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Captive to the American Woods: Sarah Wakefield and Cultural Mediation

Sophia Betsworth Hunt
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sophia Betsworth Hunt entitled "Captive to the American Woods: Sarah Wakefield and Cultural Mediation." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Lynn Sacco, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Robert Morrissey, Robert J. Norrell

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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**CAPTIVE TO THE AMERICAN WOODS:
SARAH WAKEFIELD AND CULTURAL MEDIATION
ON THE MINNESOTA FRONTIER**

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sophia Betsworth Hunt
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ABSTRACT

The life and narrative of Sarah Wakefield, an Anglo migrant who spent six weeks as a captive of the Santee Dakotas during the US-Dakota Conflict, show one woman's experience navigating the changing racial dynamics of the nineteenth-century Minnesota frontier. Using recent conceptualizations of “the frontier” as either a middle ground or woods, this thesis reconsiders Wakefield as a prisoner, not of Indians or her own conscience but of her region’s ossifying racial divisions. Wakefield's initial attempts at intercultural communication, which included feeding starving Dakotas who knocked on her door, were consistent with Anglo notions about womanhood and Indian-white relations. But when war forced Wakefield into captivity and heightened racial tensions in Minnesota, Wakefield’s decision to seek protection as the “wife” of an Indian male jumped the boundaries of what the white community would tolerate. Wakefield wrote her captivity narrative after she had returned to her Anglo community, her Indian protector had died by public execution, and the United States government had removed most other Dakotas from the state. While on the surface Wakefield’s work appears to be courageously pro-Indian, it was in fact an attempt to reconcile herself with other white Minnesotans by proving her adherence to popular notions of racial difference and female propriety. Rather than the defender of cultural pluralism that previous scholars have made her out to be, Wakefield was a pragmatist whose quest for community ultimately overshadowed her willingness to bridge the cultural divide. Her story suggests the limits of intercultural exchange on the frontier and the process by which ideas about race both created and intensified these barriers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: THE LURE OF THE MIDDLE GROUND	18
CHAPTER TWO: LIFE ON THE DIVIDE	39
CHAPTER THREE: CAPTIVE TO THE WOODS.....	63
CONCLUSION.....	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	94
VITA.....	97

INTRODUCTION

As the year 1863 drew to a close, Sarah Wakefield penned the first edition of her one literary work. The past year and a half had been perhaps the hardest of her life. On August 18th, 1862, hundreds of Wakefield's Dakota neighbors at the Yellow Medicine Indian Agency in southern Minnesota had surprised white residents with sudden and brutal attacks. In a few days' time, Dakota soldiers had killed hundreds, maybe thousands, of white civilians and taken another two hundred captive. Wakefield was one of the whites, mostly women and children, who spent six weeks in Little Crow's camp, traveling with a group of Mdewakanton Dakotas as they attempted to hold off white counterattacks. Wakefield's narrative, she promised readers, would be "a *true* statement of my captivity."¹ Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity was one of thousands of stories that make up one of America's oldest and most important literary genres. Yet while Wakefield's tale included many of the staples of nineteenth-century captivity narratives—sensational, often violent stories that described white women's suffering at the hands of "savage" Indians—Wakefield spent many more pages railing against white traders, the United States government, and the white military commission that ignored her testimony and put to death the Dakota man who she claimed had saved her life and honor.

The seemingly pro-Indian cast to Wakefield's captivity narrative has attracted the curiosity of modern scholars because it appears to offer a rare example of cultural

¹ Sarah Wakefield, Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Story of Indian Captivity, ed. June Namias (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 53, original emphasis.

pluralism on the American frontier.² In light of the racial prejudice that abounded in Minnesota on the eve of the narrative's publication, the idea that Wakefield used this work as an opportunity to defend Indians seems remarkable indeed. Wakefield lived at a time when issues of race and citizenship occupied many Americans' energies and attentions. The Civil War, western expansion into Indian lands, and increasing immigration all caused Anglo Americans to question the boundaries of racial categories and whether people who they did not consider white could become true Americans. As citizens of the first state to volunteer troops for the Union army, Minnesotans did not appear unfriendly toward all non-white people. Black Americans, for example, did not seem to elicit an entirely negative response from whites, probably because there were not enough blacks in Minnesota to pose any sort of threat to white hegemony.³ Anglo Minnesotans' attitude toward Indians, on the other hand, was generally far more vicious. Satisfied before 1862 to complain about Indians' supposed dirtiness, drunkenness, and tendency to beg, Anglo Minnesotans' views hardened in response to the brutality that they claimed to have suffered at Indian hands during the US-Dakota Conflict. When, at the end of 1862, a Minnesota-based military commission sentenced almost four hundred Dakota men and women to death, President Lincoln found the decision so rash—the commission had gathered no evidence against the vast majority of the condemned—that he reduced the number of executions to thirty-eight. Yet in the next two years, local

² See June Namias, White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, " 'Many Persons Say I am a Mono-Maniac': Three Letters from Dakota Conflict Captive to Stephen R. Riggs," Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies 29 (Cambridge University Press).

³ "I got in conversation with one of the contraband that followed the regiment north," Amos Glanville wrote of his interaction with an escaped slave while visiting with the Third Minnesota Volunteers, "I was surprised at his intelligence. I should think he would compare well with ordinary white men." Amos Glanville, I Saw the Ravages of an Indian War, copied and edited by John K. Glanville and Carrol G. Glanville (Leota, Kansas: John K. Glanville, 1988), 6-7.

writers churned out various accounts of the war, most of them blatantly anti-Indian.⁴ In light of such hostility, Wakefield, a white wife and mother of comfortable means, seemed an unlikely voice to argue for racial equality.

Reading Wakefield's text as a pro-Indian work has led some scholars to champion her as a brave but misunderstood advocate for cross-cultural understanding on an otherwise hostile frontier. Historian June Namias, who wrote about Wakefield in her book White Captives and later edited Wakefield's narrative, labels her a "Captive as Conscience"—a woman who used her captivity story to encourage white sympathy for Indians and to remove her own guilt over not being able to do more to help them.⁵ Wakefield's motivations, in Namias's view, stemmed from her role as a mother, her female view of morality as relational rather than judicial, and her Christian faith.⁶ More recently, literary scholar Kathryn Derounian-Stodola agreed, adding that although Wakefield would not have known it at the time, her view of Christianity resembled the tenets of twentieth-century liberation theology. Derounian-Stodola argues that by criticizing other white Christians for their mistreatment of Indians, Wakefield identified with the poor and showed a faith-based concern for justice that allied her with Latin American clergy who worked with marginalized indigenous peoples in the 1960s.⁷ Seen in this light, Wakefield's narrative seems to be the silver lining of an otherwise sad story. In Namias's words, "xenophobia, economic self-interest, and national, racial, and ethnic identification all overrode both justice and care for others" in the minds of most

⁴ See Charles Bryant and Abel B. Murch, Indian Massacre in Minnesota: A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians, (Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Company, 1973); Harriet E. B. McConkey, Dakota War Whoop: or, Indian Massacres and War in Minnesota, of 1862-3 (New York: Garland Publishers, 1978)

⁵ Namias, 257-259.

⁶ Wakefield, editor's introduction, 31-42.

⁷ Derounian-Stodola, 13.

nineteenth-century Minnesotans.⁸ If Wakefield's narrative was a public defense of Indians, as these scholars interpret it, her bravery was both heroic and a hopeful sign for American pluralism.

This thesis reconsiders Wakefield's narrative in a new light. A more critical look at her writing suggests that Wakefield intended her narrative to be primarily a tool of self-preservation rather than an expression of conscience. The idea that Wakefield saw herself as an advocate of cultural pluralism is appealing, but such a claim makes the way she wrote about Indians in her narrative appear contradictory. Alongside her scathing criticisms of white Minnesotans—including soldiers, traders, government officials, other captives, and even her own husband—Wakefield wrote similarly distasteful remarks about Indians. Some of her prejudice appeared to be nothing more than paternalism, common among many nineteenth-century reformers. “Poor superstitious beings,” she wrote in defense of some of the Dakotas whom she had known in captivity, “how much they are to be pitied! Very few of them believe in God besides a painted stone or stick; ought we to expect these creatures to act with reason and judgment like ourselves?”⁹ Other comments, however, were more severe. “I could never love a savage,” Wakefield proclaimed at one point in her narrative, and she referred to Indians using such terms as “wild men” and “blood-thirsty wild beasts.”¹⁰ Even Wakefield's critique of the white military expeditions who were still pursuing the Dakotas when she published her narrative contained both pro-Indian and anti-Indian sentiment. Wakefield applauded General Alfred Sully's army, who she claimed “has done a good work, killing many

⁸ Wakefield, editor's introduction, 41.

⁹ Wakefield, 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58, 65.

Indians and destroying their property.” And even though General Henry Sibley admitted that as many as eight hundred Dakota prisoners had died of sickness the previous winter, Wakefield accused him of having “fed and *petted*” them there.¹¹ While Wakefield took great pains to criticize other whites for their treatment of Indians, she also displayed her own indifference or even hostility toward them.

To take Wakefield’s appeals to justice and cross-cultural understanding at face value or to compare them to cultural views that became popular a century later is to ignore the way that she portrayed herself in both public and private writing. Namias’s idea of Wakefield as a “Captive as Conscience” is appealing to modern readers because it makes her seem self-sacrificing and idealistic—two qualities that Wakefield rarely displayed in her narrative. On the contrary, Wakefield painted herself as a pragmatist who was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect herself and her family. Any type of lies or manipulation—feigning to have married a Dakota man named Chaska, threatening to kill other white people, dressing in Dakota attire, even fabricating her own Indian heritage—seemed to her to be fair game as long as it meant that she and her children would stay alive and comfortable. As Wakefield put it, “I should have cut off my right hand if I could have saved my life by so doing.”¹² Such a shrewd woman would have been unlikely to make herself a martyr for the goal of Indian-white harmony unless the possible benefits of such actions outweighed the risks. By the time Wakefield’s narrative came to print in 1863, however, that was hardly the case.

It seems more probable that Wakefield wrote Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees mainly out of self interest. By the time she published her narrative, the arguments she

¹¹ Ibid., 126, original emphasis; Namias, 228.

¹² Wakefield, 71.

made on behalf of her Dakota friends would offer them few practical benefits; the government had already executed Chaska, her protector in captivity, and had forced most of the other Dakota people from the state. Wakefield herself, however, had much to gain from the narrative's publication. Suddenly notorious throughout Minnesota and the object of scorn from both strangers and former friends, Wakefield needed a venue where she could tell her story in her own words. Although the preface of her narrative claimed that "it was not intended for perusal by the public eye," Wakefield confessed to the military commission's interpreter, Stephen Riggs, who helped her gather information for the work, that she intended to have it published.¹³ Wakefield did not write Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees at the risk of her reputation—she wrote to save it.

Wakefield's behavior over the previous year had left her with plenty of saving to do. She wrote her narrative not to defend the Dakotas but to pose a multifaceted attack on a heavy charge that was circulating about her—that she was a "Mono Maniac," meaning irrationally, even sexually, obsessed with Indians.¹⁴ Wakefield crafted her narrative to discredit the people who had started this rumor about her, making the white soldiers, members of the military commission, and other captives who were present at Chaska's trial into selfish, ignorant, or vengeful villains. She even indirectly criticized a minister who had refused to baptize her on account of the scandal by repeatedly portraying herself as the one true Christian in the story.¹⁵ As Wakefield recounted the incredible tales of the peril she claimed she had faced, she reminded readers that she, more than any other captive, had acted responsibly by protecting herself for the sake of her children. Finally,

¹³ Ibid., 53; Derounian-Stodola, 18-19.

¹⁴ Derounian-Stodola, 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

she formulated a defense of the central cause of the gossip—her relationship with Chaska. By Wakefield’s account, Chaska had performed the qualities of white manhood better than any other male she had encountered. Wakefield muddied the image of every white man in her story, all of whom she felt had let her down through their cowardice, ignorance, or haste. Chaska, on the other hand, appeared in her account as a refined Christian protector even to his death.

A realist like Wakefield would have likely seen little reason to defend Chaska unless someone—either Chaska or Wakefield herself—would directly benefit from it. But by the publication of Wakefield’s narrative in November of 1863, Chaska was dead and buried. His family, who Wakefield also represented positively, was similarly beyond her help. New laws had forced them, along with the other remaining Dakotas, out of Minnesota into the harsh western plains of the Dakota Territory. Although Wakefield did express in private writing that she desired to help those Indians who had been kind to her, her narrative’s publication would have come too late to effect any practical change in U.S. policy.¹⁶ Wakefield might have written kindly about Chaska and his family simply to change Minnesotans’ memory of them, but to do so without a concrete goal seems, once again, unlike the sensible image that she showed of herself elsewhere. Instead, Wakefield probably hoped that by convincing white Minnesotans that Chaska’s behavior made him resemble a white man she would reshape their idea of the friendship she had with him. Throughout her story, she applauded Chaska’s bravery and his faithfulness in protecting her, and ridiculed white men for their failure to do the same. If Wakefield could show other whites that Chaska had offered protection that she urgently needed but that white

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

men had not provided, they could hardly blame her for trusting him with her life and honor. To represent Chaska in this way, however, Wakefield also had to make clear that his was a unique case. Her generally unfriendly portrayal of other Indians served to show her readers that it was not Chaska's Indianness but his whiteness that appealed to her.

This new interpretation of Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees gives Wakefield's story a different arc. Chapter One, "The Lure of the Middle Ground," narrates the hopeful but foreboding tale of Wakefield's early years in Minnesota. Although documents from this period are scarce, the information that does exist suggests that white society in Minnesota was not all that Wakefield had hoped it would be. Glimpses of marital and social troubles hint at Wakefield's reasons for looking increasingly outside of her own society for friendship. By the start of the US-Dakota Conflict, Wakefield had found what seemed to be the treasure of the frontier. After a year living at the Yellow Medicine Indian Agency, Wakefield had found a new community for herself in a world that embodied both Indian and white cultures. This glimmer of cross-cultural harmony, however, was short-lived. As war caused Indians and whites to distance themselves from each other, the Minnesota frontier no longer supported the cultural pluralism that Wakefield so cherished. Oblivious to the changing world around her, Wakefield clung to a quickly disappearing way of life, and the repercussions of her actions cast a shadow over this seemingly hopeful period.

Chapters Two and Three show the limitations and consequences of Wakefield's cross-cultural bonds. "Life on the Divide" describes Wakefield's six weeks in captivity, a period that signified both the crowning achievement of her life between cultures and the mistakes that would lead to her ruin. As one of hundreds of captives in Little Crow's camp, Wakefield was surprisingly unashamed to profess her comfort with Indian ways.

She dressed, talked, and ate according to Dakota custom, and even claimed to marry Chaska, a Dakota man. Although Wakefield insisted in her narrative that she wished to return to white society, she seemed quick to doubt that such an option was possible and behaved accordingly; her alleged marriage occurred less than a week into her time in captivity. And as both Wakefield and her contemporaries knew, to remain with the Dakotas forever was a real possibility for her. For centuries, captives had chosen or been forced to become “white Indians” and their stories circulated widely.¹⁷ Even when Sibley’s troops arrived in late September, Wakefield seemed reticent to leave the cultural divide. She accompanied the other white captives to Henry Sibley’s Camp Release but begged Chaska to go with her. Sadly for both of them, he accepted.¹⁸

The decline apparent in Chapter Three is where this thesis diverges most sharply from earlier interpretations. An expert on both worlds but completely comfortable in neither, Wakefield should have been well-suited to help whites and Indians reconcile their differences. But her loud defense of Chaska at Camp Release, both at his trial and in more informal settings, ultimately ruined both his life and her own. Worse yet, by the time Wakefield wrote her narrative a year after Chaska’s death, she was no longer even trying to change whites’ or Indians’ ideas about each other. Instead, her narrative slandered people of both races in an attempt to renew her own credibility. Either Wakefield had succumbed to the racial prejudice that pervaded the Minnesota frontier or she was so desperate for community that she was willing to forsake the memory of her now absent Dakota friends in order to make amends with other whites. Rather than the

¹⁷ Gary Ebersole, Capture by Texts: Puritan to Post-Modern Images of Indian Captivity (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Namias, 3-6, 145-203; John Demos, The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

¹⁸ Wakefield, 106.

heroic attempt to speak out in favor of the less fortunate that Namias and Derounian-Stodola applaud, Wakefield's decision to write her captivity narrative was the final tragic moment in one woman's unsuccessful effort to bridge a hostile frontier.

Acknowledging the lack of commitment to pro-Indian activism that Wakefield demonstrated in her narrative also reopens the issue of why she was so ready in captivity to offend other whites by embracing Dakota customs. Even if Wakefield's special relationship with Chaska and his family really was a result of her moral conscience or religious conviction as Namias and Derounian-Stodola claim it was, such statements fail to explain why Wakefield interpreted morality so differently than did most of her peers. Namias attributes Wakefield's emphasis on relationships rather than law to her female view of morality, but cannot pin down a coherent reason why other white women in captivity were less able than Wakefield to keep crisis from overwhelming their moral conviction.¹⁹ Derounian-Stodola argues that nineteenth-century liberal theologies may have indirectly influenced Wakefield's outlook on Christian duty, but does not explain why these ideas did not also influence other white Minnesotans.²⁰ Wakefield's endless reminders to her readers that she befriended the Dakotas out of pity and her desire to protect her children may have been genuine, but they are not sufficient explanations for her behavior unless we can determine why other Christians and other mothers did not act in the same way. What appears to have set Wakefield apart from these other women was not her morality but the alienation that forced her to seek friendship outside of her own community.

