

TROUBLING BODIES IN THE FICTION OF WILLA CATHER

Sarah E. Clere

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Approved By:

Joseph M. Flora

Connie C. Eble

Minrose C. Gwin

Fred C. Hobson

Linda Wagner-Martin

ABSTRACT

Sarah E. Clere: Troubling Bodies in the Fiction of Willa Cather
(Under the direction of Joseph M. Flora)

“Troubling Bodies” examines Willa Cather’s use of the human body as a means of foregrounding a range of economic and social concerns. I argue that for Cather the body provides a vehicle through which she explores potentially volatile issues that both the restrictive cultural climate in which she wrote and her own aesthetic sensibilities made it difficult to pursue rhetorically. In locating these issues on and around characters’ mutable bodies, Cather subtly demonstrates a significant engagement with contemporary culture. At the same time, she avoids didactic and discursive rhetoric that might have cluttered her famously smooth prose and overt political stances that could have bound her fiction too closely to contemporary events, rendering it irrelevant and anachronistic to later audiences. Ultimately, Cather’s treatment of the body contributes substantially to her status as a modernist, allowing her to resist enclosure within such potentially limiting frameworks as regionalism or local color. Tracing this idea across an array of novels, I consider Cather’s treatment of bodies in *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours*, *The Professor’s House*, *My Ántonia*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

*For Tom Horan,
my constant collaborator and best friend*

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INTRODUCTION: WHO OWNS WILLA CATHER?

Willa Cather's childhood and young adulthood coincided with middle class Americans' increasing documentation and display of their lives through the medium of photography. From her birth in 1873, a range of studio photographs depict Cather's growth and development. She was fifteen in 1888 when George Eastman's development of the Kodak camera allowed men and women without any knowledge of photography to begin taking pictures. Of the numerous extant photographs of Willa Cather as a young person, a number show her dressing in a manner that appears markedly masculine. This alleged cross-dressing has elicited a substantial degree of critical interest over the past twenty-five years.

Such masculine dress, while it was no doubt somewhat anomalous for Red Cloud, Nebraska, in the 1880s, reflected larger sartorial trends. Sociologist Diana Crane discusses the prevalence of what she terms an "alternative style" of women's clothing in the second part of the nineteenth century and its neglect by historians of fashion: "This style incorporated items from men's clothing, such as ties, men's hats, suit jackets, waistcoats and men's shirts, sometimes singly, sometimes in combination with one another, but always associated with items of fashionable female clothing" (101). It is this "alternative style" of dress that Willa Cather dons. Looking closely at photographs of Cather reveals feminine details amid the overt masculine

signifiers.¹ As a young teen she was photographed in her uncle's Confederate Army cap; however, her jacket has the elaborate frog closures and puffed sleeves typical of a woman's jacket of the period. In a later, often-reproduced portrait from her time at the University of Nebraska, Cather poses with her college friend, the future linguist Louise Pound. Both women, according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, are "stylishly turned out as 'male impersonator'—Eton Boy (Pound) and Dandy (Cather)" (213). Pound wears a cap and Cather wears a homburg, and each wears a jacket with a soft tie, but the jackets again have puffed sleeves and are obviously feminine in design. Elaine Showalter has remarked that "Cather's daring, in her disguise as the short-haired, suspender-wearing 'Billy,' and the tolerance and respect of her classmates were extraordinary" (285). Crane, however, registers the surprising "lack of social ostracism" surrounding the "alternative style" of dress Cather sports, asserting, "It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly in the 1920s, that the suit jacket worn by women acquired lesbian connotations" (106). In a related vein, Julie Abraham has noted the significant number of lesbian cross-dressing narratives from the 1920s, the period in which the construction of modern lesbian identity began, and through which lens Cather is often viewed (184 n .96).

In the nineteenth century, however, masculine dress for women had a different context and implication. Following the theme of the photograph of Cather and Pound, Wolff places Cather's clothing choices within the context of the cross-dressing often done by late-Victorian actresses and male impersonators. Wolff intriguingly asserts that far from being a rebellion against maternal identification and authority as Cather's biographers have suggested, Cather's

¹ Only in photographs of theatrical performances in which she played a male role does Cather appear garbed in actual men's clothing. In these photographs she wears a boys' or men's suit with trousers and without the fashionable puffed sleeves.

self-presentation could have been a playful collaborative effort on the part of mother and daughter: “Cather and her mother loved the professional theater. . . thus when Willa Cather decided to present herself to the public as ‘William Cather M.D.’ both mother and daughter would have known that this presentation echoed the most recent, the most impudent, and most tantalizing and daring theatrical vogue” (204). The admixture of feminine details in Cather’s clothing also matched the attire of vaudeville cross-dressers, who were never intended to fool their audiences completely. In British writer Sarah Waters’s 1998 novel about late-Victorian male impersonators, *Tipping the Velvet*, when a character dons her first suit as preparation for her stage role as a young swell, her landlady thinks the guise is “too real”: “She looks like a boy. Which I know she is supposed to—but, if you follow me, she looks like a *real* boy. Her face and figure and her bearing on her feet. And that ain’t quite the idea now, is it” (118). The “idea” is not a totalizing embrace of masculinity, but a convincing performance that still allows the original gender to be acknowledged. We have no way of knowing whether or not Cather’s contemporaries read her own performance of masculinity as “too real” and became, at certain moments, uncomfortable. My aim in this discussion of Cather’s dress is not to downplay its masculine elements or deny its transgressive aspects, but to illustrate how it did fit—just barely—within the parameters of acceptable dress and behavior in the late nineteenth century.

