 179n68
Kadlec, David, 143n9
Kallus, Joseph L., 170n25
Kant, Immanuel, 164n21
Kaplan, Amy, 163n17
Kazin, Alfred, 53
Kevles, Daniel J.: The Physicists, 152n19; on pure science and privilege, 70–71; on pure-science patrons, 69; on Rowland, 153n45, 154n48; on turn-of-the-century American scientists, 33
Kewpie Dolls, 83, 170n25
Khan, B. Zorina: on American patents, 8–9, 147n25, 147n31; on democracy, 147n30; on invention and economic mobility, 9, 147n29
Kloppenberg, James T., 17–18, 110
Kuhn, Thomas, 72
“Law in Books and Law in Action” (Pound), 163n16
Lawrence, D. H., 35
legal realist movement, 163n16
leisure class, 14–15
Liberalism and America (Stearns), 16
Liberalism and Social Action (Dewey), 72
“Light on Adobe Walls” (Cather), 99
Lippman, Walter: Drift as Mastery, 46–47; pragmatism and, 111, 174n9; A Preface to Morals, 111; on socialization of identity, 79, 168n5
literary naturalism, 156n19
literature: Cather's opposition to “propaganda” in, 70, 106–8; intellectual history and, 4–5, 146n21. See also art
“Literature and Science” (Arnold), 112
Literature and the Taste of Knowledge (Wood), 144n11
Livingston, James, 46, 156n18, 170n26
Long, Lisa, 156n19
Lowell, James Russell, 33–34, 38–39, 153n42, 154n61
Macapa, Maria, 57–58
Making of Middlebrow Culture, The (Rubin), 154n59
Manifesto for Literary Studies, A (Garber), 146n21
manual labor: Cather's view of, 93–102, 105–6; Dewey on the denigration of, 116–17; Thoreau on, 102
Marsellus, Louie, 73, 74, 81, 160n6, 167n53
Marx, Leo, 173n50
mass-market culture, 83, 96, 170n26
McCosh, James, 29
McTeague (Norris): Cather on, 41–42; gender transitions in, 46–48, 49–51, 52, 156n19; meaning vs. value in, 53–54, 56–57; new social order in, 42, 59, 155n11; relationship between invention and industry in, 6, 39–40, 42–43, 45–48, 52; romance between Grannis and Miss Baker in, 43, 44–45, 47–50, 55, 155n6, 156n16; thought/action dichotomy in, 43–46, 47–49, 59, 156n17
meaning vs. value, 53–54, 56–57, 103–6
means and ends, 54, 158nn38–39
Mendenhall, Thomas Corwin, 37
Michaels, Walter Benn: on the American dream, 144n12; critique of Cather, 167n53; on money, 96; Our America, 148n33, 168n58, 170n22
Miller, Henry, 154n51
money and exchange, 87–100, 173n53
Morrill Land Grant Acts (1862 and 1890), 171n31
Moton, Robert Russa, 131
Mumford, Lewis, 19, 51, 157n28
Myrdal, Gunnar, 178n60
national identity, 176n45
national labels, 146n21
National Society for the Production of Industrial Education, 86
Native Americans, 173n41
Native Son (Wright), 145n17
nativist modernism, 10–11, 148n33
naturalism, literary, 156n19
“Nebraska” (Cather), 95, 96, 173n51
“Negro Education” (Du Bois), 112
new commercialism. See commercialism
New Criticism, 164n27
New Deal, 80
New Humanist movement, 161n11
New Leader, The, 126
New Republic, 77
Newton, Isaac, 70
Norris, Frank: Cather's support for work of, 41–42, 155n9; death of, 41; on industry, 6; influence on Fitzgerald, 155n11; realism in work of, 41, 44, 156n14. See also McTeague (Norris)
Norton, Charles Eliot, 35, 119, 169n10
“Novel Déméublé, The” (Cather), 83, 174n57
Old Romance, 71–72
On British Freedom (Bell), 14
“On the Art of Fiction” (Cather), 98, 173n54
Our America (Michaels), 148n33, 168n58, 170n22
Outland, Tom: as an idea man, 32, 60, 61–62, 69, 159n3; belief in disinterested love, 158n40; and the Cliff City civilization, 100–101, 102, 103–4; death of, 73, 75; imagination of, 71, 72, 73; invention of,
32, 61, 160n6; manual labor and, 97–98, 99; meaning for, 104, 105, 106; moral aestheticism of, 75; relationship with Godfrey, 166n46; as a symbol of renewal, 73, 167n52

**Patent Inventions** (Pettit), 26–27

Patent Office, U.S., 8–9

patents: between 1866 and 1896, 151n4; corporations’ attempts to control/purchase, 56, 158n41; and democratic broadening of ranks of patentees, 147n31; laws on, 8–9; in *The Professor's House*, 61, 160n6; registration of, 145n13; Twain on, 18–19, 150n57