¹⁹ Ibid., editor's introduction, 36-41.

²⁰ Derounian-Stodola, 13-14.

This project—primarily focused on Wakefield and her narrative—also overlaps with larger issues of cultural interaction on the frontier. One is the question of white captives and the historical usefulness of their narrative accounts. Like Namias, I view captivity narratives as a source of information about Americans’ changing ideas about gender, ethnicity, and race.²¹ Both who Wakefield was and the story she wrote shed light on the way different groups on the Minnesota frontier interacted with each other and the way that white Americans struggled to understand these encounters. But as historian Gary Ebersole suggests, captivity narratives were sometimes about other things, too. American writers found captivity literature useful tools for discussing social, religious, and ideological issues, and they sometimes used stereotypical representations of both Indians and whites to prove a point about something other than race.²² In Wakefield’s case, writing her captivity narrative was a subtle way to convey ideas about her racial allegiance and sexual purity to a community whose image of her was hardened by the rumors that she had inspired. She wrote a lot about race and gender, but scholars should be hesitant to take all of these statements at face value. Wakefield did appear, in some ways, to be a “Captive as Conscience,” but at least part of this identity was her own creation. By framing her message in terms of religion and morality, and by presenting real people in terms of racial stereotypes, Wakefield tried to convince other Minnesotans that her behavior over the past year and a half had actually been more honorable than they believed. Given this apparent intent, historians should be particularly suspicious not only of the accuracy of Wakefield’s account but of taking her statements about race at face value.

²¹ Namias, 10-11.

²² Ebersole, 2, 11.

My thesis also intersects with scholarship on cultural intermediaries. Scholars Frances Karttunen and Margaret Connell Szasz both have presented studies on the wide variety of people who have helped different ethnic groups communicate with each other on North American frontiers.²³ Interestingly, no captive joins the many guides, interpreters, anthropologists, spiritual mediators, diplomats, reformers, and others who populate these two books. Still, Wakefield's experience in the US-Dakota Conflict resembles both Karttunen's "cultural intermediaries" and Szasz's "cultural brokers." Both scholars conclude that, like Wakefield, cultural intermediaries already felt a separation from their own society before they chose to learn about another culture. This distance often grew as a result of personality traits, such as high intelligence, linguistic ability, and curiosity about or receptiveness to other groups' traditions. While successful mediation often gave these people a feeling of accomplishment and sometimes other rewards, their position between cultural worlds was precarious because it caused people on both sides to distrust them. Wakefield's failure to save Chaska's life and the toll that their relationship had on her reputation emphasizes this final point. Szasz champions cultural intermediaries, stating that "their grasp of different perspectives led all sides to value them, although not all may have trusted them." Clearly, however, an intermediary's value depended heavily on his or her ability to maintain that trust, and showing too much appreciation for another culture seems to have put Wakefield on the fast track to losing it among her white neighbors.

²³ Margaret Szasz, Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Frances Karttunen, Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

Finally, this project involves the nature of the frontier as a potential area for cross-cultural communication. Before the start of the US-Dakota Conflict the space between Indian and white worlds appeared to be passable to some degree by many types of people. Farms belonging to Anglos, Germans, Irish, Scandinavians, and Dakotas were interspersed, a sizable mixed-blood population existed, and Protestant missionaries had been a real and somewhat welcome presence in the Dakota community for thirty years. When war broke out, however, it became apparent that the cordiality between races masked a frontier that more closely resembled the harsh divide that James Merrell describes in Into the American Woods.²⁴ Merrell shows that in colonial Pennsylvania neither Indians nor whites ever seriously entertained the idea that a permanent understanding was possible between their two cultures. Instead, both sides appointed cultural negotiators—mixed-blood men, fur peddlers, missionaries, converts, and adopted captives—to literally and figuratively cross the dark woods that they believed loomed between them. Although these negotiators learned cultural norms that allowed them to communicate with people on each side of these woods, even they themselves identified with one culture or the other and did not wish to erase the differences between the two groups. Indians and whites in Minnesota seemed to hold similar nonnegotiable loyalties that became most apparent once open violence was a factor.

Wakefield and Chaska's misfortune was that they did not recognize the nature of the frontier on which they lived. While their neighbors chose sides—Christian Dakotas taking up arms against the whites, white women exaggerating their mistreatment at the expense of their former captors, and missionary Stephen Riggs interpreting for the

²⁴ James Merrell, Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999).

military commission that eventually put Chaska, a mission Indian, to death—Wakefield and Chaska both stood firm in the center of Merrell’s dangerous woods, unable or unwilling to find their way out. For this mistake they both paid dearly, Wakefield with her reputation and Chaska with his life. Even on a less fraught frontier like the one that Richard White describes in The Middle Ground, Wakefield’s testimony would likely have fallen on deaf ears.²⁵ White fur traders and Indians in the Great Lakes Region saw the space that divided them not as woods but as a clearing, a neutral middle ground where both sides could resolve their difference via what White labels “creative misunderstandings.”²⁶ But even in this more accommodating area, cultural negotiation was not an act in which either side eagerly participated. Instead, even those Indians and whites who were skilled mediators went to the middle ground reluctantly, forcing each other to create compromises that both sides knew were superficial. Thus, when Wakefield seemed to stake her claim to this space between cultures, white Minnesotans could see her choice only as betrayal. Wakefield was not obsessed with Indians, nor did she ever seem to prefer Indian to white ways. Still, she was unusually willing, even eager, to step onto the middle ground, and until her narrative came out in late 1863, she did not appear to be leaving it any time soon.

* * *

In this thesis I use various words to refer to the space—both figurative and literal—that separated white and Indian worlds. Historians have long realized the problematic nature of “frontier,” a word that Americans of Wakefield’s time understood

²⁵ Richard White, The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁶ White, x.

as the geographic line between civilization and savagery. I use this term, as well as the similarly problematic word “West,” when writing from Wakefield’s perspective, but prefer to view the area as a metaphorical meeting ground of cultures, and therefore also refer to it as a “cultural divide.” Most often, I write about this space as the “middle ground” or “woods” to signify its relationship to White’s and Merrell’s models. In the first two chapters, I describe Wakefield’s attraction to the middle ground, a space that she, like many modern scholars, imagined as a more inclusive place than it really was. Later in the story, however, I switch to Merrell’s woods terminology to highlight the barrier that this area ultimately presented to Wakefield’s attempt at cultural mediation. In using both “middle ground” and “woods” to describe the nineteenth-century Minnesota frontier, I am intentionally highlighting both the differences and the similarities between these two models. From Wakefield’s perspective, the cold woods that hindered her from successfully defending Chaska were vastly different from the inviting middle ground that she had traversed a year before. In reality, however, the area had remained very much the same. In both White’s middle ground and Merrell’s woods, people communicated out of necessity and remained fully convinced of their difference even while creating creative misunderstandings. And in both places Wakefield’s eagerness to form cross-cultural bonds would have indicated a deviation from these expectations.

The words “Indian” and “white” present historians with similar problems. A wide variety of people lived in southeast Minnesota during the 1800s—four groups of Dakotas, Anglos from Britain and the eastern United States, Winnebagos, Ojibwas, Germans, Irish, Norwegians, Swedish, and others. Rather than indiscriminately label these people with the socially-created words “Indian” and “white,” I have tried whenever possible to refer

to them by the specific ethnic group to which they belonged. On the other hand, this project focuses primarily on one woman's perception of the changes that her region underwent during the 1860s. Although Wakefield recognized that her neighbors were from a variety of both European and native groups, she nonetheless wrote about them as "whites" and "Indians," and explained their differences in this way. While little information is available from the Dakota or immigrant perspectives, their alliances during and after the war—the Dakotas' destruction of both Anglo and immigrant towns and European immigrants' contributions to white captivity literature—suggest that these people recognized a similar racial dichotomy.²⁷ I therefore use the words "Indian" and "white" often, although I am fully aware of their modern implications. In nineteenth-century Americans' imagination, racial characteristics were real and meaningful, and such a perception affected the way these two groups interacted in the physical world.

Read within these analytic categories, Sarah Wakefield's story shows both the possibility and the limitations that one American frontier offered to the people living on it. The seeming flexibility of cultural boundaries in Minnesota before the US-Dakota Conflict presented Wakefield with the opportunity to create a community and identity that, in her mind, surpassed what white society could offer. While she did not wish to cross entirely to the Dakota side of the divide, Wakefield increasingly pursued life on the middle ground, and her experiences living at the agency and befriending Chaska made that life a real possibility. Wakefield did not realize, however, that the flexibility that she

²⁷ For the Dakota perspective on the war, see Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds, Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862 (Saint Paul, 1961); and letters written in Dakota to Reverend Stephen Riggs, Stephen Riggs and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society

A number of immigrant women wrote captivity narrative, some of which have been translated into English. See, for example, Mary Schwandt, "The Story of Mary Schwandt. Her Captivity during the Sioux 'Outbreak,'—1862." Minnesota Historical Society Collections 6 (1896): 461-74.

saw on the Minnesota frontier was largely an illusion. When war tested the many cross-cultural alliances that had developed over time they deteriorated. Wakefield, and Chaska with her, remained in this dark space—which suddenly seemed more like a woods than a middle ground—unable to survive by themselves but no longer able to fully communicate with those on either side. After Chaska’s death, Wakefield’s most promising option was to attempt to write her way back to white society. In the process, she publicly tarnished the memory of the people who had made the frontier such a special place for her. No longer a captive to Indians, Wakefield had become a captive to the American woods. Her very survival required that she accept the impermeability of the divide that supposedly separated Indians and whites.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LURE OF THE MIDDLE GROUND

Sarah Wakefield sat in the dwindling light, a red clay pipe stretching from her mouth to the ground beneath her. As she inhaled the tobacco, her gaze traveled upward and she took in her surroundings. Above loomed tall bluffs, frightfully grand but beautiful, over which her horse would soon carry her home. Sprinkled throughout the valley were the teepees of five thousand Dakota men, women, and children. Wakefield reflected on a thought that had struck her earlier that day, as she and her four-year-old son James had traveled unaccompanied through the five miles of forest that separated their home at the Yellow Medicine Indian agency from the mission church that they attended. What would Americans in the East think of this? Even a year before, Wakefield herself would not have believed that she could be comfortable as the lone white person in a camp full of Indians.²⁸ Two-hundred pounds, with light brown hair and fine eastern clothing, Wakefield certainly stood out from the women who sat in blankets around her.²⁹ The Dakotas also noticed Wakefield's distinctive appearance, referring to her as "Tonka-Winohiuca waste," or "large woman."³⁰ Yet as Wakefield's friends baked their bread and conversed with her in a language that most other white people could not understand, it seemed perfectly natural to her that she should pass her time in this way. In this place that seemed so remote from white customs, Wakefield had found a sense of community that, until then, always eluded her.

Wakefield's early experiences in Minnesota give a needed background to her behavior in captivity during the fall of 1862. Although records of her early life are scarce,

²⁸ Wakefield, 58; explanation of appearance and meaning of the pipe in editor's notes, 143-144.

²⁹ Wakefield, editor's introduction 26.

³⁰ Wakefield, 60.

offering no concrete explanation of why or when Wakefield moved west, the information that is available suggests what she may have been seeking in Minnesota and how she responded when the frontier did not meet those desires. Passing remarks in Wakefield's narrative and in the letters that she wrote to a Presbyterian missionary to the Dakotas, Stephen Riggs, the year after her captivity give glimpses of a woman who, like many westward migrants, wanted a fresh start. She left Rhode Island sometime in the 1850s and did not look back, ending all communication with a mother whom she no longer wished to know. Once in Minnesota, Wakefield struggled to create a community and identity that matched her expectations. Facing some degree of marginalization from other white Minnesotans, Wakefield discovered what others in the state already knew—that this frontier was flexible enough to allow both Indians and whites to pass through it comfortably. Throughout the late 1850s and early 1860s, Wakefield traveled increasingly over the space between Indian and white worlds. By the time war broke out in August, 1862, she seemed to be just as comfortable on the middle ground as she was on the white side of it.

The lure that the middle ground presented for Wakefield set her apart from most other white frontierswomen whose stories have been preserved. Historian Glenda Riley shows that life in the West caused many white women to reevaluate their ideas about American Indians and themselves. Although many of these women were initially afraid of Indians, believing that they were dirty, violent, promiscuous, and in need of Christian civilization, closer interactions with them often broke down these stereotypes. Much of white women's new attitude about Indians stemmed from their changing ideas about themselves. As frontierswomen discovered that they were both physically and mentally

stronger than their embrace of nineteenth-century gender norms may have led them to imagine, they realized that Indians, too, might transcend the stereotypes that white culture ascribed to them. Wakefield's attitude toward Indians, however, exceeded mere toleration. While many white women developed amicable trade relationships with Indians, employed them to care for their children, or exchanged medicinal advice with them, these friendships tended to have a practical purpose and were on the white women's own terms. Wakefield's interactions with Indians began in this way, too, but soon grew into something much more intimate. More than most other white frontierswomen, Wakefield became a person living between cultures.

Wakefield moved from Rhode Island to Minnesota sometime in the 1850s. Historians have uncovered few details about her early life, but the sources that are available suggest that for Wakefield, this move signified a clean break from the person she had been in the East. It is not clear why she chose Shakopee, Minnesota, as her destination, or who—if anyone—she traveled with. Once in Minnesota, however, Wakefield seemed to make little attempt to maintain ties to the life she had left behind. Historians trying to piece together Wakefield's early life have run into trouble because the documents they have found contradict each other. Wakefield's family Bible, for example, lists her maiden name as Brown and her birthday as June 2, 1830.³¹ Minnesota marriage records disagree, stating that she was twenty-eight years old in 1856—meaning she would have been born in 1828—and that her maiden name was Butts.³² A third source, the Rhode Island census records, offers no mention of a Sarah Butts or a Sarah Brown born whose birthday matches these options; the closest match in this final

³¹ Wakefield, 43.

³² *Ibid.*, 25.

database is a Sarah F. Brown was born on September, 29, 1829.³³ These inconsistencies might signify little more than the haphazard record-keeping that was typical of nineteenth-century documents. They do, however, offer cause for speculation. Wakefield would have seen her family Bible and her marriage certificate, if not all three documents, and it seems strange that she allowed these errors. Even if she did not set out to lie about her past, Wakefield seems to have done little to hold onto it.

A letter from Wakefield to Stephen Riggs in 1863 stated that she had so far endured an “unhappy life.”³⁴ Although she chose not to list the causes of her unhappiness, Wakefield did admit that—in stark contrast to the abundant letters that other white Minnesotans sent east and the earnestness with which she herself wrote to Riggs—she had not contacted her mother in eight years.³⁵ Once again, this hint of trouble offers room for speculation. Wakefield married, gave birth to two children, spent six weeks in Indian captivity, and began writing a narrative that she planned to publish—all without writing home. It seems that such life-changing events would have prompted some form of communication, even if such contacts were infrequent. By 1857, the year after Wakefield’s last conversation with her mother, a train traveling from New York City could arrive in Minnesota in less than a week.³⁶ Even if Wakefield and her mother did not have the money to visit each other, writing letters would have been convenient and affordable. Wakefield’s explanation for her lack of communication was cryptic but severe. “[My mother’s] life has been such,” she wrote to Riggs, “[that] she has caused me all my trouble. God forgive her as I now do.” Her words about her father were even vaguer. “I

³³ Ibid., 43; [FamilySearch Online Geneological Database](#), accessed 10 October 2008.

³⁴ Derounian-Studola, 19-20.

³⁵ See, for example, Stephen Riggs and family papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁶ “Rates of Travel from New York City, 1830 and 1857” in Cronon, 77.

have no Father,” she stated, “I would to God I had I would have some place then that would seem like home.”³⁷ It is impossible to state with any certainty that Wakefield’s conflicts with her mother influenced her desire to move west. It does seem striking, however, that the two ceased communication at roughly the same time that Wakefield misstated her name and birthday on her marriage certificate.

Wakefield seemed to feel some shame about her life in the East. In another letter to Riggs, she stated, “I have had sorrow and troubles enough . . . to drive a woman wild but I have asked God to help me bear them in secret for rather than have them known, I would have suffered death first.”³⁸ This final peek at Wakefield’s early life is the most intriguing but also the most elusive. It is difficult to say what “sorrow and troubles” Wakefield referred to and whether they had anything to do with her move west; she told Riggs that she wanted to keep them secret and it appears that she succeeded. Nineteenth-century Americans often referred to “ruin,” whether by force or choice, as a “fate worse than death,” but Wakefield left no other records that point to this possibility. It would also be understandable if Wakefield’s break with her mother had caused her shame. Wakefield was an avid reader, and the magazines and novels that she owned sent the proscriptive message that white women were naturally pure and submissive, and that these gifts made them able to remedy even very difficult family problems.³⁹ Another fact about Wakefield’s early life that might have embarrassed her was that she had not yet

³⁷ Derounian-Studola, 19-20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

³⁹ At the start of the US-Dakota War, Wakefield held subscriptions to such magazines as Godey’s, Harper’s Weekly, Peterson’s, Eclectic, and Mothers’. Editor’s introduction, Wakefield, 26; Glenda Riley, Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1815-1915 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 16-19, 31.

received a Christian baptism.⁴⁰ Nineteenth-century Americans believed that women were more capable of religious feeling than men, and female migrants often expected that they would be a moral civilizing force in frontier life.⁴¹ These details do not show the specific cause of Wakefield's sorrow, but they do point to ways in which she might have hoped that her life in Minnesota would differ from her life back east.