Although Cather’s embrace of the “alternative style” fit into period fashion paradigms, she vigorously performed masculinity in other ways, cutting her hair extremely short and signing her name William Cather M.D. James Woodress describes an entry she penned in a friend’s autograph album that revealed “slicing toads was her hobby, doing fancy work a real misery, and amputating limbs perfect happiness” (55). As Woodress illustrates Cather was using, not only props such as hats and canes, but rhetoric and behavior to flout conventional ideas of femininity.

According to Wolff, Cather's masculine affect "signified the demand for a 'space of possibility,' a vague and indefinable demand for the time to explore talents, roles, and the potential for power without being prematurely locked into the prison of late-nineteenth-century femininity" (212).

Examining Cather's self-fashioning within late-Victorian women's fashion shows how Cather fits and yet doesn't, providing an allegory for Cather's historically ambivalent status within the field of American literature. Just as her own body comes in and out of fashion and acceptability so do her characters' bodies. As Wolff indicates, from an early age Cather felt the need to carve her own discursive and aesthetic space. Her use of men's clothing and accessories reinforces her late-Victorian upbringing even as it adumbrates the contested space she would occupy as a twentieth-century author.

Ironically, although more recent critics misconstrued Cather's appearance as uncommonly masculine, her fiction was ultimately dismissed by the mid-century academy for being too stereotypically feminine. Cather was popular with contemporary critics so long as she stuck to writing about the American West and strong female characters. *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918) were all well reviewed, with *My Ántonia* eliciting a particularly favorable response. The novel that followed *My Ántonia*, *One of Ours* (1922), proved to be the work that simultaneously cemented Cather's general popularity and financial security and badly damaged her critical reputation. Although readers loved the story of Claude Wheeler, Nebraska farm boy turned World War I doughboy, the literary establishment balked at Cather's refusal to provide what they considered to be a suitably realistic and bleak picture of the war. Critics increasingly described her as "nostalgic" and "sentimental," presaging Granville Hicks's 1933 dismissal of her work "The Case Against Willa Cather," which appeared in the *English Journal* and struck a major blow at her already shaky reputation with young

intellectuals. Deriding Cather for her distance from economic and cultural realities, Hicks condemned her fiction from the 1920s forward as failing in “the expression of what is central and fundamental in her own age” (708).² His description of Cather as a writer who jettisoned any obligation to reality for “the calm security of her dreams” (710) became for many people the most enduring view of her work. Although in Hicks’s estimation Cather’s alleged escapism proves entirely negative, the qualities he so disdains formed the crux of other critics’ appreciation of her. In an obituary for the *Saturday Review of Literature* penned upon Cather’s death in 1947, Henry Seidel Canby claimed that during the years when her male contemporaries such as Sinclair Lewis dealt with the “troubled sense of American might and magnitude realized but undirected,” Cather was more concerned with conveying the “passionate revelations which conserved the life of the emotions” (24). Canby praises what is “feminine” in Cather’s work and claims that literarily she is “preservative, almost antiquarian” (24). While ostensibly offered as an appreciation of her talent and significance, Canby’s obituary, in the words of François Palleau-Papin and Robert Thacker, “seems to finesse and extend Granville Hicks’s famous 1933 charge against Cather” (xv), indicating that critics of the 1930s and 1940s were primarily in agreement regarding her fiction’s lack of relevance to contemporary social and political issues.

After Cather’s death, succeeding generations of readers kept reading and responding favorably to her books; critical appraisals—when they appeared at all—were markedly less flattering. The influential New Critics in particular had scant use for Cather. Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine’s influential (and still in print) 1954 collection “Short Story Masterpieces” notably fails to include Cather, even though it collects not only formalist darlings Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, but older writers such as Sinclair Lewis, who by his death in 1951

² Hicks does offer Cather a modicum of grudging approbation for *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, which he thinks demonstrate a commitment to literary realism lacking in her later novels (706).

had undergone his own critical diminution. Employing as it did a critical methodology that was insensible, and at times hostile, to political and social content and context, the New Critical dismissal of Cather would have had little to do with her perceived lack of political engagement; in fact, the regional and agrarian themes of *O Pioneers* and *My Ántonia* should have appealed to the earliest proponents of New Critical thinking, the Southern Agrarians, although the novels' depictions of immigrant women as the next generation of successful American farmers might have given them pause.³ Cather's apparent lack of stylistic complexity proved to be the breaking point for post-World War II critics. When technical aspects of her fiction were considered at all, they tended to be condemned, as in the case of David Daiches, who wrote one of the first book-length critical studies of Cather in 1951. James E. Miller's 1958 comment on *My Ántonia*'s narrative structure sums up the attitudes of many critics—even those who liked Cather: "It does seem strange that the one who wanted to unclutter the novel by throwing the furniture out the window should have bungled so badly the structure of one of her most important works" (476). The dearth of significant and lengthy work on Cather during the 1950s and 1960s is particularly revelatory, since those decades were the heyday of college English departments, which enjoyed unprecedented (and since unequaled) popular support and funding, leading to an explosion in critical production. The meager size of the coterie of critics who were interested in Cather provoked James Schroeter to remark dryly in 1967 that she formed a "very small critical backwater" (230). Ordinary readers, however, cheerfully unaware of the vagaries of critical fashion, kept avidly reading Willa Cather, keeping the majority of her novels continually in print.

