

Liberal Individualism, Race, and Mildred Taylor's *The Land*

The American Adam, the taming of the wild, and self-invention are common motifs in mainstream American literature that play central roles in Mildred Taylor's *The Land* (2001). These motifs often help to delineate a popular version of the American dream that emphasizes freedom, individualism, achievement, and exceptionalism. The tropes support and seem to confirm the liberal project of the United States by dramatizing the hard, but fulfilling, path to success in a free society. Although this project supposedly benefits all U.S. residents, some, including many African Americans, have found its promise illusory. In exploring Taylor's use of these liberal motifs, I ask a few questions: What are the implications of using them to depict a mixed-race, self-identified African American protagonist's struggles to define his place in post-bellum southern agrarian society? To what extent, do they fit the particularities of African American historical experience? How do the motifs interact with *The Land's* insistence on community, which aligns it with many other African American children's texts? To begin answering these questions, I explore Taylor's representation of the protagonist Paul-Edward Logan's personal development and success, focusing on the novel's reliance on the motifs of the American Adam, the taming of the wild, and self-invention. The racially ambiguous Paul-Edward's struggles as a businessman, aspiring land-owner, and friend often have him performing [black] respectability and conforming to Anglo-Saxon Protestant standards of self-regulation, industry, and property acquisition and use. Taylor highlights these WASP qualities by contrasting the light-skinned Paul-Edward with his beloved friend and partner, the dark-skinned Mitchell, and by portraying Paul-Edward's identity through his labor as a horse trainer, carpenter, land clearer, and farmer. Although the resulting characterization is complicated by Paul-Edward's developing racial consciousness, conflict with rich white family members and romance with a black woman, it is ultimately determined by protocols of liberalism that limit selfhood to work, respectability, and material accumulation.