The myth that the West was a place for new beginnings was common in nineteenth-century America.⁴² To Anglos living in the eastern United States, the vices of city life, the federal government, and even the past seemed miniscule compared to the wide, open land that awaited them out west. In reality, western Americans depended heavily on the federal government and the eastern market, facts demonstrated by Patricia Nelson Limerick's Legacy of Conquest and William Cronon's Nature's Metropolis. Acquiring, distributing and defending western land were tasks that were too costly for white communities to handle without government intervention, and western communities' survival depended on the technology and purchasing power of eastern industrial centers.⁴³ Like the government and the market, the past also had a way of reappearing in new locales. Easterners who moved west soon missed home, and built their cities in the image of the places they had left. As cities grew, so did the industrialization and vice that migrants had sought to escape.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, independence remained a central feature of western imagery. If Wakefield had burned

⁴⁰ Derounian-Studola, 20.

⁴¹ Riley, 16.

⁴² Patricia Nelson Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), 82.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 82; William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), 201-202, 247.

⁴⁴ Limerick, 89.

bridges in Rhode Island, or if she just desired a fresh start, the West would have seemed to her the obvious place to begin again.

The earliest available record of Wakefield's life in Minnesota is her marriage in 1856. At least on paper, John Wakefield appeared to be a good partner for Sarah. He was well-connected socially and, unlike his wife, close to his family. John was born on May 25, 1823, to a politically active family, his father winning two elections on the Connecticut General Assembly. He attended Yale Medical School in 1847, and practiced medicine in Connecticut and California before moving to Shakopee, Minnesota, with his brother James in 1854. The historical record does not show how, when, or where Sarah and John met, but by the time they married in 1856 he owned his own medical practice in Shakopee. John's brother James rose to even greater prominence in Minnesota, working as a successful land speculator and later entering the federal legislature, and the two remained in contact. Not only was John's education and social background impressive, he was also financially astute. Six years after they were married, the Wakefields lived in a five-room house with mahogany furniture, six canaries, glass and porcelain dinnerware, and hundreds of pounds of dried meat. Sarah's wardrobe boasted plenty of fine fabrics, and her bookcases were home to fashionable eastern magazines like Harper's Weekly and Godey's Lady's Book. Over the next ten years, the family wealth increased. By 1870, John had grown their estate to over ten times its original value.⁴⁵

But Wakefield's life in Shakopee was proof that the West rarely acted as the clean slate that it promised to be. If Wakefield had hoped that the frontier and a good marriage would bring out her womanly qualities of religious feeling and sociability, her experience

⁴⁵ Wakefield, 25-27.

in Shakopee proved otherwise. Although Wakefield attended church regularly, the facts of an incident which Wakefield chose not to disclose soon caused other Christians in town to turn against her. “God only knows the truth of the affair,” she later wrote to Riggs. “It would be useless for me to say anything more than this. I was not guilty. I done wrong I acknowledge and I have prayed for forgiveness.”⁴⁶ But her neighbors judged the matter differently. Not a single congregation in Shakopee was afterward willing to baptize her or her children.⁴⁷ Family trouble also seemed to follow Wakefield west. A census taken one year after the Wakefields’ marriage listed John living alone in Shakopee. Whether there was an error in documentation or whether Sarah and John had separated is unclear. It is possible, however, that Wakefield escaped problems with her family in Rhode Island only to once again fail to demonstrate her womanly ability to bring people together. Not only did she have trouble with her neighbors in Shakopee, it appears that she was unable to establish a happy relationship with her husband. This early sign of marital distress is purely speculative, but proof of later disputes between John and Sarah make the idea of a separation seem plausible. Whatever Sarah Wakefield had hoped for her life in Minnesota, gossip and exclusion were not it.

It was in this moment of disappointment that Wakefield discovered another of the West’s promises. The “certain class of Christians” who treated Wakefield so poorly was not the only community that was available to her.⁴⁸ Although Shakopee was one of Minnesota’s larger cities and rapidly growing, the state was still very much what white people of the time labeled the frontier. Wakefield and her contemporaries would have

⁴⁶ Derounian-Stodola, 20.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

seen the land to the east of Shakopee as civilization. Daily steamboats traveled eastward out of the city along the Minnesota River to Saint Paul.⁴⁹ From there, it was only a few days' train ride to Chicago, and only another day or two more to New York.⁵⁰ Shakopee residents who traveled west, however, would arrive on the land that the United States government had reserved for the Mdewakaton, Wahpekute, Sisseton, and Wahpeton bands of Santee Dakotas—people who many white Americans believed were inherently savage. “Indian Country,” as Wakefield and her peers referred to this area, was not only near but was getting nearer. When, in 1858, Dakota leaders agreed to sell the land on the northern bank of the river to pay debts they owed to American traders, they cut the size of the already small reservation in half. Because most Dakotas in Minnesota lived nomadically, the drastic reduction in land forced them to travel to the cities, begging for food for survival. Many white Minnesotans saw Indians as intruders in their towns. But to others, like Wakefield, the Dakotas offered the possibility to create an alternative community.

Wakefield's initial encounter with Indians was more typical than the intimate relationships that she would form later. Shakopee drew its name from Chief Sakpe (Shock-pay), the leader of a band of Mdewakanton Dakotas whose village bordered the city.⁵¹ Some of these people made frequent visits to Wakefield's house in search of food, and unlike some Anglo females who interpreted Indians' requests as signs that they were

⁴⁹ Namias, 205.

⁵⁰ Cronon, 77.

⁵¹ The Mdewakanton Dakotas now own 2,800 acres of land near the city of Shakopee. Although Wakefield used the same spelling for both the city of Shakopee and the name of the Mdewakanton chief, I have chosen to refer to the chief in the way that his name is written on the tribe's website: <http://www.shakopeedakota.org>, accessed April 25, 2009.

beggars and thieves, Wakefield felt sympathy for them.⁵² Recalling those days in her captivity narrative, Wakefield wrote that she saw Sakpe's band almost every day, knew them by name, and invited many of them into her home. Like many frontierswomen, Wakefield saw these encounters as demonstrations of her Christian gentility. As she recalled in her narrative, she came across Sakpe's band when she was in captivity and some of the older women "cried like children. They spread down carpets for me to sit on, gave me a pillow and wished me to lie down and rest."⁵³ The relationship that Wakefield formed with Sakpe's band at her house in Shakopee served as her first tentative steps onto the middle ground. She remained within a safe distance of the white side of the divide, offering what she understood as Christian charity from a white home in a white city. Still, even in this early encounter Wakefield seemed eager to forge cross-cultural ties.

Wakefield's later claim that she helped Sakpe's band because she "pitied them" on account of her Christian gentility seems to only tell half the story.⁵⁴ Many white women pitied Indians, whom they saw them as wretched creatures in need of civilization.⁵⁵ But Wakefield also claimed that she became "old friends" with them.⁵⁶ Feelings of pity alone would have seemed a good reason to give Indians food, but it would have hindered true friendship rather than created it. Wakefield's encounter with Sakpe's band seems to have been the first of many times that she acted for practical reasons but made herself the heroine of her narrative when she wrote about it later. A

⁵² Riley, 147; Wakefield, 69.

⁵³ Wakefield, 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁵ Riley, 32-33.

⁵⁶ Wakefield, 69.

more realistic explanation for Wakefield's friendship with the Mdewakantons is that they befriended her in a way that many white people had not. Wakefield wrote little about the white community in her captivity narrative or in her letters to Riggs, but the few things that she did write were negative. As the doctor's wife, Wakefield should have had many chances to build community with other whites in Shakopee. Historian Emily Abel shows that caregiving played a central role in nineteenth-century social networks, joining women together even in the face of interpersonal grudges.⁵⁷ When John made house calls to sick or dying patients, he would have been attending communal events, meeting family and female caregivers who were already present. Through John's presence at these events—and maybe Sarah's along with him—it seems that the Wakefields would have had reason to bond with other whites. Instead, the one medical call Sarah described was when she helped John attend to Sakpe's band after their battle with the Ojibwas in 1858. Even in this small step to the middle ground, it seems possible that Wakefield found her encounter with Indians to be more hospitable than her reception in the white community.

In June of 1861 John's medical career again prompted Sarah to step onto the middle ground. This next, bolder move was literal as well as figurative. President Lincoln's inauguration caused a reorganization of workers on the Dakota reservation, and John received an appointment as physician at the upper agency, called Yellow Medicine. The Wakefields, by then a family of four, moved west from Shakopee. The following year proved to be a pivotal time for Sarah. Much more intensely than Shakopee, Yellow Medicine was a place that embodied the apparent flexibility of the Minnesota frontier. During the preceding twenty years, Presbyterian and Episcopalian missionaries Stephen

⁵⁷ Emily K. Abel, *Hearts of Wisdom: American Women Caring for Kin, 1850-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, 37-39, 50-60).

Riggs, Thomas Williamson, and Samuel Hinman had lived among the Dakotas and over time had become willing to meet their growing number of converts halfway. By the 1860s, some Christian Dakotas had taken up white dress and farming practices, adopted English names, and went to church alongside whites.⁵⁸ In turn, the missionaries invented a written Dakota language, translated the Bible into it, and taught the Dakotas such good penmanship that their writing sometimes surpassed that of less educated whites.⁵⁹ Housing styles also demonstrated this uncertain ground between white and Indian lifestyles. A photograph that white easterner Adrian Ebell took on a visit to Minnesota in 1862 portrayed a Dakota farmer dressed in suit and hat, posing in front of his two-story brick home. Between this man and his white dwelling, however, stood a large teepee, where he was known to hold meetings with other Dakota leaders.⁶⁰ Life at the agency allowed Wakefield the freedom to step more confidently onto the middle ground. Like others around her—or at least that was how it seemed—Wakefield selected a community and identity made of both white and Indian ways.

Yet Wakefield's initial response to Yellow Medicine was more negative. Although some Dakotas dressed and behaved similarly to white people, most of them maintained their traditional cultural habits, and this frightened Wakefield. Like the Anglo women that Glenda Riley describes in Constructing Race, Wakefield moved to Indian Country expecting to encounter a rough landscape and dangerous people, and she

⁵⁸ For a list of members of mission congregations and letters from Dakota converts, see Thomas Smith Williamson and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul.

⁵⁹ Dakota penmanship in Stephen Riggs and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, can be compared to Elias Cowan, Letters Written by Elias and Elisha Cowan to their Mother and Brother in Palmyra, Maine 1861-1864, ed. Sara J. Cowan (Portland, Maine, 1988).

⁶⁰ Photo of Chaska in Alan R. Woolworth, Camera and Sketchbook: Witnesses to the Sioux Uprising (Roseville, Minnesota, 2004); That this man's name was Chaska is coincidental—"Chaska" was a name that the Dakota community used to refer to a family's oldest son.

interpreted her early experiences through this lens.⁶¹ Years later, she remembered the feelings that her first vision of the reservation invoked: “[I felt] disheartened, low-spirited and frightened, for the buildings were situated on a high prairie, and as far as the eye could reach, was a vacant space.”⁶² But these thoughts were only Wakefield’s impression of the Lower Agency, or Redwood; her own destination was another thirty miles farther west. Yellow Medicine consisted of only five buildings and a jail. In Wakefield’s mind, she had “really got out of civilization.”⁶³ Despite her positive experience with Indians in Shakopee, Wakefield’s new neighbors worried her even more than the landscape. Like many Anglos, Wakefield assumed that Indians were “filthy, nasty [and] greasy,” wild and prone to violence.⁶⁴ Wakefield described her first night in Indian Country “one of horror,” filled with Indians’ “shouting and screaming.”⁶⁵ She and her white companions were so terrified that the next day they mistook their own horses’ racket for “a hundred horsemen close to the house.” Like the women Riley describes, Wakefield’s adjustment to life on the frontier came in stages—she first felt frightened and alarmed, then sheepish, and finally at ease.⁶⁶ Yet other factors in Wakefield’s life seemed to push her more quickly and more completely onto the middle ground.

The first was Wakefield’s deteriorating relationship with her husband and white neighbors. Wakefield’s reputation among white Minnesotans continued to flounder as her marital discord became public. Within months of moving to Yellow Medicine, Sarah and John engaged in a fight severe enough that news of it appeared in the newspaper in Saint

⁶¹ Riley, 95-131.

⁶² Wakefield, 55.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁶ Riley, 106.

Peter, a white town close to the agency. According to witnesses, John hit Sarah hard enough to knock her down, and continued to “abuse [her] most inhumanly” even though she pleaded with him to stop.⁶⁷ Later, when neighbors tried to respond to Sarah’s cries from the Wakefields’ second story window, they found that they could not enter the house because someone had locked the door. John’s brother James was present for the dispute and stood by, discouraging onlookers from intervening in what he considered to be a family affair. A few weeks later, Indian Agent Thomas Galbraith wrote to the Saint Peter newspaper in response to the Wakefield incident. While he did not outright deny the witnesses’ claims, Galbraith made clear by his refusal to comment on the rumors that his allegiance, like James’s, lay with John and the reputation of the agency.⁶⁸

Wakefield did not leave a record of how this incident affected her but it apparently drove her further from white society. Although Wakefield was the victim of this domestic abuse, it would have reflected poorly on her as well as her husband and most likely renewed the gossip that had circulated about her years before. Like the Virginia planter that Martha Hodes describes in White Women, Black Men who could not attain a divorce because he had physically abused his wife, John Wakefield seemed to demonstrate his lack of manliness by appearing unable to control both his wife and his own temper.⁶⁹ Yet the incident suggested a similar failure on Sarah’s part, because she had betrayed the nineteenth-century womanly ideal by provoking John’s anger and engaging in an argument that pierced the walls of their home to penetrate the streets. Second, the incident might have changed Sarah’s feelings towards John. When she later

⁶⁷ Derounian-Stodola, 4.

⁶⁸ Derounian-Stodola, 4.

⁶⁹ Martha Hodes, White Women, Black Men (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 68-95.

complained to Riggs that she had no place that seemed like home, Wakefield indirectly commented on her dissatisfaction with her marriage.⁷⁰ Wakefield's marital trouble did not necessarily send her looking for another romantic partner, but it might have encouraged her to seek a community outside of her own home. Wakefield's alienation from other white people and even her own husband may have sparked her swift transformation from fearing the frontier to embracing it.

Wakefield soon immersed herself in the cross-cultural opportunities that the frontier extended. Only a few weeks after her arrival at Yellow Medicine, Wakefield began attending the Presbyterian mission churches of Thomas Williamson and Stephen Riggs. In light of Shakopee churches' exclusion of her, these new religious communities—home to people of white, Dakota, and mixed descent—were perhaps the most welcoming of any type that Wakefield had experienced in Minnesota or back east.⁷¹ Wakefield also invited her Dakota neighbors to work as hired help in her home. She was happy with their work, later remarking that she “found them very kind, good people”⁷² Her reaction to these positive interactions to some extent matched Riley's description of Anglo women's experience in the West. According to Riley, the demands of frontier life caused many women to value their physical and mental acuity, qualities that traditional gender ideology denied that women possessed. As white women reevaluated their own identity, they simultaneously changed the way they thought about Indians.⁷³ In Wakefield's captivity narrative, she attributed her realization that not all Indians were savage to the time she spent with them at Yellow Medicine. “Many persons say the

⁷⁰ Derounian-Studola, 19-20.

⁷¹ Congregation lists in Stephen Riggs and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷² Wakefield, 61.

⁷³ Riley, 152-153.

Indian cannot be civilized,” she wrote. “I think they can, but did not know that until I lived among them.”⁷⁴

But Wakefield perhaps went further than many white women did in her revision of herself and others. Other Anglo women, like those that Riley describes, tolerated Indians, maybe even developing friendships with one or two, but often in a white setting and on white terms. Wakefield, on the other hand, seemed to openly embrace life on the middle ground. Moreover, it was exactly the same qualities that had, at first, frightened her, that she now found emotionally uplifting. Only a few weeks after arriving at Yellow Medicine, Wakefield began to travel the five miles to Riggs’s mission church unaccompanied, often stopping at the Indian camp and not returning until sundown.⁷⁵ The fear and disgust she had originally felt toward the landscape disappeared, and she found that she “enjoyed it exceedingly.”⁷⁶ What Wakefield seemed to like most about the land surrounding Yellow Medicine was its wild expansiveness. “The scenery . . . was grand,” she wrote in her narrative. “Enormous hills—almost mountains—were on every side of this stream, and when a person was at the top and commenced descending, they would tremble with fear for awhile, but at last they would entirely forget all danger, while looking at the beauties of the scene.”⁷⁷ These seemingly dangerous spaces seemed to offer Wakefield freedom to escape the white community entirely. She became fluent in the Dakota language and even began to experiment with Dakota customs. One such tradition was Dakota women’s frequent smoking of long, clay pipes called *canduhupe*. As Wakefield became more intimate with the Sisseton women, they began to offer her the

⁷⁴ Wakefield, 57.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

opportunity to smoke with them and she accepted, symbolically cementing her relationship with them.⁷⁸ “Indian women smoke all the time,” Wakefield later explained to her readers, assuming that the image of women smoking pipes would seem strange to them, “[but] only when they are at rest.”⁷⁹ This seemingly crude, even lazy behavior was not what white Americans would expect from a respectable “lady,” but Wakefield seemed happy with the change and the apparent acceptance and intimacy that she had finally found, paradoxically, among “savages.”