³ One major intellectual source for the New Criticism was the group known as the Fugitives, whose 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* advocated a movement away from industrialism and migration and into an isolationist agrarian society. Barbara Foley and others have argued convincingly that although they soon abandoned their radical agrarian platform, the influence of the Fugitives permeates the New Criticism of the post-World War II US (Foley 3-5).

At this point it should be clear that Cather forms a very strange critical case. She was never at any point during the influential and canon-forming midcentury years really “in,” as were Faulkner and Hemingway; however, she was never really “out” either, in the manner of female authors such as Zora Neale Hurston or Susan Glaspell. Indeed, in Jackson Bryer’s influential collection *Sixteen Modern American Authors* (1974), Cather is the only female author included. Duke University Press published an earlier version of the collection, *Fifteen Modern American Authors*, in 1969. In addition to Willa Cather, the following authors were included: Sherwood Anderson, Hart Crane, Theodore Dreiser, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, Eugene O’Neil, Ezra Pound, Edward Arlington Robinson, John Steinbeck, Wallace Stevens, and Thomas Wolfe. *Sixteen Modern American Authors* updated versions of the original entries, and added a new entry on William Carlos Williams.

Bryer assembled this compressed version of the twentieth-century canon by writing to a group of 175 English professors and students and asking them to list the ten most significant twentieth-century American writers. As he tabulated the around 130 responses he received, Bryer found that “beyond a ‘hardcore’ of Hemingway, Faulkner, Frost and Fitzgerald, there was considerable disagreement” and realized that the planned volume should include more than ten entries (x). He then selected authorities on these writers to write review essays evaluating the existing scholarship on the selected authors. Bernice Slote, one of Cather’s first and best critics, wrote the entry on Cather, and her pithy summation of the vicissitudes of Cather’s critical fortunes remains apt:

The course of critical attitudes seems extraordinarily perverse in her case: she was first praised for being unlike other writers, for taking a new subject—the immigrant pioneer and the West—and was called in effect the new “American Voice”; she was later condemned for being unlike other writers, for writing not about social movements and the rise of the masses but about history and the rise

of civilizations. She was at first a realist and later an antirealist; at first an explorer into new terrain, then an escapist for leaving the current scene. (39)

As Slote's review essay demonstrates, Cather's place in the academic canon, although frequently questioned and contested, was never in serious jeopardy. When, in the 1970s, feminist critics began to turn their attention to Cather, they could speak of literary *reclamation*, but it would have been absurd to claim a literary *rediscovery* of her.

Over the past thirty years, however, the steady trickle of critical interest in Cather has increased to something of a torrent. The feminist criticism of the 1970s begun by Blanche Gelfant's article "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*" (1971) continued with Ellen Moers's consideration of Cather in *Literary Women* (1976) and culminated in Sharon O'Brien's 1987 biography *Willa Cather: the Emerging Voice*, which offered the first major consideration of Cather as a lesbian writer. 1986 saw the publication of Susan Rosowski's influential full-length critical study *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*.⁴ Two more biographies came out around the time of O'Brien's. In 1987 James Woodress published *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, still the standard critical biography of Cather; British critic Hermione Lee's *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* appeared in 1989. In the 1990s an increasingly heterogeneous range of critics began to work on Cather. Joseph R. Urgo and Guy Reynolds questioned Cather's famed disengagement from political and economic realities, writing books that revealed her as both producing and produced by the political and cultural context of contemporary America. In a more controversial vein, responding to O'Brien, queer theorists began to consider Cather within the history of gay and lesbian literary history. In 1999 Marilee Lindemann's *Willa Cather: Queering America*, the first book-length treatment of Cather's fiction from the standpoint of

⁴ A professor for many years at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Susan Rosowski is credited for playing a crucial role in Cather's reconsideration as an important American writer. She advised and encouraged a range of scholars who worked on Cather and edited three of the first four issues of the biennial journal *Cather Studies*. *The Voyage Perilous* (1986) still stands as one of the few works on Cather that treats every book.

queer theory, appeared. Cather now shows up frequently in multi-author books and monographs dealing with a wide range of literary topics. Regarding the proliferation of diverse critical approaches to her fiction, Elsa Nettels affirms that “the recent criticism shows that Cather is a compelling subject for almost every kind of critic—feminist, queer theorist, new historicist, ecocritic, ethnographer, structuralist, deconstructionist, reader-response critic and psychoanalyst” (7).