“Path of the Law, The” (Holmes), 163n16

Pettit, Claire, 26–27, 145n16

Physicists, The (Kevles), 152n19

Pizer, Donald, 41, 155n6, 155n11

Plato, 164n21

Posnock, Ross, 110

Pound, Roscoe, 162n16


pragmatism: Cather’s opposition to, 64–66, 67, 161n7, 163n18; conception of truth, 62–63; cultural anxiety and, 23; Ellison and, 125–27; *The Great Gatsby* and, 1–3, 11, 15–17, 144n12; idealism vs., 60, 61–62, 64–66, 160n4; influence on Du Bois, 109–10; Lippman and, 111, 174n9; science and, 38; William James on, 3, 4, 13, 17–18, 160n4; World War I and, 16, 17

Preface to Morals, A (Lippman), 111

primitivism, 67, 164n27

Professor’s House, The (Cather): anti-Semitism in, 74, 167n53; Cliff City tribe in, 100–106; critique of commercialism, 6, 31–32, 51, 77–78, 85, 169m7–8; critique of science, 60–61, 71, 72; desirability of a presexual world in, 158n40; Godfrey’s disengagement from context and action in, 66–67, 165n28; idealist thought vs. pragmatist thought in, 60, 61–62, 64–66, 159n3; imagination in, 71, 72, 73; money and exchange in, 87–93; negation of the present in favor of the past, 74–76, 107–8; patent-rights dispute in, 61, 160n6; practicality vs. culture in, 73–74; productive process vs. product in, 100–103, 158nn37–38; relationship between Tom and Godfrey in, 166n46; renewal in, 73, 167n52; science vs. technology in, 169n8; self-sufficiency and moral victory in, 93, 96, 97–98, 99

“Progress of Culture, The” (Emerson), 34

propaganda: Cather on, 70, 106–8; Du Bois on, 109

psychic individuation, 121, 174n34

purely cultural studies, 77, 78, 79–81, 83–84

Quest for Certainty, The (Dewey), 116

Rabinach, Anson, 142

race: aesthetics and, 133–35; double consciousness and, 125; identity and, 121–22, 124, 125, 127–31; individuality and, 127–33, 135–37, 139, 179n70; in *Invisible Man*, 127–37, 139, 179n70


Ramazani, Jahan, 146n21

Rampersad, Arnold, 177n47

realism: emergence of literary genre of, 163n17; idealism and, 161n7; in Norris’ work, 41, 44, 156n14

Reid, Whitelaw, 166n40

Remsen, Ira, 165n36

Richardson, Robert, 3, 18, 150n55

Rise of Silas Lapham, The (Howells), 145n17, 156n16

Robinson, Ezekiel G., 29

Robinson, Peter, 20

romanticism, 1–3, 73, 167n51

Rothstein, Edward, 146n18

Rowland, Henry: best-science elitism of, 34, 153n45, 154n48; pure science and, 31–32

Rubin, Joan Shelley: on Arnold, 165n30; on generalism, 30; *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 154n59