Wakefield also acknowledged in her narrative that she “began to love and respect [the Dakotas] as well as if they were whites.”⁸⁰ Her growing friendships in the Dakota community seemed to give her a deeper sense of Indians’ humanity, probably because they had offered her affections that whites had withheld. This new attitude caused Wakefield to seek to understand the Dakotas’ behavior rather than assume the superiority of white ways. When, for instance, a group of Dakota men frightened the other white people at the agency by interrupting their Fourth of July celebration with threats of violence, Wakefield invited the intruders in for ice cream and proceeded to explain the meaning of the holiday decorations. According to Wakefield, “the Indians all took a fancy to me at that time” and they singled her out for thanks.⁸¹ These early attempts at cultural mediation were small compared to the daring—even treacherous—efforts that Wakefield would make a year later, but already a pattern was emerging in the role she saw for herself in the West. Like other female emigrants, Wakefield’s experience in Minnesota caused her to reevaluate her ideas about Indians and herself. Unlike her peers,

⁷⁸ Ibid., 59, editor’s notes, 143-144.

⁷⁹ Wakefield, 58, and editor’s notes 143-144.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁸¹ Ibid., 60.

however, Wakefield took this revision to the extreme. To her, Indians were not only good; they were people who she loved “as well as if they were whites.” She was not simply someone who could navigate the middle ground if forced onto it; she went there willingly.

Wakefield moved to Shakopee, and then to Yellow Medicine, with high expectations. If the literature Wakefield read served her right, the West would be a place where she could begin again, and where she could put her inherent womanly powers of morality and sociability to good use. Like other female emigrants, Wakefield also carried fear in her cultural baggage. She believed that she was sensitive and became anxious easily—traits that would leave her especially vulnerable to attack by Indians, who many white Americans assumed were filthy and dangerous. These expectations, both good and bad, shaped the way Wakefield interpreted her first experiences in Minnesota. In the end, however, Wakefield discovered what many other female emigrants also learned—that the reality of the West confirmed neither her hopes nor her fears. She was not exceptionally moral. She was not any better at bringing people together than she had been in the East. Yet life in Minnesota was good in surprising ways. As Wakefield dropped her preconceived notions, she filled them with a new reality that viewed the West as majestic and beautiful and the Indians who populated it as an ideal community. Like Anglo women throughout the West, Wakefield’s changing self-image simultaneously altered her vision of the people and things around her.

But the extent to which Wakefield’s experience at Yellow Medicine reshaped her cultural assumptions was atypical. Many female emigrants crossed onto the middle ground, but Wakefield did it eagerly and seemed more comfortable there than she did at home. It was common for female emigrants to soften their stance on Indians after they

had lived in the West for a while, and many white women even had friendly relationships with Indians who they relied on for trade, household help, and medical care.⁸² White women were also more likely than their husbands to attend Indian ceremonies or to visit the inside of Indians' homes.⁸³ Wakefield's actions, however, surpassed these surface niceties. As she sat on the bare ground of the Indian camp, smoking and talking according to Dakota custom, Wakefield had placed both feet firmly into the cultural divide. She still dressed like a white woman and would still ride her horse back to her frame house later that night, but she clearly was sitting outside the boundaries of white society. This bold step onto the middle ground was, most importantly, completely willing. White people were scarce at Yellow Medicine, but they existed, and Wakefield seemed in no hurry to seek them out. Instead, she embraced opportunities to learn more about her Dakota neighbors, attended church with them, and worked to reconcile conflicts that they had with other white people. In these situations she discovered that she had become useful and needed. And even though white congregations in Shakopee had turned against her, Wakefield seemed to enjoy the missionaries at the agency, who also frequented the cultural divide.

The fact that Wakefield later couched her attraction to the middle ground in terms of Christian charity belied the practical benefits that such a life offered her. While Wakefield's religious conviction may have encouraged her to see humanity in all people, there were plenty of white Minnesotans for whom Christian faith did no such thing. It is also unlikely, as June Namias suggests, that Wakefield's peers did not step readily onto the middle ground because they lacked Wakefield's New England heritage or determined

⁸² Riley, 189-193.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 197.

moral conscience.⁸⁴ Many Anglo Minnesotans in the mid-nineteenth century hailed from New England, and although Wakefield attended church regularly, she demonstrated no particular religious conviction. Instead, what set Wakefield apart from other Anglo Minnesotans was her disappointment with other whites and theirs with her. The mysterious troubles and unhappiness that Wakefield claimed she felt before and after she moved to Minnesota seem to have prompted her to explore other possibilities for community to an extent that other Anglo Minnesotans did not desire or need to do. Wakefield's appreciation for other cultures appears admirable by today's standards, but she would not have understood the concept of pluralism much less advocated it. Wakefield justified her growing friendship with her Dakota neighbors as pity for the less fortunate, but the evenings she spent smoking with the Sisseton women suggest she received at least social benefits and acceptance in return, if not friendship.

By the summer of 1862 it seemed that Wakefield had found a place for herself in Minnesota, a middle ground that allowed her to remain part of white society while simultaneously building friendships with Indians. But as Wakefield's first year at the agency drew to a close, the US-Dakota Conflict altered the divide between Indian and white worlds. For Wakefield, the conflict intensified her position as a person between cultures. Wakefield's time in captivity and her relationship with the Dakota man who protected her offered the apparent possibility of staying on the middle ground forever. Even when white troops liberated the captives and Wakefield's return to white society was imminent, she still imagined herself caught in the divide, hoping to serve as a cultural intermediary between these warring groups. But Wakefield would find that the

⁸⁴ Wakefield, editor's introduction, 41.

lure that the middle ground presented for her had caused her to misinterpret its nature. During peacetime the Minnesota frontier appeared to be a hospitable place. All types of people passed freely through it, communicating with each other in varied ways. In reality, however, the space between Indian and white worlds had not been the haven that Wakefield had imagined. Central to its success was the fact that people did not go there willingly; they forced each other to compromise in whatever way would satisfy both sides and never forgot where their true allegiance belonged. By stepping so eagerly onto the middle ground, Wakefield appeared disloyal to her own society. Rather than making her a successful intermediary, such a move destroyed white Minnesotans' trust in her. Wakefield's six weeks in captivity would be the fulfillment of the life between cultures that she had begun at Yellow Medicine. The disaster that followed would show that Wakefield's vision of the middle ground had been nothing more than an illusion.

CHAPTER TWO: LIFE ON THE DIVIDE

As Minnesota soldiers left the state in the early 1860s to fight for the Union army, a different sort of civil war erupted in their absence. Hungry, angry, and discouraged by increasing white settlement, Dakota leaders took advantage of the state's lack of manpower and ransacked towns on and around the reservation. Although the number of deaths is still uncertain, sources at the time estimated that during August and September of 1862, Dakota soldiers killed between four hundred and two thousand white and mixed-heritage men, women, and children, and took another three hundred of them captive.⁸⁵ In addition, Dakotas looted stores, burned homes, and succeeded in their goal of frightening many white people out of the state. Governor Alexander Ramsey requested that Minnesota troops fighting in the South return home and the whites struck back. The battles that took place over the months that followed resulted in the largest public execution in United States history and the removal of the Dakota and Winnebago people from Minnesota. On December 26th, 1862, thirty-eight Dakota men—including Chaska, by then an intimate friend of Sarah Wakefield—would hang on the gallows in the frontier town of Mankato. By the following May, white Minnesotans had virtually eliminated Indian residents from the southeast portion of their state.

Wakefield and her two children were among those whites who spent six weeks during the fall of 1862 as captives in Little Crow's camp. Although she initially faced her captivity with fear, Wakefield soon found that the experience offered her rewards as well as troubles. Even more than the steps onto the middle ground that she had taken at Yellow Medicine, Wakefield's captivity gave her a taste of life between cultures.

⁸⁵ Michael Clodfelter, The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1998), 35-67.

Wakefield's evenings with the Sissetons at Yellow Medicine had always ended with her return to white society. In captivity, on the other hand, Wakefield's home was, as the title of her narrative would illustrate, "in the Sioux Tepees." The man she referred to as her husband during that time— although according to Wakefield, the two had only pretended to marry in order to protect her from rape—was a full-blood Mdewakanton Dakota. This man, named We-Chank-Wash-Ta-Don-Pee but commonly called Chaska because he was his parents' eldest son, seemed by Wakefield's telling to offer the ultimate fulfillment of her search for community on the middle ground.⁸⁶ In contrast to John and others who Wakefield believed had failed to guard her as white men should, Chaska offered Wakefield constant protection and support. Other Dakotas, too, gave Wakefield the affection that, from the beginning of her time in Minnesota, she had lacked. Although even during captivity other whites showed concern over Wakefield's fondness for Indians, their distress did not deter her from the new community and identity that she was forming.

Probably because of her comparative comfort in Little Crow's camp Wakefield began to envision herself as a cultural intermediary—one of many individuals who bridged the cultural divide by transporting messages among people who were unable or unwilling to communicate with each other directly.⁸⁷ When Colonel Henry H. Sibley's troops freed the captives in late September, Wakefield did not want to travel to the white camp without Chaska there to protect her. According to Wakefield's account, Chaska seemed similarly reluctant to part with her, and although many Dakotas fled the area before the whites arrived, he followed Wakefield to Camp Release. The two friends approached Sibley's officers together, confident that their position between worlds would

⁸⁶ Namias, 222.

⁸⁷ Karttunen, xi.

enable Wakefield to shield Chaska from white Minnesotans' desire for vengeance. During her capture and captivity, however, Wakefield had sown seeds that would ultimately destroy both Chaska and herself. Cultural mediation required a host of skills that Wakefield had developed at Yellow Medicine and strengthened during captivity, including linguistic ability, curiosity about other people, and an adaptability to cultural norms.⁸⁸ Unfortunately for her, she failed to realize that mediation was also a precarious career that demanded that she keep her feet firmly planted on one side of the cultural divide.⁸⁹

Wakefield's narrative reluctantly confirms what other white captives were all too eager to say—that she betrayed cultural expectations while in captivity by appearing too comfortable on the middle ground. While other captives complained about their discomfort and refused to behave by Indian customs, Wakefield embraced the people around her and their way of life. Convinced early on that she might never return to white society, Wakefield readily crafted a new identity. She claimed that Chaska was her husband, dressed and behaved like a Dakota woman, and appeared by her own account to be genuinely enjoying herself. During peacetime Wakefield's attraction to the middle ground had appeared similar enough to other whites' more reluctant journeys onto it to be deemed acceptable by frontier standards. After the dividing violence of the US-Dakota Conflict, however, Wakefield's unwavering friendship with Indians shocked and disgusted many whites. As the nature of the Minnesota frontier shifted, Wakefield—and by her account, Chaska with her—were left behind. Standing firm on what they saw as a

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 286-288; Szasz, 6, 294-296

⁸⁹ This is most clear from Merrell; See also Karttunen, 295-300.

safe middle ground, they were actually in the middle of thick woods, and their apparent ease there would tarnish Wakefield's reputation and end Chaska's life.

The US-Dakota Conflict began with a seemingly small incident on August 17th at a farm town called Acton. Four young Mdewakanton men from the Rice Creek village near the Redwood Agency killed five Anglos in what appeared to be an unprovoked murder. The young men had traveled north from the reservation on a hunting trip and passed by Acton on their way home, challenging a white farmer to a shooting contest that ended in the death of the farmer, his wife, and three guests. When news of the murders reached the reservation that night, Dakota leaders from the Rice Creek and Shakopee villages met to decide how they should respond. They knew that treaty stipulations required them to hand over the men to white authorities in order to receive their annuity payments. Starving and angry, some leaders claimed that a more drastic response was in order. The next morning, over one hundred Dakota men traveled south to confer with Little Crow, the Dakota leader whom many whites would later blame for the violence that ensued. After a heated debate, the Mdewakanton leaders in favor of war succeeded in persuading many others to their side. Starting at the Lower Agency and expanding into the other parts of the reservation and the countryside around it, Dakota soldiers captured, pillaged, and massacred entire white communities.⁹⁰

Some causes of the conflict were longstanding. For the preceding thirty years, missionaries had chipped away at traditional Dakota beliefs, convincing a small but growing number of families to convert to Christianity and take up white cultural habits. The treaties of 1851 and 1858, which reduced Dakota land to a ten mile strip along the

⁹⁰ Clodfelter, 35-67; Wakefield, editor's introduction, 20

Minnesota River, had exacerbated this cultural divide by breaking land into farm lots, establishing white institutions like schools and military posts, and imposing paternalistic laws against drinking and other “depredations” that the Dakotas must abide if they wished to receive the full portion of their annuity money.⁹¹ Despite these impositions, the U.S. government often failed to protect the Dakotas from the nearly two hundred thousand white settlers who entered the state, often squatting on Indian land and forced them into unfair trade agreements.⁹² In other Midwestern states, Dakota anger over white land-grabbing had already erupted into violence. The most memorable of these conflicts in Minnesotans’ minds occurred in 1857 at Spirit Lake, Iowa, near the Minnesota border. Outraged at white squatting, theft, and violence, the Wahpekute Dakota leader Inkpaduta initiated an attack that led to fighting on both sides. After the death of about forty whites, Inkpaduta’s band escaped, and many white Minnesotans feared that he would next attack their own towns.⁹³

The Civil War served as the spark to ignite this already fueling fire. Many Dakota leaders scorned the U.S. government for entering into their own war while chastising Indian communities for doing the same. More significantly, the burden of organizing and equipping a military distracted the federal government and drained it of the resources it needed to honor its treaty commitments. Annuity payments—part of the agreements that U.S. and Dakota leaders negotiated when they created the Dakota reservation years earlier—normally arrived to Minnesota in late June or early July. By early August, 1862, the money still had not come. Crop failure exacerbated this problem, leaving many

⁹¹ Wakefield, editor’s introduction, 17-18

⁹² Ibid., editor’s introduction, 16

⁹³ Ibid., editor’s introduction, 17-18; Anderson, 19-20; Clodfelter, 38-39.

Dakotas without food. As the Dakotas waited at the agency, hungry and discouraged, local white agents responded coldly if at all. Although the government warehouses contained provisions that were beginning to spoil, tradesman Andrew Myrick proclaimed that the Indians should receive none of it, making a statement that would become well-known throughout the state: “Let them eat grass!” Knowing that many white soldiers had vacated state military posts to fight for the Union army, Dakota leaders saw an opportunity to fight the mistreatment and disrespect they suffered.⁹⁴

The attacks of August 18th came as a shock to many white Minnesotans, but the Wakefields and other families living at the agency had seen trouble brewing for weeks. On August 4th, a group of Dakotas went door-to-door demanding food and broke into the agency warehouse. Wakefield remembered this interaction as one that at first caused her alarm—she answered the door with pistol in hand—but in the end invoked her sympathy. “They offered no violence,” she wrote in her captivity narrative, “and departed quietly; all they cared for was food—it was not our lives; and if all these Indians had been properly fed and otherwise treated like human beings, how very many innocent lives might have been spared.”⁹⁵ As the Dakotas left the warehouse carrying bags of flour, Agent Galbraith and agency soldiers threatened them, insisting that they should not return for more. The next day, however, a “friendly or Christian Indian” informed whites at the agency that some of the Dakotas planned to break into the warehouse a second time.⁹⁶ Knowing that the soldiers would respond with violence to another raid and fearing that they would be caught in the middle, Wakefield and her children accompanied other white

⁹⁴ Clodfelter, 35-67; Wakefield, editor’s introduction, 20.

⁹⁵ Wakefield, 62.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

families to the Redwood Agency, where they stayed for a week. There is no record of where her husband John was during this time. As Wakefield journeyed home, she passed the white soldiers on their way back to Fort Ridgely, located just south of Redwood. Fearing that the soldiers would be too far away to be of any use at Yellow Medicine, Wakefield made plans to take “a journey East.”⁹⁷

But Wakefield was still at home on the early afternoon of August 18th when rumors about Indian attacks began to circulate. John heard the news and decided that his family should leave for Fort Ridgely immediately rather than waiting for the stagecoach as planned. He negotiated with the Redwood Agency clerk, George Gleason, to drive Sarah and the children to Fort Ridgely in return for the use of the family’s wagon. Despite their own worries, the men did not inform Sarah of the specific dangers she faced that afternoon, and she was sad to leave her home on such short notice. Still, she obeyed John’s wishes and loaded herself and her two children into the backseat of the open wagon. At two o’clock the party left Yellow Medicine, bound in the direction of Redwood and Fort Ridgely. On his way out of the upper agency, Gleason stopped at the store of white trader Stewart P. Garvie, who warned them that Dakotas had killed some whites at a nearby hunting ground and that Indian war councils were in session throughout the reservation. Suddenly aware of the peril surrounding her, Wakefield begged Gleason to take her back to her house, but he pushed on.⁹⁸

Wakefield later described her departure from Yellow Medicine with language that hinted at resentment. From her telling of the story, both John and Gleason had failed to protect her, putting her in danger while refusing to take seriously her justifiable fear.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 62-63.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 65-66.