The quantity and diversity of literary production Cather elicited during the 1990s slowly began creating its own vexing set of critical and canonical issues, which came to a head in 2000 with the publication of Joan Acocella’s brief monograph *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*. Acocella begins with a thoughtful synthesis of early critical responses to Cather, writing perceptively of the problems created by the often “polarized discussion” of her work: “The more she was senselessly dismissed by the Left, the more she was senselessly exalted by the Right and used as a stick to beat the Left—indeed to beat anything that the Right disliked” (26). As her study of Cather continues, however, it becomes increasingly clear that, for Acocella, Cather begins to function as just such a stick, one with which to punish theoretical approaches that she dislikes, specifically feminist and queer theory. In a largely favorable review of Acocella’s book, James M. Decker notes how apparently ironic it is that “Acocella indeed seems impervious to the ideological implications of her own interpretive strategy” (446). When, in the last portion of her book, she finally gets around to offering her own critical interpretation of Cather, the resulting unoriginal and reductive analysis makes an eloquent case for the proliferation of critical approaches she has spent so much time castigating.

More than perhaps any other phenomenon in Cather criticism, Acocella’s book represents the gulf between the attitude the reading public takes toward the author and her fiction and the

responses of academics and other scholars. A writer for the *New Yorker*, Acocella expanded a provocative 1995 article to create *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*. Her argument against the proliferation of critical methodologies being applied to Cather assumes and validates the kind of static “universality” many readers have enshrined as the most salient characteristic of her fiction. According to Acocella, looking for evidence of either subtext or subconscious in Cather was senseless, since her prose “rose like a cliff wall in the face of the conflict seekers, denying them access, insisting that it really did mean what it said” (43). *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* has six Amazon.com reviews, a remarkable tally for a critical monograph. Five of these reviews are glowingly positive. One praises Acocella for “showing that the Emperor of Academia really has no clothes.” Another cheers wildly at the way she “takes on the Amazons of feminist theory and vanquishes the lot.” Actually, Acocella envisioned her book as feminist in scope. In a 2002 piece in the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*, she asserts, “My book was a feminist book” (75), but many readers seem not to have registered that fact.

In some ways Acocella’s book gauges, not just conflicts surrounding Cather, but the issues many Americans have with academia in general. The accusation that a critic is cannibalizing an author’s work in the service of a particular professional or ideological goal is certainly neither new nor unique to critics who work with Cather. The stakes are higher, however, with her than most other writers, not only because of the volume and enthusiasm of her readership, but because of the strong emotional responses her books often elicit among people of vastly different backgrounds and political ideologies. Unlike many American writers, Cather has an educated and vocal readership apart from the critics who write about her. In their turn, the critics themselves are often as personally invested in her as the members of a book club devoted to her work. Ironically, the attitude of Jonathan Goldberg, who writes about Cather through the

lens of sexuality, when he first encountered Cather's fiction in high school recalls the feelings of her most ardent conservative fan, "It was as if, somehow, the novels were written in a language which I could not myself articulate and yet in which I found myself articulated" (ix). Although the passionate "ownership" of Cather both critics and readers feel can seem problematic, it should not be. Both general readers and academics relish the depth and richness of Cather's work; they merely do so in different ways. As I have learned from my own oscillations between academic researcher and avid member of Cather's reading public, these differing perspectives are not mutually exclusive.

When Cather created her novels, she drew on a grab bag of diverse materials, stitching each piece so finely into her design that the original fabrics become absorbed in the pattern of the whole. A great deal of recent criticism has focused on isolating the individual bits of material and establishing their nature and origins, as well as finding those nearly invisible seams in her writing that often reveal larger issues and concerns. This seeming conflict in views of Cather between the narrowly specific and the grandly universal is really not a conflict at all, but the evidence of Cather's design. You can look at her work broadly and it conveys one thing; study it up close and isolate its component parts and it reveals other ideas.

Long though Cather's critical backstory may be, there is still room for further work on her. One central element of Cather's fiction is her use of bodies, a topic that most critics have strangely neglected. The lack of critical attention paid to bodies and their role in Cather's novels and stories is particularly striking because of Cather's early manipulation of her own physical appearance and the biographical and critical attention her youthful self-presentation has garnered. Critical conversation surrounding Cather's use of the body has been heavily theoretical and focused almost entirely on figurations of sexuality and their relation to Cather's own gender

identity and sexual orientation. Pioneering queer theorists Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick both deal with Cather's figuration of the queer body in particular texts. Butler's reading of Cather in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) responds to Sedgwick's important essay "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others" (1989). Christopher Nealon builds on the critical foundation established by Butler and Sedgwick in the discussion of Cather he includes in *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (2001). Departing from a sustained focus on sexuality, my dissertation *Troubling Bodies in the Fiction of Willa Cather* looks more broadly at Cather's use of the body, examining the ways it creates meaning within the structure of her work and considering it as a forum for exploring the interpolations of multiple markers of identity and differentiation including gender, race, sexuality, economics, and social class.