saccharin, 165n36
Sacred Wood (Eliot), 164n27
Santayana, George, 16, 160n7, 162n11
Saturday Evening Post, 69, 166n37
School and Society (Dewey), 38
science: Arnold’s critique of, 67, 68, 166n43; Cather’s critique of, 67–70, 72; cultural acceptance of, 27–29; democracy and, 34; Dewey on, 19, 39; dispute over purpose and definition of, 10–11; generalism vs. specialization of, 29, 152n27; invention and, 24–26, 28, 33, 36–37, 152n19; pragmatism and, 38; in The Professor’s House, 60–61, 71, 72, 169n8; pure vs. practical, 28–34, 36–37, 39, 152n23, 154n53, 166n37. See also invention
Scientific American, 8, 148n31
segregation, 117
Seguin, Robert, 15, 143n5
Seize the Day (Bellow), 145n17
self-fulfillment, 93–100
Simmel, Georg, 52, 157nn31–32
“Singing Tower, The” (Cather), 167n53
Singularity of Literature, The (Attridge), 146n21
Slote, Bernice, 65
Snow, C. P., 72
“Social Value of the College Bred, The” (James), 21
Sokoloff, Kenneth, 8–9, 147n25
specialization vs. generalism, 29, 152n27
St. Peter, Godfrey: animosity toward technology, 70; critique of science, 68; disengagement from context and action, 66–67, 165n28; idealization of the past, 74–75, 88–93; on ideas, 62; interest in nurturing individuality, 169n7; opposition to commercialism, 71, 77, 78, 85; opposition to pragmatism, 64–65, 66; relationship with Tom, 166n46; struggle to incorporate the past, 167n52
St. Peter, Lillian, 73
St. Peter, Rosamond, 62, 90, 91, 92, 160n6
Stearns, Harold, 16, 17
Stein, Roger, 164n21
Stoddard, Lothrop, 10
Story, Joseph, 147n29
Stout, Janice, 65–66
Sun Also Rises, The (Hemingway), 145n17
Sundquist, Eric J., 176n76
Talented Tenth: Du Bois’ idea of, 119, 120–21, 177n59; Invisible Man as one of, 129, 132, 137, 177n58
Tesla, Nikola, 27, 31
Thoreau, Henry David: criticism of education, 82; on exchange and dependence, 51–52, 91, 92, 93, 94, 172n40; on manual labor, 102
thought/action dichotomy: Dewey's concern with, 43–44; in McTeague, 43–46, 47–49, 59, 156n17
Tocqueville, Alexis de, 146n18
Tolstoy, Leo, 148n34
Trachtenberg, Alan, 4, 50
Trilling, Lionel, 2
truth: Du Bois on, 110–11; idealist vs. pragmatist conception of, 62–63
Tuskegee Institute, 114, 130
Twain, Mark, 18–19, 150n57
Tyndall, John, 69, 152n19
universities: commercialism and, 77–79, 85, 169n7; elective system at, 152n25; and exclusivity of culture, 75–76, 77–78; gendered courses in, 78, 79; liberal arts in medieval schools, 169n10; teaching of science at private vs. public, 152n23
U.S. Patent Office, 8–9
utility, domain of. See work
value vs. meaning, 53–54, 56–57, 103–6
vocational education: Cather’s resistance to, 79, 85, 169n7; Dewey on, 78, 86–87; Du Bois on, 113, 114; historical dislocation in, 78; movement for, 85–87, 171n31
Walden (Thoreau): criticism of education, 82; on exchange and dependence, 51–52, 91, 92, 93, 94, 172n40; on labor of the hands, 102
Warren, Kenneth, 179n76
Westbrook, Robert: Democratic Hope, 20–21; on Hegel and American philosophy, 160n7; on vocational education movement, 86
What Is Art? (Tolsoy), 148n34
white supremacy, 148n35
Whitney, Willis R., 151n10
Why Does Literature Matter? (Farrell), 146n21
Will, Barbara, 148n33
Williams, Daniel G., 174n4
Wilson, Woodrow, 169n6
Wise, George, 151n10
Wood, Michael, 144n11, 146n21
Woodberry, George Edward, 162n11
work: in The Great Gatsby, 13–14, 15; Huxley on, 14–15; Washington on, 115–16
working class, 14
Works Progress Administration (WPA), 80, 169n12
“World and the Jug, The” (Ellison), 126
World War I, 16, 17
WPA. See Works Progress Administration (WPA)
Wright, Richard, 145n17
Žižek, Slavoj, 146n18
"What makes Where the World Is Not so compelling and valuable is Kim Savelson’s consistently intelligent, thoughtful, and penetrating discussion of pragmatism in relation to fundamental questions about the social authority of education and culture in the modern United States."

—Thomas Augst, associate professor of English at New York University

"The major contributions of Where the World Is Not lie in its identification of the trope of the inventor as a mediating figure in some well-known debates in intellectual history; its extended readings of canonical literary texts in exploring these debates; and its extension of its analysis to racial politics and the mid-twentieth century. It is an excellent piece of scholarship."

—John Swift, professor and chair of English and comparative studies, Occidental College

How do novels that literally discuss invention and inventors engage through such discussions an array of critically important conversations and issues beyond invention? And to where and how can we trace and follow such discourses? In Where the World Is Not: Cultural Authority and Democratic Desire in Modern American Literature, Kim Savelson examines the ways in which resoundingly popular U.S. novels by Frank Norris, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ralph Ellison host the tug-of-war between thought and action, between the democratic agenda of the pragmatist movement and the aristocratic idea of aesthetics. Savelson argues for and reads these novels as a way of thinking through the implications for the meaning and making of "culture" brought about by the ongoing social revolution of democratic modernity. She thus expands the scope of the current work being done on pragmatism, as well as the work being done on literature and democracy, carving out an intersection of these two fields.

Savelson demonstrates that the questions under her consideration appeared at different key moments over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, embodying and deepening the struggle between the abstract and the practical, the cultural and the commercial—a struggle that turned into a dilemma and a period of growth for modern democratic desire. In so doing, she offers a historical recontextualization of selected literary texts, analyzing them as a way of thinking about intellectual history with subtlety and particularity.

Kim Savelson teaches at Stanford University in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric.

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