John's crime was less severe than Gleason's. He did not know the full details of the crisis descending on Redwood and he believed that sending his family away from Yellow Medicine would keep them safe. Still, it was at John's insistence that Sarah found herself unprotected on the open prairie. Although she did not outright condemn John in her captivity narrative, she did mention that it was ironic that he had ordered her away from home at that moment. "All this day these lower Indians had been committing these awful murders," she wrote, "and, we, not knowing it, were going down into their country for safety."⁹⁹ Even worse, Sarah later suspected that she had in some way sensed what was going to happen, but that John's decision not to tell her about the reports of violence had led her to believe that her feelings were foolish. "I felt unusually sad," she recalled, "I remember going from room to room, taking a final look. My husband grew impatient and asked me what I was doing, and I made some excuse. I knew he would ridicule me if I told him how I felt."¹⁰⁰ In her public writing, Wakefield never openly blamed John for his failure to protect her. It is clear from her telling of the story, however, that she believed him to be partially responsible for her captivity.

John's apparent failure to protect his wife and children from Indian attack seems to have colored Sarah's image of him. Although she did not explicitly say as much, Wakefield would not have been unusual if she had felt disappointment over her husband's inability to protect her, especially in light of the breach of gender ideals that he had demonstrated during the domestic abuse scandal of the year before. As Glenda Riley explains, white emigrants' gender expectations often contrasted sharply with the reality of the frontier experience. When they encountered unfamiliar dangers in the West, many

⁹⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁰⁰ Wakefield, 66.

Anglo females worried that white men were not as sensible or capable of protecting them as the proscriptive literature suggested.¹⁰¹ Although the claim that Wakefield doubted John's manliness because of his ability to protect her is speculative, she did clearly express her opinion that John might have made a wiser choice that day had he been more sensitive to her feelings. Writing again of her last moments at home, Wakefield recalled, "I asked what was the hurry, but he made me some answer that satisfied me then, but many times while I was in captivity I thought of our conversation."¹⁰² John's indifference to Sarah's concerns fit well with the common perception among whites that women were prone to unnecessary panic, but nonetheless the Wakefields' last moment together was not a positive one and its image stayed in Sarah's mind over the weeks that followed.¹⁰³

Yet perhaps John's biggest mistake was his decision to entrust his family to George Gleason. Sarah wrote that Gleason "made great sport" of her feelings and, like John, ignored her "presentiment of what was going to happen."¹⁰⁴ Time and time again, Wakefield begged Gleason to return to Yellow Medicine, remarking on the absence of any other wagons on the road, and complaining of her sadness and fear. Gleason laughed, sang, and shouted, teasing Wakefield that "he would never take me anywhere again" and that she would "live to see the time I would thank him for taking me away."¹⁰⁵ On a hill halfway between the two agencies, Wakefield could see burning buildings in the distance. Even this observation was not enough to trouble Gleason, who claimed that the smoke was nothing but a prairie fire and scolded Wakefield for her "unpleasant" attempt to jump

¹⁰¹ Riley, 119.

¹⁰² Wakefield, 66.

¹⁰³ Riley, 114-117.

¹⁰⁴ Wakefield, 66-67.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

out of the wagon.¹⁰⁶ At the Redwood River, near the villages of Shakopee, Rice Creek, and Little Crow, Gleason made his final—and fatal—misjudgment. Wakefield saw two Indians approaching the wagon, and through her tears she pleaded with Gleason to take out his pistol, which he had falsely assured her he was carrying. Instead, Gleason slowed the horses and asked the men where they were going. To Wakefield’s horror—and possibly in some small way her satisfaction—her presentiments about the journey had been right on all counts. Earlier in the trip she had warned Gleason that, if he did not go back to Yellow Medicine, “[the Indians] will shoot you, and take me prisoner.”¹⁰⁷ Sure enough, as the two Dakota men passed the wagon, one turned and fired at Gleason, who fell backward into Wakefield’s lap. Another shot sent Wakefield’s driver out of the wagon. Gleason died that day on the prairie, and Wakefield and her children spent the next six weeks as captives of the Dakotas.

Gleason’s death began a new stage of Wakefield’s life in the West. Wakefield discovered that she felt safer in Indian hands than she had under the protection of white men. The Dakota man who had not fired the gun was Chaska, a member of Sakpe’s band whom Wakefield had met while living in Shakopee.¹⁰⁸ When Gleason fell from the wagon, Chaska took his place, calming the horses and shaking hands with Wakefield. She remembered later that, with Chaska in control, “one ray of hope entered my heart.”¹⁰⁹ According to Wakefield’s account, Chaska spent the next hour defending her from his companion, Hapa, even going so far as to knock Hapa’s gun from his hands when he tried to shoot her. Unlike John and Gleason, Chaska seemed to take seriously the gravity of

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁹ Wakefield, 67.

both Wakefield's situation and her feelings of vulnerability as a white woman without a white male protector. As the party rode off in the direction of Little Crow's camp, Wakefield provoked Hapa's anger by becoming visibly sentimental about leaving Gleason unburied on the prairie.¹¹⁰ Chaska urged her to face forward, but unlike John had done earlier that day, he explained the rationale behind his censure. "Hapa was very cross," Wakefield claimed in her narrative, "and [Chaska] said if I turned around [Hapa] would kill me now."¹¹¹ Even in these early moments of captivity, Wakefield's life had drastically changed—in some ways, it seemed, for the better. Curiously, with Chaska at the reins, Wakefield suddenly felt a security and affection that it seemed white men could not offer her.

Upon entering captivity Wakefield felt a constant and understandable need for Chaska's protection. Real or imagined dangers seemed to lurk everywhere, and Wakefield and her children were always on the move—either at Chaska's insistence or at the urging of family members whom he had recruited to protect her in his absence. Wakefield slept and ate very little during her first week in camp, and by the fifth night her frequent attempts to escape men who she believed meant to harm her had caused sores on her feet that left her unable to walk.¹¹² According to Wakefield's account, these early days were frighteningly eventful, including one occasion when Dakota men threatened to kill all the white prisoners and one occurrence of a mass rape. Wakefield wrote regarding the second of these incidents that "I arose and looked north where the excitement was and saw a hut made of green boughs, and women led into it by an Indian

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹¹² First week described in Ibid., 69-83.

wearing a white band on his head; presently I would hear a shriek and see female clothing spread out, and what we all thought were bodies put into an ox wagon, and then driven off.”¹¹³ Even if scenes such as this did not really happen, the fact that Wakefield wrote about them shows that in her mind they were real possibilities. To avoid the dangers that she feared, Wakefield spent one entire night carrying her baby, Nellie, through the woods.¹¹⁴ She then passed the next day in a haystack without food or water.¹¹⁵ Even the weather threatened Wakefield when what she believed to be a hurricane toppled Chaska’s teepee and forced the whole family to sleep under their wagon. Although Wakefield herself claimed that she was “naturally timid, and afraid of death under any circumstances,” her narrative suggests that in this case her fear was justified.¹¹⁶

Wakefield’s struggles during that trying first week brought her closer to Chaska and his family. According to Wakefield’s narrative, each time some alleged danger threatened her, these new friends would offer her their protection. Chaska’s mother and grandfather continually led her away from camp to hide when trouble emerged and Chaska often defended her with sound advice or even his own body.¹¹⁷ Frightened of her surroundings and thankful for the Dakota family’s help, Wakefield quickly developed a special intimacy with them. By her fifth day in captivity Wakefield could already claim that she “felt as if this was my home.”¹¹⁸ That night she returned to Chaska’s teepee, exhausted from the trials of the day. The family washed her feet and then cooked their evening meal. Wakefield wrote later that it was a “good supper,” showing her distance

¹¹³ Ibid., 76.

¹¹⁴ Wakefield, 79-80.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 69-83.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

from other white captives, who generally described Indian food with disgust.¹¹⁹ Safe and content, Wakefield fell into the first sound sleep she had experienced since leaving Yellow Medicine.¹²⁰

Later that night another threat intensified Wakefield's intimacy with Chaska in a way that would later come back to haunt both of them. Wakefield claimed that around midnight Hapa returned to the teepee, drunk and determined that she "be my wife," or as nineteenth-century readers would have understood, have sex with him. Chaska tried to reason with Hapa, who finally declared that he would leave Wakefield alone if she would marry Chaska instead of him. Wakefield wrote that Chaska responded in a way that he believed would save both her life and her honor. "As soon as I know her husband is dead," he said, "I will marry her."¹²¹ In the end, Hapa would only be satisfied with visual proof of the union, so according to Wakefield, Chaska lay down between her and his mother until Hapa fell asleep. Once the danger had passed, Wakefield assured her readers that "[Chaska] very quietly crawled back to his own place, and left me as he found me."¹²² She also admitted, however, that "this was not the only time he saved me in a like manner."¹²³ After a mere five days in captivity, Wakefield trusted Chaska so deeply that she allowed him into her bed and did not protest the claim that she was his wife. Even if their interaction that night was as innocent as Wakefield insisted it was, and even if she would have preferred that her protection come from a white man, Wakefield's actions flew in the face of what most white people considered to be decent behavior.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, the account of Helen Corruthers in Bryant and Murch.

¹²⁰ Wakefield, 83-84.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 84.

Reports of Wakefield's marriage to Chaska grew into a scandal that persisted during and after her captivity. "I dared not contradict it" explained Wakefield, "but rather encouraged everyone to believe so, for I was in fear all the while that Hapa would find out we had deceived him. I did not consider the consequences outside of the Indian camp, for I had my doubts all the while of getting away."¹²⁴ The day after Chaska told Hapa that he would take Wakefield for a wife, a group of white captives confronted her about the report and Wakefield did not deny it. According to her, neither she nor Chaska considered themselves married but they kept the lie going for fear that other Dakotas would find out the truth.¹²⁵ Wakefield ridiculed the other white women for spreading false rumors about her relationship with Chaska, but her own narrative shows that they had good reason to speculate. At least three times during her captivity, Wakefield left the teepees of old neighbors or friends because she preferred to stay with Chaska, one day choosing to walk sixteen miles with him rather than ride on horseback with another group.¹²⁶ On another occasion, she openly declared to a Dakota man that she was Chaska's wife.¹²⁷ Even when talking to other white captives, Wakefield appeared to enjoy her new Dakota family to an inappropriate degree. Upon hearing a false report that her husband John had died, Wakefield confessed to Jannette De Camp that she "might as well pass the remainder of my days here as any place" and speculated that "there are many worse things than this."¹²⁸ De Camp later repeated these conversations in a way that Wakefield claimed was misleading, but it seems odd that Wakefield would have been

¹²⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

¹²⁵ Wakefield, 85.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 96, 99-101, 107.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 102.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 97.

so careless about what she said unless she really meant it. Accurate or not, white women's gossip about Wakefield's alleged marriage to Chaska rested on good evidence. Regardless of what actually happened behind closed doors, Wakefield seemed to be in no hurry to maintain an image of herself as a respectable white woman.

It makes sense that Wakefield felt so comfortable with Chaska. Even if their marriage really was, as Wakefield claimed, nothing more than a method of protecting her from other men, her description of Chaska shows that he seemed in her eyes to be no typical Indian. Chaska's family, like many of the Dakotas living on the reservation, had adopted customs that placed them in a gray area that seemed to defy racial stereotypes. He was, as Wakefield wrote, "a farmer Indian, had worn a white man's dress for several years: had been to school and could speak some English, and read and spell very little."¹²⁹ He had lived in a frame house rather than a teepee before the war began, and his grandfather, Eagle Head, still owned a brick home.¹³⁰ Even though Chaska discarded these signs of white culture, he continued to act in a way that seemed as white as it did Indian. "The family I was with," Wakefield later informed her readers, "were not the greasy, lousy filthy Indians, we used to see around begging. . . . I always had in our tepee, a towel, soap, and wash dish, and I never knew of any of the family to neglect washing and combing before eating."¹³¹ Chaska's faithful concern for Wakefield's safety added to these other qualities to further prove his ability to act in the genteel way that white culture

¹²⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹³⁰ Wakefield, 78, 96.

¹³¹ Ibid., 113.

ascribed to white men. “When I hear all the Indians abused, it aggravates me,” Wakefield wrote, “for I know some are as manly, honest, and noble, as our own race.”¹³²

Wakefield also wrote about Chaska’s religious beliefs similarly to the way she described her own. Both Wakefield and Chaska appeared in her writing to act according to Christian values even though neither of them were baptized Christians. According to Wakefield, Chaska attended Reverend Samuel D. Hinman’s Episcopalian mission church at the Redwood Agency.¹³³ “Although he was not a Christian,” she remarked, “he knew there was a God, and he had learned right from wrong.”¹³⁴ In a letter that Wakefield sent to Stephen Riggs while writing her narrative, she presented her own faith in a similar way. She admitted that she, like Chaska, had never received a Christian baptism, but that she “always attended Church and never forgot that there was a God and have tried to go to him in many hours and afflictions of different kinds.”¹³⁵ What Wakefield may not have realized was that her tendency to view religion as experiential and social rather than dogmatic also resembled Dakota belief systems that revolved around ceremony and kinship. In fact, when Wakefield passed the pipe while cooking with the Dakota women, she engaged in a sacred kinship ritual.¹³⁶ The mix between Christian and native values that Wakefield and Chaska shared symbolized—and possibly contributed to—their comfort on the middle ground. It also seemed, in Wakefield’s mind, to explain their attraction to each other.

¹³² Ibid., 86.

¹³³ Ibid., 63.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 69.

¹³⁵ Derounian-Stodola, 20.

¹³⁶ Wakefield, editor’s introduction, 21.

As time progressed Wakefield increasingly embraced her new life while retaining elements of the old. She committed many cultural gaffes over the course of her stay with the Dakotas, one time washing her feet in a pail of water that they believed to be sacred and another time touching a medicine bag that was off-limits to women, but Chaska's family responded with patience and she began to learn their ways.¹³⁷ Wakefield's son James became a favorite in the Dakota community, learned to speak their language, and spent days on end in other teepees, outside his mother's sight. Wakefield's new life differed drastically from what it had been in white society, but it also was not entirely Indian. Instead, during their last weeks in captivity, Wakefield and her children truly resided on the middle ground. She later remembered that some Dakotas had kindly helped her obtain remnants of white culture. "They brought me books and papers to read," she wrote, "and I would make them shirts, so as to return their favors."¹³⁸ Wakefield, and the Dakotas she befriended in captivity, found value in both white and Indian customs, and the community they created together utilized both. These final weeks seemed, by Wakefield's memory of them, to show the possibilities that a long-term stay on the middle ground had to offer.

Other white women's apparent scorn at Wakefield's attempts to help them achieve her level of comfort perhaps should have warned her of the seriousness of her behavior. Wakefield rarely mentioned other white people in her narrative, but when she did it was to show the harsh consequences of their less accepting attitude toward Indians. According to Wakefield, a mixed-descent man had told her early in her captivity that the

¹³⁷ Ibid., 100-101.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 103.

best way to earn the Dakotas' love and respect was to always act pleasant and trusting.¹³⁹ She followed his suggestion and benefited from it. "My children never knew what it was to be hungry," she remembered later, "for food was plenty, and that which was good."¹⁴⁰ It seemed to Wakefield, though, that other captives had either not received this advice or not heeded it. And although she believed that other white women were jealous of her situation, Wakefield could not seem to convince them to imitate her behavior. When Jannette De Camp came to Wakefield's teepee one morning "nearly starved," Wakefield offered her the rest of her own breakfast as well as what she believed to be helpful instruction. "She remarked several times," wrote Wakefield, "that she would be thankful if she was as comfortable as I was. I told her she took a wrong course with the Indians; that she cried and fretted all the while, making them feel cross towards her; that they gave her the best they had, and she must try and be patient; that her life would be in danger if she kept on complaining and threatening them; it done no good, only enraged them towards her."¹⁴¹ Wakefield encouraged De Camp to be more cheerful and patient with the Indians because it would make them treat her more kindly, but her counsel seemed to fall on deaf ears. "She was determined to look at the worst," Wakefield later lamented, "and would not be comforted."¹⁴²

Wakefield's own narrative suggests a reason that other white women might have been reticent to heed her advice. Even though her willingness to take up Dakota customs made her captivity experience more comfortable, she embraced this new life so quickly and to such an extent that it probably shocked her peers. While other captives complained

¹³⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹⁴¹ Wakefield, 96.

¹⁴² Ibid., 97.

about their discomfort, Wakefield seemed to have no qualms about appearing genuinely happy in captivity. When the Mdewakantons and their prisoners camped near her home at Yellow Medicine, Wakefield was so content that she “sang for the children that night. We ran around on the prairie, picked flowers, and my spirits were as light as air.”¹⁴³

Wakefield also adopted the dress and appearance of a Dakota woman, braiding her hair, painting her face, and even rubbing “dirt into my skin to make me look more like a squaw.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, she made claims about her allegiance and identity that other whites found shocking. Wakefield told the Dakotas more than once that she was willing to fight on their side, saying that she wished she were a man so she could help them in their “plans or exploits” and even made promises to kill her own people.¹⁴⁵ Later, she concocted a lie that “I was about an eighth-breed . . . my grandfather had married a squaw many years ago in the west, and took her east, and I was one of her descendants.”¹⁴⁶

Although nobody—Indian or white—seemed to believe this tale, Wakefield repeated it many times in hopes that it would prevent the Indians from killing her. She later attempted to justify her actions to her readers, claiming that “my sole object was while there to gain [the Dakotas’] friendship so as to save my life.”¹⁴⁷ Regardless of her intent, Wakefield’s seemingly treacherous behavior probably discouraged other white women from hearing her point of view.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 70, 87.