For a writer like Cather who was skilled at subtlety and indirection, a focus on the body with all its messy realities seems surprising, appearing to counter her spare aesthetic credo, famously articulated in her 1922 essay "The Novel Demeuble." This may partially account for the dearth of critical work considering the topic, and the clustering in the field of queer theory of what significant work exists. In actuality, the body provides an excellent correlative for Cather's restrained aesthetics. As Butler, following Foucault, discusses in the Introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, the body is an extremely unstable and changeable entity in both appearance and function. Environment, exercise, nutrition, accident, disease, pregnancy and simply the progression of time can all substantively alter a person's body to the point of making it unrecognizable. The possibilities for difference and subjectivity the body quietly encloses make it an ideal literary vehicle for a range of different ideas. A sudden change might register abruptly if made rhetorically, but when that alteration is displaced to a character's body, the transition becomes

organic. A representative example of this phenomenon is the character of Blind d'Arnault, whom I discuss in Chapter 4 at greater length. Within the space of a couple of pages, Cather constructs d'Arnault as a light-skinned, submissive nineteenth-century black man and yet a mesmerizing and god-like African presence. The contradictory nature of these two portrayals rarely registers with either critics or readers because Cather encodes them in d'Arnault's shifting physical appearance. Through depicting a character's body Cather is able to foreground ideas in a subtle and wholly credible way, since the changes undergone by the body, even when surprising, always appear believable.

As I began to examine the various ways that Cather uses the body in her fiction, I found myself unexpectedly drawn to those novels of Cather's that I thought I liked least. The five novels I discuss in this dissertation emerge from different points in Cather's career and are set in diverse historical and geographical settings. The project moves chronologically until the last chapter, which is the only one to treat two novels: *My Ántonia* (1918) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). The progression illustrates both the increasing complexity of Cather's usage of the body and the way similar ideas and motifs recur in different contexts. I avoid too much biographical consideration of Cather and in general stay away from extrapolating directly from her life to her fiction. The investment many critics have in who Cather was as a person or author means her biography often enters and colors their arguments. Although such work can be enormously productive it requires archival work that I have not done. I rely on close readings of Cather's fiction, juxtaposing analysis of the work with the cultural surroundings in which it is both set and composed.

Troubling Bodies opens with *The Song of the Lark* (1915), probably Cather's novel that deals most thoroughly with a single character's body. The protagonist, Thea Kronborg, is an

aspiring opera singer, and the novel chronicles her efforts to adapt her body to her chosen vocation. One larger goal of the first chapter is to remedy the almost total lack of critical attention given to the racial dynamics in *The Song of the Lark*. Thea establishes her own identity through experiences with modern Mexican and ancient Puebloan cultures, which are seen critically as wholly positive and unproblematic, unhinged from any historical realities involving Mexicans or American Indians. Thea's experiences represent acts of cultural appropriation that are specific to the early twentieth century. Most criticism of *The Song of the Lark* has been specifically feminist in its approach; in their celebration of Thea as a strong female character, critics have ignored the significance of the privilege she, as a white woman, possesses. By bringing the focus back to Thea's body and examining it as marked by Thea's status as a white person as well as her identity as a woman, I explore the intersections between gender and ethnicity in *The Song of the Lark* and the time period in which it was written.

Following the examination of a female character in the midst of an ultimately successful search for selfhood, I venture into the difficult terrain of the problematic novel that won Cather the Pulitzer Prize. In the 1922 novel *One of Ours* the novel's protagonist, Claude Wheeler, exhibits his own version of gender trouble. Claude affiliates himself with female characters, forming sympathetic relationships with women whose interests he shares. At the same time, he feels alienated from the majority of men in the novel. Claude's attraction to women is not surprising given Cather's location of culture and aesthetics within the female realm. Claude's troubled masculinity is closely related to his inability to embrace the current capitalist economic paradigm. His dislike of contemporary business and farming practices indicates how out-of-step he is with contemporary economic realities, while the close ties between those economic realities and American masculinity emphasize Claude's deficiencies in that area as well. In a crucial

departure from most contemporary depictions of individuals who fail to conform to established gender roles, Cather, instead of depicting Claude as inadequate, indicts the deficiencies of an America that has no place for people like him.

Claude's battle with inhabiting a normative male role culminates in his enlistment in the American Expeditionary Force of World War I and his deployment to France, which forms the topic of Part II of the chapter. His success as a soldier and veneration of France, although frequently interpreted as a glorification of war on Cather's part, in reality provide a sharp critique of the limitations imposed on both men and women within the United States. The description of Claude's time in the military illustrates the cruel paradox that to establish his masculinity and his bodily normalcy, Claude must risk disability and death. I devote more space to *One of Ours* than any other novel both because of its length and the relative lack of critical attention it has received.