¹⁴⁶ Wakefield, 102.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

Wakefield claimed that she took up an Indian identity because she “had given up all hopes of being rescued.”¹⁴⁸ And in her situation, such a conclusion was understandable. Adopting captives was common among many North American Indian groups, who saw the practice as a way of physically and psychologically replacing lost kin.¹⁴⁹ An avid reader, Wakefield might have been familiar with stories of women like Mary Jemison or Eunice Williams, who lived for many years with their captors and sometimes did not return at all.¹⁵⁰ It would have been easy for Wakefield to assume that her experience would end the same way. Chaska’s family seemed to welcome Wakefield as one of their own, and they might have acted especially welcoming to her because Chaska’s Dakota wife had died a few months earlier.¹⁵¹ As the Mdewakantons took Wakefield and her children further up the Minnesota River toward the Dakota Territory, Wakefield, believing that she would be going with them, helped them prepare food for the winter.¹⁵² She had heard multiple rumors that her husband had died, and her son James seemed to be perfectly content with his new family. “I often asked [James] if he would not like to see his father,” Wakefield remembered, “and he would answer, very indifferently, ‘Yes, but I wish he would come here, I would like to stay if he would.’”¹⁵³ Chaska’s family became just as attached to James as he was to them, and they begged Wakefield to leave her son behind when she finally departed for Camp Release.¹⁵⁴

On September 23rd, Henry H. Sibley defeated Dakota troops at the battle of Wood Lake and white soldiers took steps to free the captives. When Wakefield and

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁹ Namias, 3-4.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 145-203; Demos.

¹⁵¹ Wakefield, 96.

¹⁵² Ibid., 103.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 107.

Chaska heard this news, they did not know what to do. Many of the Dakotas planned to leave the camp before the whites arrived, because they feared what was true—that white soldiers, set on revenge, would make little effort to distinguish between innocent and guilty Indians. As Chaska and his family packed their things, Wakefield fell to the ground crying, not wanting to go with them but scared to wait for the soldiers without Chaska’s protection.¹⁵⁵ At first Chaska insisted on leaving, pointing Wakefield toward the teepee of Mary Butler Renville and her mixed-descent husband. After only an hour, however, Chaska had returned and, to Renville’s distress, Wakefield spent the night in his teepee.¹⁵⁶ Over the next two days, Wakefield and Chaska debated whether he should stay or go. Chaska ultimately stayed but pleaded with Wakefield to speak to Sibley on his behalf, by her account saying, “You are a good woman, you must talk good to your white people or they will kill me; you know I am a good man, and did not shoot Mr. Gleason, and I saved your life. If I had been a bad man I would have gone with those bad chiefs.”¹⁵⁷ Wakefield assured him that, as long as she explained the situation to Sibley and his officers, Chaska “need not fear, they would not injure him”¹⁵⁸

Chaska was innocent in Wakefield’s eyes for the same reason she felt that she herself had nothing to hide. Wakefield saw herself as a cultural intermediary, and she viewed Chaska the same way. Just as Wakefield would soon urge the white military commission to differentiate Chaska from other Indians, Wakefield had often seen Chaska rebuke people like Hapa who appeared to despise her simply because she was white.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵⁶ Wakefield, 107.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 68.

Chaska also became friends with whites as Wakefield had done with Indians. Wakefield remembered him spending evenings with some of the other white captives, laughing, singing, and playing cards. The women would “comb his hair and arrange his neck-tie,” from Wakefield’s perspective proving that they did not believe him to be a savage Indian.¹⁶⁰ At times Chaska even seemed to create a new racial identity for himself as Wakefield had begun to do. According to Wakefield, when a drunken Indian in a nearby teepee threatened to shoot all the white captives, Chaska declared, “I wish I could kill all the Indians” as if he were not one of them.¹⁶¹ By Wakefield’s account of her captivity, it seemed that she and Chaska bonded through their shared identity as cultural negotiators. They both adapted to aspects of each other’s way of life and desired that other people do the same.

But Wakefield and Chaska seem to have misjudged the nature of cultural mediation and the Minnesota frontier. While they strengthened their friendship on what they believed to be a safe middle ground, the people around them—both Indian and white—fled from it. By the time Wakefield took the stand at Chaska’s trial, even the people who Wakefield had earlier believed shared her taste for the cultural divide had moved to one side or the other. Christian Indians had killed agency whites, people of mixed-descent had served as spies for both sides, and Stephen Riggs had agreed to serve as an interpreter at military trials that would be anything but just. The surface niceties of the middle ground had given way to woods that, like the space that historian James Merrell described in early Pennsylvania, seemed to divide Indian and white societies

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁶¹ Wakefield, 82.

rather than bring them together.¹⁶² Although people like Riggs still crossed this area to help people communicate, they did not stay long in it and always returned to their own community. To Wakefield and Chaska, the cultural divide still presented opportunities to transcend their own identities and communities. In the eyes of other Minnesotans, however, their decision to live in this seemingly dangerous place appeared threatening.

But the changing mood of the frontier only halfway caused Wakefield's failure as a cultural intermediary. Even on the seemingly accommodating middle ground that historian Richard White proposes Wakefield's sincere affection for Indians would have seemed shocking. The Great Lakes frontier that White describes initially comes across as a safe place because the Indians and whites on each side of it believed it was a neutral area rather than, as with Merrell's woods, a sinister place that the other group inhabited.¹⁶³ But despite the inviting facade of the middle ground, its purpose was not intercultural harmony but communication. As White writes, the middle ground "was not Eden, and . . . could be a violent and sometimes horrifying place."¹⁶⁴ Indians and whites compromised because they needed to in order to maintain the benefits extended to allies, trade partners, and friendly neighbors. Thus, they created shared cultural practices for pragmatic reasons, and often consciously manipulated each others' values in order to achieve their own ends. Even Margaret Connell Szasz, whose work on cultural mediation presents a more hopeful tone, acknowledges that it was intermediaries' communication skills that led people to value them; when they created a deeper understanding between

¹⁶² Merrell, 27.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27; White, x.

¹⁶⁴ White, x.

cultures it was often a byproduct of more practical goals.¹⁶⁵ The reluctant, practical, and sometimes opportunistic mediation that these historians describe bore little resemblance to Wakefield's comment to De Camp that she "might as well pass the remainder of my days here as any place."¹⁶⁶

By the early days of 1863 both Wakefield and Chaska would pay the price for stepping too readily into the cultural divide. For Wakefield, six weeks in captivity had begun as a burden but had swiftly changed course. Despite her initial discomfort and fear, she had found that life among Indians satisfied her just as much as, if not more than, life among whites. Her time in captivity had also equipped her with skills that should have made her able to help whites and Indians communicate. But in Wakefield's eagerness to adopt Dakota customs, she destroyed the possibility of convincing white people of her point of view. Testifying at Chaska's trial at Camp Release, she appeared not as a genteel white lady willing to navigate the dark woods to help her own people, but as a race traitor who preferred a savage Indian to her own white husband. As Wakefield would soon learn, in order to successfully cross the American woods, an intermediary should not appear too willing to make the trip.

¹⁶⁵ Szasz, 6.

¹⁶⁶ Wakefield, 97.

CHAPTER THREE: CAPTIVE TO THE WOODS

Wakefield's decision to testify at her captor's trial appears by today's standards to embody ideals of both cultural pluralism and Christian morality. That both she and Chaska could show such concern for each other in the face of the prejudice and violence that permeated both sides of their frontier seems truly remarkable. But the hopeful message that Wakefield's story seems to send is too simple in light of its sad ending. The first blow occurred just days after her release from captivity, when her defense of Chaska provoked whites at Camp Release to write home excitedly, suspecting that a sexual affair had occurred. Although the commission could not prove Chaska's guilt and Wakefield headed back to her own society expecting them to spare his life, she read in the paper three months later that her friend had, in fact, died by public execution. Heartbroken, Wakefield anxiously wrote to Stephen Riggs to determine why Chaska had been put to death. Riggs insisted that the execution had been a mistake—a claim that seemed inaccurate to both Wakefield and modern historians. In May, 1863, the United States government removed most of the Dakota and Winnebago people from Minnesota, and Wakefield lost not only Chaska but also the rest of his family. Alone once again, she found herself the object of public scorn and marital unhappiness. Over the months that followed, Wakefield wrote a narrative of her captivity, hoping that by explaining “what I suffered, and what I was spared from suffering, by a Friendly or Christian Indian” she could renew her image in the minds of other whites.¹⁶⁷

In retrospect Wakefield's narrative appears even more tragic than Chaska's death. Although scholars June Namias and Kathryn Derounian-Stodola have viewed this work

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 53.

as a defense of the less fortunate, a more careful analysis of Wakefield's writing makes it seem the reverse. By the time Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees came to print, Chaska had died and the government had forced his family from the state. Even if Wakefield had wanted to help her friends, to convince Minnesotans that the Dakotas were innocent would have done little good at that point. Moreover, Wakefield used language in her narrative that suggested that she shared the same racial assumptions as the rest of the white community. As other scholars have shown, Sarah Wakefield did spend a large part of Six Weeks in Sioux Tepees criticizing whites for what she saw as their ignorance and cruelty toward Indians. She wrote an equal amount, however, about her belief in Indians' savagery and her own dislike of them. By the time she wrote her narrative, Wakefield had consciously or unconsciously reimagined the frontier as an impermeable boundary between Indians and whites. Intent not on defending the less fortunate but on saving her own reputation, Wakefield wrote a narrative that emphasized rather than denied racial difference, forsaking the memory of her Dakota friends in the process. It appears that she had finally learned the lesson of the frontier. Recognizing that she was alone in the American woods, Wakefield tried to write herself out of them. The result was that she—like the whites around her—became captive to the woods' existence.

The Dakotas' defeat at the battle of Wood Lake on September 23rd alerted Wakefield that her time in captivity was nearing its end. Over the next three days, as they waited for Colonel Henry H. Sibley and his troops to arrive, Wakefield and Chaska pondered their options. Many Dakotas were fleeing west, away from the reach of white troops, and Chaska feared that he should do the same. But Wakefield persuaded her protector to stay, because she believed the other Indians would kill her if he left.

Wakefield claimed later that she and Ellen Brown, the mixed-descent daughter of a former Dakota agent, promised Chaska that they could protect him by arguing on his behalf, saying that “if Sibley had promised to shake hands with all that remained and gave up their prisoners, he would do as he said.”¹⁶⁸ A couple of days before the white troops’ arrival, two Dakota chiefs encouraged the captives who had received kind treatment to write letters to Colonel Henry Sibley on behalf of their captors, asking him to be lenient. Wakefield not only wrote a letter for Chaska, but also spoke to Sibley personally when he and the other white officers arrived to liberate the captives on September 26th. Wakefield later remembered that when she introduced Chaska to Sibley and Stephen Riggs, “they made quite a hero of him for a short time.”¹⁶⁹ Satisfied, Wakefield left the circle to tend to her baby, and passed the rest of the night celebrating with other whites, assured that Chaska was safe.

Trials began two days later. Chaska’s official charge was the murder of George Gleason, the Redwood clerk who had attempted to transport Wakefield and her children from Yellow Medicine to Fort Ridgely, but both Chaska’s and Wakefield’s testimony suggest that the trial had as much to do with their relationship as it did with Gleason’s death. Chaska began his testimony by claiming that he had aimed his gun at Gleason but not fired, and had later “snapped” the gun but it had not gone off.¹⁷⁰ More central to his defense, however, was his explanation of his interactions with Wakefield. He promised that he had “kept [Wakefield] with the intention of giving her up” and also tried to appeal to the white commission’s racial prejudice by declaring that he “could not take as good

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁷⁰ Namias, 223.

care of her as a white man because I am an indian [sic].”¹⁷¹ Wakefield’s testimony also addressed both Gleason’s death and Chaska’s treatment of her. She claimed that Hapa had shot Gleason and Chaska had only snapped his gun. More importantly, Wakefield insisted that Chaska had defended her own life and her children’s, and that although “he had on leggins at the time Gleason was shot,” he was “a farmer indian and spells a little.”¹⁷² Both Chaska and Wakefield understood that his fate depended not only on proving him innocent of the murder that whites had officially condemned him for but also on dispelling the rumors that were already circulating about their relationship. Yet though they successfully acquitted Chaska of the former charge, the fact that Wakefield had so passionately defended him—after all, out of the almost four hundred people to stand before the commission on account of war-related crimes, Chaska’s was the only trial in which a white woman would defend an Indian man—unintentionally proved him guilty of the latter.¹⁷³

Although the commission did not succeed in proving Chaska responsible for George Gleason’s death, in hindsight his execution seems almost inevitable. Out of the 394 people that the military commission tried, only seventy-two received a verdict of not guilty. White Minnesotans’ fear and prejudice coupled with undue haste—the men on the commission often tried thirty to forty people in a single day—to create a grim situation for the Dakota prisoners who took the stand. Wakefield’s lack of restraint, however, probably reduced any chance Chaska had of a fair verdict. On September 26th, the day of Wakefield’s release from captivity and two days before Chaska’s trial, some of the men

¹⁷¹ Description of the trial and testimony transcripts found in *Ibid.*, 221-225.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 223.

in the commission held a court of inquiry at which Wakefield was present.¹⁷⁴ The men involved—Stephen Riggs, Colonel William Crooks, and Isaac V. D. Heard, who would publish his anti-Indian book on the US-Dakota Conflict the year after Wakefield—all “thought it very strange that I had no complaints to make [about my captivity].”¹⁷⁵ In fact, Wakefield reflected later that they “did not appear to believe me.”¹⁷⁶ Still, apparently unconcerned about the commission’s skepticism of her claims, Wakefield left the inquiry and immediately went to a teepee where she sent for Chaska. That night, Wakefield shocked the white officers at camp in an even more overt way. When Captain Hiram P. Grant taunted Wakefield that Chaska would “swing with the rest,” she responded by threatening Grant’s life.¹⁷⁷ By Wakefield’s telling, the white people present for her argument with Grant misunderstood the intention of her outburst. She admitted that her first statement had sounded improper, but claimed that when she realized that other whites had taken it the wrong way, she had tried to turn it into a joke. “Capt. Grant,” she had declared, “if you hang that man, I will shoot you . . . but you first much teach me to shoot, for I am afraid of a gun.”¹⁷⁸

Wakefield’s attempts to convince white people that Chaska was innocent of murder unfortunately proved him guilty of a worse crime—intimacy with a white woman. The day after Wakefield’s quarrel with Grant, General Sibley wrote to his wife that “one rather handsome woman among them had become so infatuated with the redskin who had taken her for a wife that, although her white husband was still living . . . and had been in

¹⁷⁴ Wakefield, 113.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

search of her, she declared that were it not for her children, she would not leave her dusky paramour.”¹⁷⁹ Stephen Riggs also wrote home about the trial, telling his daughter Martha that Wakefield’s was a “curious case.”¹⁸⁰ According to Wakefield, people at the camp “began to say that I was in love; that I was [Chaska’s] wife; [and] that I preferred living with him to my husband;” she also claimed that these remarks soon received statewide attention.¹⁸¹ It is no wonder, given the rumors she caused, that Wakefield was unable to persuade a commission of white men to accept her story. Yet even when Grant supposedly promised her that Chaska’s sentence would be five years in prison rather than death, Wakefield refused to restrain her behavior.¹⁸² Before she left camp, Wakefield visited Chaska’s prison cell, exacerbating the existing rumors by the extreme emotion that she displayed.¹⁸³ Then, when Wakefield and four other women began their seventy-mile trek from Camp Release to the city of Red Wing, southeast of Saint Paul, Wakefield insisted that they all spend the first night in Dakota teepees instead of in the white soldiers’ tents.¹⁸⁴ The white wagon master who had escorted the women voiced an opinion that many other whites probably shared, proclaiming that “if we liked the tepees so well, we might stay there, for he was going to hurry off.”¹⁸⁵

Wakefield later blamed her failure to save Chaska on her status as a woman and the commission’s acts of favoritism. “I was angry,” she wrote, “for it seemed to me as if

¹⁷⁹ H. H. Sibley to Sarah Sibley, Aug. 28, 1862, Sibley Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, quoted in Namias, 226, and Derounian-Stodola, 8.

¹⁸⁰ S. R. Riggs to Martha Riggs, 27 September 1862.

¹⁸¹ Wakefield, 114, 116.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

they considered my testimony of no account.”¹⁸⁶ In Wakefield’s defense, her gender may have contributed to the poor reception that her concern for Chaska’s safety received. As Glenda Riley observes, nineteenth-century Americans saw white women as nervous and weak rather than strong and calm like men.¹⁸⁷ John and Gleason had demonstrated this assumption when they had failed to take seriously Wakefield’s concern about her fateful trip to Redwood. It seemed natural to white Minnesotans that white women like Wakefield might worry unnecessarily or foolishly say the wrong thing. Given those expectations, Wakefield’s loss of composure at Chaska’s arrest would have seemed to her peers to be a sign of feminine weakness rather than mark of passionate resolution. Had a man defended Chaska so valiantly, he might have evoked a different response. Furthermore, Wakefield also betrayed gender expectations when she argued with the white soldiers who had come to protect her. In some ways, Wakefield’s crime was as much about gender as it was about race. Had her pleas for Chaska’s wellbeing come from a different source, the white commission might have found them more tolerable.

But it was Wakefield’s apparent breach of racial allegiance and not gender favoritism that ultimately incriminated both herself and Chaska. She either did not realize or refused to acknowledge the message that her behavior would send to other whites. As June Namias observes, Americans in the mid-nineteenth century had grown increasingly concerned about sexual relationships between Indians and whites.¹⁸⁸ Stories about captives like Eunice Williams who chose not to return to white society suddenly gained new prominence, and novels like James Fenimore Cooper’s Last of the Mohicans

¹⁸⁶ Wakefield, 116.

¹⁸⁷ Riley, 114, 153.

¹⁸⁸ Namias, 97-107.

reminded whites of the tragedy that might befall an interracial union.¹⁸⁹ Westward expansion combined with rising racial ideologies to make nineteenth-century whites keenly aware that sexual encounters with Indians were a real possibility—and for some people, an attractive alternative. Although popular art and literature warned whites of both genders from engaging in interracial sex, ideas about white women’s sexual purity left them with more to lose from these unions. Many former captives wrote about their experience according to culturally-constructed racial categories and publishers selected carefully the narratives that they endorsed; both of these strategies resulted in an explosion of sensational tales assuring readers that Indians were brutal and that white women found them disgusting.¹⁹⁰ Unlike other white women, Wakefield defended her captor, writing letters on his behalf and even threatening the white soldiers who she believed would harm him. Even after arriving safely in Red Wing, Wakefield refused to abandon her campaign to prove Chaska’s innocence. Sibley wrote again to his wife on October 10th, complaining that “Mrs. -----, of whom I wrote you” was disappointed that he would not intervene on behalf of “her Indian *friend*.”¹⁹¹ With all the hysteria surrounding Indian-white sexual relationships, Wakefield was naïve if she believed that her aggressive displays of affection for Chaska would benefit either of them.

On December 26th, 1862, Chaska and thirty-seven other Dakota prisoners hung on the scaffold at Mankato, Minnesota. Back in Shakopee, Wakefield did not know that Chaska had died until two days later, when she opened the Sunday paper to read his name. She realized immediately that the men in charge of the hanging had switched Chaska

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹⁹¹ H. H. Sibley to Sarah Sibley, Oct. 10, quoted in Namias, 226, original emphasis.

with someone else. “The Indian named Chaskadon,” Wakefield decried in her narrative, “that the President ordered to be hanged, killed a pregnant woman and cut out her child, and [the military commission] hung Chaska who was only convicted of being present when Mr. Gleason was killed.”¹⁹² Eight weeks later, Wakefield met with Stephen Riggs, who maintained that Chaska’s death had been a mistake and expressed his regret. Wakefield was unconvinced. “Now I will never believe that all in authority at Mankato had forgotten what Chaska was condemned for,” she wrote in her narrative, “and I am sure, in my own mind, it was done intentionally.”¹⁹³ According to Namias, Wakefield had good reason to doubt Riggs’s claim that Chaska’s death was an accident.¹⁹⁴ It was true that many Dakota men went by the name Chaska, a word meaning “oldest son,” and that whites often had trouble distinguishing between Dakota names. But Riggs knew the Dakota language well and visited almost daily with the prisoners. He, of all people, would have been unlikely to mistake a Dakota man for another—especially when one of the men in question had been the focus of three months of statewide gossip. Furthermore, Namias notes that Riggs gave a list of confessions to a Mankato newspaper in which “Chas kay dan,” the man he supposedly confused with Chaska, claimed to have saved Mrs. Wakefield’s life.¹⁹⁵ Even if Chaska’s name or appearance had at first confused Riggs, such a testimony would have shown him his error.

Wakefield failed as a cultural intermediary because—either out of stubbornness or ignorance—she did not acknowledge the hardening of racial lines that had taken place in her community. Both in captivity and out of it, Wakefield willingly stayed in the cultural

¹⁹² Wakefield, 121.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁹⁴ Namias, 235-236.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

divide, unaware that, like the people in Merrell's American woods, white Minnesotans had begun to see the space between cultures as an inherently unfriendly place.¹⁹⁶ Unlike Riggs, who mediated the Dakota trials simply by translating other people's words and clearly demonstrated his allegiance to white society, Wakefield outspokenly tried to convince other people to accept her attachment to the middle ground. Worse yet, she argued her position so passionately that she caused other whites to suspect a romantic intimacy between her and Chaska. Although before the war many whites living at the Indian agency had moved comfortably on the middle ground, few of them had done so with the eagerness that Wakefield displayed—and in the light of the violence of August and September, Wakefield's blatant culture-crossing appeared even more like betrayal. Because other whites believed she had been unfaithful to her own society, Wakefield could not be an effective intermediary. Her earnest attempts to prove Chaska's innocence came across as the passionate outbursts of a woman in love. In the end, white authorities felt such outrage at what they understood as an Indian's dishonor of a white woman—worse yet, one whose husband was still alive—that they condemned Chaska to death in practice even when they failed to do it legally.

Chaska's execution—whether mistaken or intentional—sent a powerful message to Indians and whites alike that such intimate intercultural relationships were unacceptable. While Chaska and Wakefield found the woods a place where they could act out, if not enjoy, physical and sexual intimacy, the white community refused to countenance such contacts. White female purity was not negotiable, and one outcome of their liaison, whatever its extent, was white Minnesotans' insistence that a clear boundary

¹⁹⁶ Merrell, 27.

be drawn between Indian-white relations. Like the mobs who lynched black men in the post-Civil War South, the military authorities who hanged Chaska aimed to impress upon other Minnesotans the racial expectations that governed their community and to erase those who strayed from that system.¹⁹⁷ Even white Minnesotans' behavior after the execution resembled white southerners' response to lynching—authorities sent the bodies of all thirty-eight prisoners to doctors for dissection, and George Gleason's family received one of Chaska's braids as a "memento" of his death.¹⁹⁸ Wakefield's affection for Chaska threatened white Minnesotans because, as Martha Hodes claims about liaisons between white women and black men in the South, it made whites and Indians appear equal; it dispelled the notion that white men could control their wives; and, most importantly, it blurred racial categories that had previously seemed clear.¹⁹⁹ By executing Chaska in spite of Wakefield's testimony, white Minnesotans not only removed the threat of their specific union, they also warned other white women against befriending Indian men. This definition of racial boundaries was particularly important in light of the changing nature of the Minnesota frontier. Whether or not whites would have found such intimacy acceptable on the middle ground, they certainly did not welcome it in the woods.

Chaska's death left Wakefield alone in the cultural divide. Up until that time, she had persistently argued on his behalf, angering other whites at her refusal to abide by their racial expectations. But Chaska's execution seems to have accomplished its goal of silencing her unwanted behavior. Finally heeding other whites' warning, Wakefield tried to step back toward her own side of the woods, but she soon discovered that white people

¹⁹⁷ Hodes, 207.

¹⁹⁸ Derounian-Stodola, 11.

¹⁹⁹ Hodes, 207.

no longer welcomed her. She began correspondence with Stephen Riggs in April, 1863, under the pretense of obtaining information about Chaska's death for use in her narrative, but her letters soon grew to include requests for advice on other issues. On April 9th, Wakefield complained of the exclusion she felt from white society on account of her relationship with Chaska. "Many persons say I am a 'Mono Maniac'," she wrote, "perhaps I am let those who judge me be placed in a situation similar to mine and I think they would change their opinion. . . . I have not one Friend to consult with or to go too [sic] now I am in trouble: they have all vanished like 'dew before the Sun.'"²⁰⁰ Wakefield felt so isolated that she considered leaving Minnesota with the Dakotas, whom white officials were planning to send to the Dakota Territory the following month. "If I can procure a situation of some kind to accompany the Indians," she informed Riggs, "I care not for any remuneration all I wish is to make myself useful: I need employment so I will not have as much time to think as I now have."²⁰¹

Wakefield's family was little help during her time of trial. On April 25th, she confessed to Riggs, "My Husband blames me very much for my talking so at Camp Release and does not have the pity for me that he would have otherwise. He says I have brought my trouble upon myself and now I must bear it."²⁰² It is understandable that John would have had difficulty seeing the situation from Sarah's point of view. On one hand, as Sarah wrote to Riggs, John could not understand the gratitude that she, a woman and a mother, felt toward a man who saved both her children's life and her own honor. More than that, however, John likely resented the ridicule from his neighbors that Sarah's

²⁰⁰ Derounian-Stodola, 19.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰² Ibid., 21.

supposed affair had surely exposed him to. Just as whites in the antebellum South often overlooked illicit liaisons between white women and black men because it demonstrated the flaws of their gendered and racial systems, John probably worried that Sarah's apparent indiscretion undermined his claims to manly respectability.²⁰³ Interestingly, John himself considered moving west with the Dakotas to offer his medical services.²⁰⁴ Sarah worried that, if John left Minnesota without her, she would be even more alone, "shut out from the world from the Church (for I have not dared to go lately) and I suppose from Heaven."²⁰⁵ Nor did moving east appear to Wakefield to be an option, because "my relatives are all in the East and I cannot go there at present."²⁰⁶ Despite the impossibility of these other options, she bemoaned, "To stay here is like being buried alive."²⁰⁷

The final strategy that Wakefield employed to remove herself from the woods was to retell her story—"a *true* statement" that would convince whites that she had behaved more honorably than they had assumed.²⁰⁸ Over the course of 1863 she worked on her narrative, originally claiming that she intended to publish it in her home state, Rhode Island, but ultimately choosing to use a Shakopee press.²⁰⁹ In the preface to her work, Wakefield listed various reasons for writing her story, claiming that she intended it primarily "for the especial benefit of my children as they were so young at the time they were in captivity."²¹⁰ As literary scholar Derounian-Stodola observes, however,

²⁰³ Hodes, 6-7.

²⁰⁴ Derounian-Stodola, 21.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰⁸ Wakefield, 53, original emphasis.

²⁰⁹ Derounian-Stodola, 19.

²¹⁰ Wakefield, 53.

Wakefield's constant appeals to the general public in her narrative suggest that she offered this first motive mainly to satisfy nineteenth-century gender expectations that relegated women to the private sphere.²¹¹ Instead, Wakefield appears to have been particularly concerned with what she lists as her third reason for writing: "To vindicate myself, as I have been grievously abused by many, who are ignorant of the particulars of my captivity and release by the Indians."²¹²

June Namias has analyzed some of the methods that Wakefield used in her narrative to try to clear her name. First, recognizing that her cooperation with her Indian captors had appeared indecent, Wakefield framed her behavior in terms of motherly duty.²¹³ She acknowledged that she had done things that seemed to be signs that she loved Indians, but claimed that her real motive had been to protect her children. When, for example, she wrote that she had considered killing her daughter Nellie instead of allowing a Dakota woman to hold her for ransom, Wakefield appealed to female readers' sentiments by begging them to imagine what they themselves would have done in her situation.²¹⁴ She later wrote of a time that she and her children had dressed like Dakotas, war paint and all, insisting that she had submitted to such treatment only because it disguised them from the bad Indians who she believed wanted to kill them.²¹⁵ Wakefield often remarked about her love for her children, her fears for their safety, and the sacrifices she was willing to make for their benefit. In doing so, she encouraged readers to re-evaluate her behavior. If motherhood had motivated her, other whites would see

²¹¹ Derounian-Stodola, 8.

²¹² Wakefield, 53.

²¹³ Namias, 242.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 242; Wakefield, 18.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 242; Wakefield, 22.

Wakefield's friendship with Indians was an affirmation rather than a rejection of her white womanhood.

Second, Wakefield wrote that her friendships with Chaska and his family had been demonstrations of her moral conscience. As Namias observes, Wakefield made her behavior appear to stem from the Christian command: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."²¹⁶ According to Wakefield, Chaska and his family had protected her and her children, so it seemed only natural for her to want to return the favor. "I loved not the man," she insisted to readers regarding her relationship with Chaska, "but his kindly acts. . . . I should have done the same for the blackest negro that Africa ever produced."²¹⁷ She wrote that she prayed often in captivity, and credited her ultimate safety to her Christian faith. "Had not God raised me up a protector among the heathen?" she remarked at one point, "Have I not reason too [sic] bless His name, and thank the man and his family for all their goodness towards me and mine?"²¹⁸ But Wakefield's letters to Stephen Riggs suggest that her claims that Christian conscience motivated her to be kind to Chaska were more pointed than Namias has observed. Wakefield's comments to Riggs that white Christian churches had shut their doors to her, and in particular that one Episcopal minister "heard the vile reports in circulation about me and did not consider me righteous enough to be visited . . . by him [to discuss the possibility of my baptism]" suggest that she intended her defense of her Christian faith to improve her own reputation and not just encourage white Minnesotans to pity Chaska.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Namias, 243.

²¹⁷ Wakefield, 123.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²¹⁹ Derounian-Stodola, 21, footnote 7, pg. 23.

Third, Wakefield attempted to discredit white Minnesotans' trust of the military authorities and captives who she believed were responsible for both her and Chaska's ruin. Namias once again analyzes Wakefield's discussion of both of these groups, but she interprets her argument with less cynicism than perhaps is due. Regarding Wakefield's treatment of the U.S. government Namias states, "perhaps Wakefield's way of dealing with her grief and guilt was to transpose her personal story into a political one. Unlike the usual captivity narrative, Indian action and damage done have *causes* other than God's or the Devil's work or savagery or malevolence."²²⁰ About Wakefield's censure of other captives she notes that Wakefield believed their primary fault was that "when H.H. Sibley arrived at Camp Release with the Minnesota military forces, many women changed their story."²²¹ And to an extent, these claims are true.

But there was more to Wakefield's story. While she did offer a political message by explaining the role that late annuity payments and traders' unfairness played in provoking Dakota aggression—causes of the war that even seemingly more anti-Indian writers like Charles Bryant acknowledged—Wakefield more often used these stories to criticize specific people who she felt had wronged her.²²² For example, Wakefield claimed that Indian Agent Thomas Galbraith bore primary responsibility for the outbreak because he provoked the Mdewakantons anger when he refused to have a council with them or give them provisions when their annuity payments were late.²²³ This seemingly dispassionate criticism was actually more personal for Wakefield, who surely remembered that two years earlier Galbraith had taken John's side when news of the

²²⁰ Namias, 243.

²²¹ Ibid., 2243-244.

²²² Wakefield's discussion of causes of the war in Wakefield, 63-65.

²²³ Ibid., 64-65.

Wakefields' domestic dispute reached the Saint Peter newspaper. Wakefield similarly censured Henry Sibley and Hiram Grant, two men who she believed were responsible for Chaska's execution and the ruin of her reputation, claiming that the Indians believed that Sibley was a coward and that Grant had lied to her about Chaska's sentence.²²⁴ Even Wakefield's description of white soldiers in general appeared negative. Regarding her first nights at Camp Release she wrote, "I was a vast deal more comfortable with the Indians in every respect than I was during my stay in the soldiers camp, and was treated more respectfully by those savages than I was by [the soldiers] in camp. . . . We had to cook our own food, exposed to the gaze of several hundred ignorant men, that would surround our fires as soon as we commenced cooking, so we could not breathe for want of air."²²⁵

Wakefield's claim that other white women had lied about Indians' treatment of them seems to have been similarly deliberate. These other captives, after all, were the very people who had started the rumors about the marriage between Wakefield and Chaska, rumors that by the time she published her narrative had left her virtually friendless. If Wakefield could prove that the white women who gossiped about her enjoyed kindness from Indians just as she had, their account of her behavior would not appear as incriminating. "I do not know of but two females that were abused by the Indians," she insisted. "I often asked prisoners when we met . . . but they all said they were well treated, that I saw."²²⁶ Furthermore, if Wakefield could prove that other captives had changed their own stories simply to impress the soldiers at camp, she would

²²⁴ Ibid., 102-108, 114, 118, 124.

²²⁵ Ibid., 112.

²²⁶ Ibid., 117.

have more hope of convincing readers that these women had also fabricated the stories that they told about her. Wakefield wrote in her narrative that “of all the places for gossip I ever was in, that Indian camp was the worst.”²²⁷ Although she claimed that “many of the white prisoners were roving from morning until night, and would often wish me to accompany them,” she remarked that “I thought I was better off staying [in Chaska’s teepee] attending to my children than roving around gossiping” particularly because stories tended to be “exaggerated and misconstrued.”²²⁸

But there was no way for Wakefield to deny her friendship with Chaska and his family. Although she could attempt to justify her behavior and slander those who she believed had misconstrued it, even Wakefield herself acknowledged the abundant evidence that she and Chaska had shared a special bond. In order to write her way back to the white side of the woods, she had to address why she, a married white woman, had trusted an Indian man so completely. Moreover, she had to prove Chaska’s worthiness of her affection while still dispelling the myth that she loved Indians. It is this gloomy portion of Wakefield’s narrative that other scholars have overlooked. Wakefield wrote about both Chaska and other Indians in a way that confirmed common racial assumptions rather than denying them. In order to make her friendship with Chaska acceptable by white standards, she wrote about him as if he were a white man—more of a white man, in fact, than the Anglo males in her story, including her husband, John. But Wakefield claimed that Chaska’s ability to appear, in her terms, manly and civilized was thanks not to inherent similarities between Indians and whites but to the hard work of the

²²⁷ Wakefield, 83.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

missionaries and God's faithfulness to her.²²⁹ Furthermore, Wakefield's portrayal of other Indians was more negative than her treatment of Chaska. In order to show that she believed that Chaska's manliness was unique, Wakefield described most Dakotas in a way that differed little from the anti-Indian sentiment expressed by her contemporaries.²³⁰ In order to save her own reputation and bring herself out of the woods, Wakefield either denied or forgot her earlier respect for the people on the other side.