I move from the understudied *One of Ours* into a discussion of *The Professor's House* (1925), the Cather novel that over the past fifteen years has garnered the greatest amount of critical attention. In contrast to Claude's bodily struggles, the ephemeral hero of *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland, seems to have no body. Leaving the broad complexities of American industrialization and World War I, Cather concentrates on the claustrophobic lives of Professor Godfrey St. Peter and his family and their memories of Outland, who has played an important role in each of their lives. In her seventh novel, Cather portrays her characters' appearances via an array of very specific physical descriptions. The bodies of the central characters also come under scrutiny secondhand through aesthetic, representative mechanisms such as portraiture and *tableaux vivants*. Strikingly, Cather does not offer a description of the most important character in the novel, the dead young inventor Tom Outland. Outland's bodilessness comes into particular

focus against the excess of description that pervades the rest of *The Professor's House*. At first this emptiness of detail seems like a refreshing change from the novel's cluttered materiality. Ultimately, however, his lack of substance becomes suspicious. Looking at the absence of Outland's body and its effect on the other characters leads to a reconsideration of his status as a mythic hero and an antidote to the perils of modernity.

The fraught relationship of slavery and Southern identity forms the subject of my final chapter, which compares the acclaimed *My Ántonia* (1918) and the often-neglected *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), two novels from very different periods of Cather's authorial career. In this chapter, as in the first chapter treating *The Song of the Lark*, I was able to deal with the issues of race and gender in American literature that formed the subject of my initial, ill-planned dissertation project. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is set in the antebellum South and forms both Cather's most sustained exploration of her Southern background and her most involved analysis of the relations between African Americans and European Americans. *My Ántonia*, set in post-bellum Nebraska might seem an unlikely addition to this chapter; however, Cather's depiction of Jim Burden, a displaced white Southerner and Blind d'Arnault, an African American pianist and another itinerant Southerner, anticipates the issues she will examine at greater length in her final novel. Looking at the confluence of race and Southern identity in these two novels allowed me to explore my own academic interest in Southern literature and culture. As a white Southern woman, I found working with this material gave me a more complete understanding of my own position of relative privilege and the role it plays in my academic work.

After nearly twenty years of reading her novels and stories, I still find Cather endlessly compelling. The range and diversity of her fiction allows a plethora of different critical approaches, as partially cataloged by Deborah Carlin: "Whether viewed as an American icon, a

woman writer, a lesbian, a cosmopolitan Midwesterner, a conservative Republican, a scathing journalist, an antimodernist, or an embittered elegiast, Cather remains an anomaly in American literature and her fiction is particularly hard to place” (6). As *Troubling Bodies in the Fiction of Willa Cather* illustrates, the impossibility of adequately and definitively categorizing Cather extends to her treatment of the body. At times she reflects contemporary viewpoints and preoccupations, as with Thea’s experience with the American Southwest in *The Song of the Lark*. At other times, however, she diverges sharply from accepted theories and ideas. Her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is an anachronistic and enigmatic work that still puzzles critics. Cather’s one constant may be her refusal to write the same novel twice. At the time of her death, she was engaged in writing a voluminous novel about the Avignon papacy of fourteenth-century France. Because Cather left instructions that the manuscript be burned, little is known about it; however, one of the few surviving details indicates that the novel was to treat two children who have been brutally disabled: One has had his tongue cut out, and one has been hanged by his thumbs until his hands are useless (Kates 482-3). One can only speculate that had Cather been able to finish this novel and write others she would have moved even deeper into the body and what it reveals.

VOCATION AND APPROPRIATION IN *THE SONG OF THE LARK*

The Song of the Lark (1915) traces the artistic development of Thea Kronborg from her small town childhood in Colorado to her emergence as a New York opera diva. Dissatisfaction with the currents of modernity causes Thea to identify with non-white people to escape the stultifying conventions of modern America. While home for a summer in Moonstone, she experiences an episode of communion with the town's Mexican community. This event foreshadows the intense bodily connection she feels later in the novel with the long vanished Native Peoples of the Southwestern United States.

Much critical attention has been paid to the role of southwestern Indian ruins in *The Professor's House*; far less space has been devoted to the uses Cather makes of indigenous culture in *The Song of the Lark*. In *The Professor's House* Tom's experiences with Cliff Dweller culture include concrete historical and anthropological qualities that appear to be largely absent from Thea's encounters with Native ruins. Tom excavates and catalogues; Thea has transcendent moments of identification with long-dead Native women. On the surface Thea's response to Panther Canyon appears to be entirely emotional and almost intentionally ahistoric. Yet Thea's sojourn in Panther Canyon is, in reality, heavily grounded in contemporary anti-modern anxiety surrounding gender roles and the appropriation of American Indian culture. By allowing Thea to identify herself so closely with these non-white women, Cather is indulging in a variation of the

practice Philip Deloria, in his book of the same name, terms “playing Indian.” Thea’s identification with the long dead Native women of Panther Canyon allows her to identify herself as an artist without completely abandoning the qualities of domesticity that Cather’s successful female characters invariably possess.

Moonstone, the small railroad town where *The Song of the Lark* begins, does not lend itself to romantic dreams. Although it is located in the middle of the desert just a few miles from the tantalizing multi-colored sand hills that kindle Thea’s childhood imagination, Moonstone lacks the idealized freedom of the American West. Despite its size and relative isolation, it possesses all of the restrictive social stratifications of an older, more established city. The novel’s view of the western United States differs markedly from that of both *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. Thea’s West is not the West of Alexandra Bergson or even Ántonia Shimerda. The role of pioneer is not for Thea; she cannot tame the wild land as Alexandra did because that period in American history is over. She also cannot withdraw into an agrarian, domestic utopia of the type Ántonia has created at the end of *My Ántonia*. As an opera singer, Thea must eventually wind up in an urban center and cannot be encumbered with a large family. With the character of Thea, Cather struggles to depict a female artist who is true to the claims of art, but who also does not wholly reject the domestic bonds of family and community that are so important in Cather’s works. Unlike Claude, in *One of Ours*, another character who feels thwarted by his community of origin, Thea is not in search of a community of like-minded people; rather she is on a voyage of self-discovery.

Thea’s body is at the center of a narrative that charts her growth to adulthood and elaborates on her development as an artist. As the novel begins, Dr. Howard Archie is visiting the Kronborg home because Thea’s mother is in labor with her seventh child. After delivering

Thea's youngest brother, Dr. Archie sees that eleven-year-old Thea is ill with pneumonia in the next room. As he attends to her, Archie notices Thea's body "so neatly and delicately fashioned, so soft, so milky white" (10). Here, Thea's undeveloped body comes into relief against the fact of her mother's recent labor and delivery. The extreme whiteness of Thea's body, dwelt upon by the doctor, will reappear throughout the novel. Archie is clearly irritated that Thea's father calls him to attend to what turns out to be a perfectly normal birth, and has not thought to mention his sick daughter: "The baby would have got into the world; somehow; they always do. But a nice little girl like that—she's worth the whole litter" (8). This novel will not focus on the eagerly-anticipated male infant, whose birth opens the novel, but on his older sister coughing in the next room. According to Susan Rosowski, "The scene announces Cather's concern with double birth: a biological one is an accidental thing and highly overrated, the narrator says, while the far more important 'second self' necessary for creative life is ignored. The book itself is about that second self, its gestation, birth, and passion" (63). Dr. Archie believes Thea is an extraordinary child, and a few of Moonstone's more discerning residents have a similar regard for her. Most important, Thea's mother recognizes and embraces her daughter's exceptional status, understanding that it will probably lead to a life very different from her own domestic existence. From the novel's beginning, Cather portrays Thea as a prototypically romantic figure with a significant destiny that she must work out.

This elevated, romantic conception of Thea presents a number of narrative difficulties. The novel is loosely based on the life of the celebrated opera singer Olive Fremsted; however, it also has clearly autobiographical elements of Cather's own small town Nebraska childhood and rise to vocational maturation. In a narrative experiment, Cather temporarily jettisoned the elegiac voice of *O Pioneers!* and wrote *The Song of the Lark* in the Midwestern vernacular speech that

she grew up hearing. The juxtaposition of the flat Moonstone idiom and the elevated and somewhat inchoate ideas surrounding artistic development can sometimes jar discordantly. In the same way, the tension between the single-minded trajectory Thea as an artist must follow and the bonds of family and community seems imperfectly resolved. Cather wants her artist to be able to synthesize and use all of the elements of her childhood in her art, but runs into difficulties because, in order to survive, Thea must explicitly reject the ties to relatives and neighbors that would impede the upward trajectory of her career. Cather surmounts this obstacle by having Thea make use of people who can demand nothing from her in return.

Thea's decidedly unromantic mother with her brood of children is one of the most sensible and sympathetic characters in the novel. Mrs. Kronborg does not appear to be oppressed or ground down beneath the weight of her domestic routine and seems to welcome each new baby with benevolent fatalism. Thea's somewhat silly father recognizes the worth of his wife's contributions: "With all his flightiness, Peter Kronborg appreciated the matter-of-fact, punctual way in which his wife got her children into the world and along in it. He believed, and he was right to believe, that the Sovereign State of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her" (12). Despite the humor of the previous quotation, childbearing and childrearing are here depicted as not only a natural but a national responsibility. The settling of the western United States is at this juncture rendered as a womanly, domestic project, much as it is in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, the two novels that bookend *The Song of the Lark*.

Relatively early in the novel, this guardedly positive portrayal of domesticity falls apart. Maternal, commonsensical Mrs. Kronborg somehow manages to raise children who as they move closer to adulthood are shown as petty, narrow-minded, and judgmental. Thea stands out in part because her uniqueness contrasts with the ordinariness of her "whole litter" of siblings. By

adolescence she has become even more extraordinary, whereas her siblings have degenerated from mere ordinariness to the category of Thea's "natural enemies" (240). Thea's brothers and sister are on the whole an unpleasant lot, but part of Thea's ire toward them stems from their failure to recognize and defer to her own superior giftedness: "Thea had always taken it for granted that her sister and brothers recognized that she had special abilities, and that they were proud of it. She had done them the honor, she told herself bitterly, to believe that though they had no particular endowments, *they were of her kind*, and not of the Moonstone kind" (240). Thea's assumption that her untalented siblings will acknowledge her own superiority and bow to it, however galling her siblings (and the reader) might find it, illustrates her early awareness of her own heroic position. It also signals the novel's rejection of the significance of the biological ties of kinship, since the people most closely related to Thea prove to be those from whom she is most intrinsically different. Thea's recognition of people who are "*of her kind*," not only bypasses genetic, familial connections, but transgresses categories of ethnicity and social class. This expanded idea of community is fairly radical for the early twentieth-century, and would have seemed extremely subversive in the 1890s when the novel is set.