Wakefield described the Dakotas with dualistic imagery that Americans and Europeans had used since the seventeenth century. Many nineteenth-century whites, like the generations before them, believed there were two types of Indians: good Indians, who were simple, proud, independent, brave, and enjoyed a special connection to nature and primitive life; and bad Indians, who they believed were sexually promiscuous, prone to violence, animalistic, lazy, and dirty.²³¹ Namias correctly observes that Wakefield divided the Dakotas into these categories based on an early- and mid-nineteenth century environmentalist interpretation of difference.²³² According to Wakefield's narrative, some Indians, like Chaska, were good because the missionaries had made them so through Christianization and other "civilizing" influences. Most Indians remained bad, however, because they did not accept or were not exposed to the missionaries' good work. Wakefield also made use of another category of bad Indian which Robert Berkhofer describes in White Man's Indian. This other trope, which emerged in the nineteenth century, claimed that some Indians were bad not because they lacked white society but

²²⁹ Ibid., 86.

²³⁰ See, for example, Bryant and McConkey.

²³¹ Robert Berkhofer, Jr., The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 11-20, 28.

²³² Namias, 241.

because exposure to it in the forms of alcohol and poverty had negatively affected their character.²³³ Good, bad, and degraded, the Indians in Wakefield's story rarely strayed from the assumptions readers would have had about them.

Wakefield wrote about most of the Dakotas as bad Indians. One characteristic that she seemed to highlight the most was what she described as their wild appearance. From the first page of Wakefield's narrative she assured readers that the way Indians looked disgusted her. She claimed that on the day she moved from Shakopee to Indian Country, she disembarked the steamship to see "six hundred filthy, nasty, greasy Indians" and realized just how far from civilization she was.²³⁴ She also claimed that their attire—or lack thereof—appalled her. Three days into Wakefield's captivity, she traveled past a large group of Dakotas who were preparing to attack Fort Ridgely. She described the "grand but savage sight" in the following way: "They were either over dressed *or else not dressed at all*; their horses were covered with ribbons, bells, or feathers, all jingling, tinkling, as we rode along, the Indians singing their war songs. . . . Many of the men were entirely naked with the exception of their breech cloth, their bodies painted and ridiculously ornamented."²³⁵ She later scoffed at what she remembered as Indians' misuse of white objects, declaring that "they looked more like a troop of monkeys than anything human."²³⁶

Wakefield also described Indians as violently impulsive. She wrote that even before the Dakota Conflict began, the Dakotas would periodically come to Yellow

²³³ Berkhofer, 28-31.

²³⁴ Wakefield, 55.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

Medicine to beg for food or “make mischief.”²³⁷ These stories all followed the same pattern: the Indians’ initial supplication would instantly turn to uncontrolled violence, which would just as easily disappear when they received what they wanted. Put simply, Wakefield wrote about Indians as if they were misbehaving children. She claimed that when Agent Thomas Galbraith told visiting Dakotas that he had no food to offer them because government provisions were late, their response was akin to a child’s temper tantrum: “They got very saucy, kept firing their guns up in the air, and beating against the doors.”²³⁸ At that moment two wagons full of flour arrived and Galbraith offered them to his guests. The Indians divided it up and, like hungry children, were at once “contented.”²³⁹ Wakefield described what she saw as Indians’ irrational tendency toward violence in the following way: “That is the only way the wild Indian can be kept quiet, by just filling them with food; for if before eating they feel like fighting, they eat so ravenously that they have to sleep, and then forget all during their slumbers.”²⁴⁰

The close contact with Indians that Wakefield experienced in captivity allowed her to write about other behaviors which she claimed were savage. One was Indians’ apparent cowardliness. Almost daily, Wakefield found herself hiding under a wagon, inside a haystack, or among piles of buffalo hides, escaping a villain who turned out to be nothing more than a product of Indian gossip. “The squaws would get frightened,” she explained, “and off we would go; when soon they would hear different stories and we would rest awhile. . . . [They] were very cowardly, and I was needlessly frightened many

²³⁷ Ibid., 59.

²³⁸ Ibid., 60.

²³⁹ Wakefield, 60.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

times by them.”²⁴¹ Wakefield also wrote that the Indian women were cruelly vengeful. Chaska’s half-sister Winona, for example, stole Wakefield’s clothes and would wear them herself or let her children play with them in the dirt. According to Wakefield, Winona also intentionally scared her when Chaska was absent. One time, while Wakefield was hiding from some unknown killer, she asked Winona how she would die. According to Wakefield, Winona offered her no comforting words, but instead predicted that she would be stabbed, “pointing near her heart.”²⁴²

Wakefield sometimes wrote about the supposedly degraded nature of some Dakotas. According to her account, white traders were partially to blame for showing Indians the vices of white society but not its virtues. “All the evil habits the Indian has acquired may be laid to the traders,” Wakefield wrote, “[They] took their squaws for wives, and would raise several children by them, and then after living with them a number of years would turn them off. It was the Traders who first taught them to swear, for in the Indian language there are no oaths against our God or theirs.”²⁴³ Furthermore, she claimed that traders had awakened what she saw as Indians’ savage desire for revenge by selling them goods on credit and then demanding more than their share at the time of payment.²⁴⁴ Wakefield listed alcohol as another factor that increased Indians’ naturally wild tendencies. The primary villain in her narrative, Winona’s husband Hapa, was always drunk. She claimed that Hapa had killed Gleason because, in Chaska’s words, he had “too much whiskey.”²⁴⁵ Later, when Hapa entered Chaska’s teepee and demanded

²⁴¹ Ibid., 71.

²⁴² Ibid., 75-77.

²⁴³ Ibid., 61

²⁴⁴ Wakefield, 61

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 67

Wakefield as a wife, she wrote that she believed he would kill her, because “a drunken Indian knows not what he is doing.”²⁴⁶

Less frequently Wakefield wrote about Indians’ good qualities. Although she still used animalistic and childlike images to describe the Sissetons who lived near her at Yellow Medicine, Wakefield’s description of them matched the image of good Indians instead of bad ones. “These wild men [roamed] in pursuit of game,” she wrote, “while their wives and children bathed in the stream. From the top of the bluff they looked like babes.”²⁴⁷ She wrote that another group of Indians was good because they had converted to Christianity and a white lifestyle.²⁴⁸ But, true to her nineteenth-century environmentalist view of gentility and race, Wakefield wrote that Indian converts could lose their good behavior just as quickly as they had learned it. Paul, a Dakota Christian who lived on a farm at Riggs’s Hazelwood mission, proved in Wakefield’s narrative to be such a character. Wakefield claimed that she at first did not recognize Paul him when she saw him during her captivity because, unlike the white attire he had worn at the agency, he was “disguised in his Indian costume.”²⁴⁹ This change of clothing seemed to Wakefield to signify a change of nature as well. Paul offered to watch Wakefield’s son James for a few days, and tried to persuade Wakefield to accompany him. According to Wakefield, she asked Chaska for advice and soon learned that Paul “wanted me as a wife”—meaning that he wanted to have sex with her—and that he “had been for several days trying to get a white woman.”²⁵⁰ Wakefield wrote that over the days that followed,

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 84

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 58

²⁴⁸ Namias, 241

²⁴⁹ Wakefield, 89

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 90

Paul continued to pester her to be his wife. By Wakefield's account, even civilized Indians became dangerous away from the influence of the missionaries.

Chaska and his family were the only Indians in Wakefield's narrative to remain good from start to finish. According to Wakefield, Chaska, his mother, and his grandfather were clean, modest people.²⁵¹ They were farmers. Wakefield viewed Chaska as her protector. "He knew there was a God," she asserted, "and he had learned right from wrong."²⁵² Wakefield wrote scene after scene about Chaska saving her from death or moral ruin, either by offering her advice or physically intervening on her behalf. Wakefield claimed that when she asked Chaska a second time if she should leave his teepee to go stay with Paul, Chaska's response was the epitome of morality and respect: "He said [to go] if I wished to; he did not care; he intended keeping me so as to give me up to my husband."²⁵³ At times, Wakefield even wrote about Chaska as if he were white and not Indian. She claimed that when another Dakota man threatened to "shoot all the white women in our camp," Chaska had said, "I wish I could kill all the Indians" as if he were not one of them.²⁵⁴ Even at Camp Release when Chaska began to suspect that white men would kill him, he was, by Wakefield's account, the picture of bravery. According to her narrative, she tried to persuade Chaska to escape, but he responded, "No; I am not a coward, I am not afraid to die."²⁵⁵

Yet even in her glowing description of Chaska, Wakefield seemed keenly aware of the way other whites would interpret her message. Despite the affection she felt for

²⁵¹ Ibid., 113

²⁵² Ibid., 69

²⁵³ Ibid., 96

²⁵⁴ Wakefield, 82

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 114

Chaska and the bravery she showed by publicly defending him at Camp Release, Wakefield sometimes belittled Chaska's kindness in her narrative. She gave God and the missionaries the primary credit for Chaska's behavior. "Little did I think while I sat there that my life and my children's would so soon be in danger," Wakefield wrote of her experience at Samuel Hindman's mission church the Sunday before the August attacks, "and that our deliverer would be one of those wild men that were listening with eager attention to God's word."²⁵⁶ Later, she followed praise of Chaska with the exclamation, "Had not God raised me up a protector among the heathen?"²⁵⁷ In her prologue, Wakefield even appeared uncertain that Chaska's reasons for protecting her had been pure. She qualified her description of him as a "Friendly or Christian Indian" with the aside, "whether such from policy or other motives, time will determine."²⁵⁸ Wakefield seemed intent on convincing her readers that Chaska's behavior had, at one time, seemed white to her—he had, after all, displayed all the trappings of white civilization and bravely protected both her life and her honor—but it seems clear that her allegiance lay with the living and not the dead. To show that Chaska acted "white" was necessary in order for Wakefield to defend herself; to say anything more radical about Chaska's character or the nature of race would only have alienated the white readers whom Wakefield was trying to court. Even though she could "respect any or all that might befriend me," Wakefield concluded, "I could never love a savage."²⁵⁹

It is unclear how conscious Wakefield was of the racial categories that her narrative followed. She wrote about most Dakotas using images that nineteenth-century

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 63

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 77

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 53

²⁵⁹ Wakefield, 116

readers would have recognized as bad Indians—naked, impulsive, childlike, cowardly, vengeful, and degraded. The few Indians in Wakefield’s narrative who did appear good either seemed, like the Sissetons bathing in the stream, to be an inhuman part of the natural environment, or they apparently owed their goodness to white influence. It is possible that by late 1863 Wakefield actually believed that these tropes were accurate, but it seems equally likely that—practical woman that she was—she intentionally manipulated racial categories to prove her allegiance to white society. Either interpretation makes for a tragic story. Wakefield had, by her own account, endured a hard life. By befriending various groups of Dakotas in Shakopee, Yellow Medicine, and Little Crow’s camp, she had created an identity and community that gave her the affection and security that she felt her previous communities had denied her. But these bonds could not withstand the power of frontier insecurities. In the end, Wakefield was no “Captive as Conscience.” Instead, her captivity in Little Crow’s camp gave way to an equally powerful, though less overt, form of imprisonment. In attempting to gain admittance to the white side of the woods, Wakefield became captive to the notions of inherent racial difference that her friendships with the Dakotas had seemed to refute.

CONCLUSION

The few records that survive from the remaining years of Sarah Wakefield's life do not show whether her narrative succeeded in taking her out of the woods. One detail, however, implies that it did not. Sources suggest that John Wakefield's reputation—and probably Sarah's along with it—sharply declined in the decade that followed the US-Dakota Conflict. By the time he died of an opium overdose in February, 1874, John's smoking and drinking habits had driven his once prosperous family into debts so large that they forced Sarah to bury him in an unmarked grave.²⁶⁰ Probate records show that John passed the remaining years of his life lavishly, stopping at two or three saloons daily to buy, as June Namias words it, “several beers, a whiskey or two, and often a can of oysters.”²⁶¹ His grocery tab included these items along with “tobacco, whiskey . . . sardines, cheese, crackers, ‘treats,’ candy,” and most of all, pharmaceuticals.²⁶² Namias speculates that John Wakefield's outstanding bill for two hundred dollars worth of drugs could be a sign that his death was intentional, stating that such a purchase was “perhaps a natural expense for a doctor, perhaps not.”²⁶³ And although the Saint Paul newspaper implied that the death was an accident, it seems that John, a doctor for almost thirty years, would have known the proper amount of medicine to take. The idea that John committed suicide also seems plausible in light of the situation surrounding his death—he supposedly went to bed and told Sarah to check on him at a specific time, then he died almost as soon as she arrived.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Namias, 249

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 249

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 249

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 249

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 248

John left his wife to negotiate his many outstanding debts. It is possible that, as Namias mentions, creditors' eager descent on Wakefield's estate was a sign that some white Minnesotans still held grudges against her for her behavior in captivity.²⁶⁵ Such a claim, however, is merely speculative, and other white Minnesotans' opinion of Wakefield at that time is hard to tell. After selling off their estate, the family moved to a small residence outside of Saint Paul, where Wakefield, who did not remarry, lived until her death twenty years later. Wakefield's obituary, which Namias quotes in White Captives, mentioned that Wakefield was a "former Sioux captive" but stated no more about her tumultuous past.²⁶⁶ Yet whether white Minnesotans continued to scorn Wakefield for her relationship with Chaska or whether they simply erased it from their minds as white authorities had done with the Dakotas whom they had sent west, the result was the same. Chaska's death and Wakefield's ultimate acceptance of racial categories had solidified the rigid separation that existed between Indians and whites.

* * *

Wakefield's publication of Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees and her experiences over the years that preceded it illustrate one woman's attempt to mediate her own frontier. As such, these events speak to larger issues about the nature of cross-cultural communication and the people who facilitate such contacts. The system of interaction between whites and Indians in nineteenth-century Minnesota confirms both the similarities and the differences between Richard White's middle ground and James Merrell's American woods. Before the US-Dakota Conflict, the frontier was, as Wakefield recognized, a somewhat inviting place. When she attended Stephen Riggs's

²⁶⁵ Namias, 250-251

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 252

mission church near Yellow Medicine, rode unaccompanied over the countryside, and passed a sacred pipe in the Sisseton village, Wakefield felt that she resided on a middle ground that, while belonging to neither Indians nor whites, was welcoming to both. Once violence erupted, however, the frontier appeared to be a much darker place. Whites and Indians still communicated with each other through the dense forest that they believed divided them, but they made their allegiances more obvious. The few people who, like Riggs, still served as cultural intermediaries strove to maintain as disinterested an air as possible. Wakefield did not recognize this shift, and her ignorance contributed to her failure to save Chaska. But even if Wakefield had noticed the changes occurring in Minnesota more quickly, she would likely have been an unsuccessful intermediary. In reality, Wakefield had laid the foundation for her and Chaska's destruction before the transition from middle ground to woods ever took place. Wakefield's eager embrace of Indians would have surpassed the expectations for intercultural communication on either type of divide. Appearances can be deceiving, and the Minnesota frontier was never as friendly as Wakefield had believed it to be.

This is also a story about freedom and captivity. Ironically, Wakefield seemed to feel most free when she was a prisoner in Little Crow's camp. Chaska and his family included Wakefield in their day-to-day activities in a way that she seemed to enjoy far more than her interactions with the white community. Although her arrival at Camp Release technically made her free, it was only after Chaska died and left Wakefield alone in the cultural divide that she expressed feeling captive. Finally realizing that the middle ground had changed, and that she was the only person remaining on it, Wakefield also discovered that there was more to hinder her return from the woods than just the trees.

Other whites distrusted Wakefield's attraction to the cultural divide, as symbolized by her public affection for Chaska, and they were reluctant to welcome her back to their own side. Utterly alone, Wakefield made one final attempt to find community using the only method left to her: she put pen to paper and tried to write herself out of the woods. But in order to completely liberate herself, Wakefield had to demonstrate, once and for all, that she had relied on Chaska's protection in spite of his Indianness and not because of it. Despite her earlier intimacy with and reliance on her Dakota friends, Wakefield claimed that Indians were bad and that she had not—in fact, could not—love Chaska, who in her words was a “savage.”²⁶⁷ By abiding by racial categories in her narrative, Wakefield hoped to assure white readers that, like them, she preferred whites to Indians. Yet this, too, was a type of captivity.

Wakefield's narrative demonstrates the agency one woman showed as she attempted to make a life for herself in the West. Feeling that her earlier life had disappointed her, she set out to create her own reality. On the other hand, Wakefield's story also shows the limits that cultural and racial divisions imposed on the choices that she made. The flexible way that Wakefield understood frontier relationships, her pragmatic behavior in captivity, and her shrewd manipulation of the written word offered chances to alter her community and identity in profound ways. But her attempts to take control of her own life were ultimately no match for white Minnesotans' insistence that they were uncompromisingly different from Indians and their refusal to accept Wakefield when she would not agree. Wakefield treated the Dakotas with kindness not because she was exceptionally moral but because they welcomed her when her own community

²⁶⁷ Wakefield, 65

would not. When this seeming act of conscience further alienated her from white society, her allegiance once again shifted. In the end, Wakefield's quest for community made her a captive—not to Indians, but to the beliefs and behaviors that she believed would bring her closer to the sense of inclusion that she desired. June Namias states that the moral of Wakefield's story is that “women and men across the cultures [need] to do justice, love kindness. This before war.”²⁶⁸ Wakefield's ruin, however, and her ultimate disregard for the principles that Namias applauds, warn that although acting out of conscience is desirable, it often cowers in the face of our need for community.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., editor's introduction, 42

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