The shattering of idealized conceptions of both family and community takes place within a western America that lacks any sort of mythic promise. The demise of the frontier undergirds the ambivalent attitude toward the western United States in Cather's third novel. Cather establishes the precise year of *The Song of the Lark*'s action in the second paragraph, which begins, "As the doctor in New England villages is proverbially old, so the doctor in small Colorado towns twenty-five years ago was generally young" (3). Cather follows an offhand reference to Sarah Orne Jewett and New England local color with the information that the year is 1890, the same year the United States Census announced the closure of the frontier. Three years

later at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Frederick Jackson Turner presented his famous address "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner's speech elaborated the frontier's crucial role and established it as irrefutably vanished. This is not the first time Cather has made use of Turner's ideas. In her previous novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), Part I, "The Wild Land," begins "thirty years ago," or in the winter of 1883, just before the closure of the frontier. The second part of the novel, "Neighboring Fields," begins sixteen years later in June of 1900, after the frontier period is over and during the reign of agrarian populism in the Midwest.⁵ The first two parts of *O Pioneers*, "The Wild Land" and "Neighboring Fields," stand in stark opposition to one another and are divided both temporally and thematically by the 1890 census's decree.

As a child in the western United States, Thea Kronborg is captivated by the optimistic project of country-making. Thea's engagement with pioneering is, however, retrospective and vicarious, gained through the stories of others, rather than her own experiences. When Thea is a little girl, she and her father visit a high, remote place near Laramie, Wyoming, "where the wagon-trails of the Forty-niners and the Mormons were still visible" (53). The old rancher who is their guide tells them of "Indians and buffalo, thirst and slaughter, wanderings in snowstorms, and lonely graves in the desert" (54). He also remembers the first telegraph message to cross the Missouri River—"Westward the course of Empire takes its way"—and recounts that, as the message was transmitted, all of the men in the telegraph office removed their hats (55). Thea associates this first telegraph message with the remains of the great wagon trails: "Thea remembered that message when she sighted down the wagon tracks toward the blue mountains . .

⁵ In Part 2 of *O Pioneers* Alexandra's brother Lou asks Karl Linstrum about William Jennings Bryan and boasts, "We gave folks a scare in ninety-six, all right, and we're fixing another to hand them" (37). The "scare" Lou and other populists are "fixing" is the 1900 presidential election, which will take place that fall. This (rare for Cather) concrete political detail further establishes the novel's timeframe.

. The spirit of human courage seemed to live up there with the eagles.” Eric Aronoff emphasizes this association of imperial movement with the eagle, and connects it to the point later in the novel where Thea sees eagles in Panther Canyon and feels a similar sense of exhilaration at human potential (15). The next sentence in *The Song of the Lark* throws Thea’s uncomplicated faith in empire into question: “For long after, when she was moved by a Fourth-of-July oration, or a band, or a circus parade, she was apt to remember that windy ridge” (55). Cather’s association of this experience with Fourth of July orations, bands, and circus parades, all institutions of the small town life Thea eventually grows to loathe, undercuts such a joyous belief in westward expansionism, relegating it at best to a childhood preoccupation and at worst an example of small town boosterism and spectacle.

Thea experiences the authentic West as a tourist instead of an actual participant; the stories she hears and the significant places she visits, rather than her own experiences, frame her knowledge of the region’s settlement. The “wagon trails of the Forty-niners and the Mormons” may still be seen; however, they are gradually fading back into the landscape, superseded by the railroad. Thea’s trip with her father occurs before the novel’s action begins and is narrated retrospectively—it is thus even more distanced, a memory of a memory. The “old rancher” who enthralls Thea with his tales gives her an iron ox-shoe as a “keepsake” (55). Cather here represents frontier history contained within an artifact, reminiscent of the souvenirs that tourists to the western United States purchased. The keepsake horseshoe is also akin to the American Indian artifacts that became one of the region’s most sought-after commercial commodities, a phenomenon that Cather deals with at length in *The Professor’s House* (1925).

Western tourism in the 1890s was inextricably bound up in the railroad, which increasingly brought eastern visitors into the West.⁶ An expanded network of tracks and swifter, more comfortable passenger trains made the western United States a desirable vacation spot for middle class Americans. *The Song of the Lark* refers to the burgeoning tourism industry obliquely in the form of a ballad about a Harvey House waitress named Katie Casey sung by a railroad employee to Thea and her mother. The song's refrain runs: "Oh, who would think that Katie Casey owned the Santa Fe? / But it really looks that way, / The dispatcher's turnin' gray, / All the crews is off their pay" (124). The "Santa Fe" is the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad (AT&SF), which during the 1890s provided service to the Western United States. The railroad ran both passenger and freight lines and was heavily involved in promoting and developing western tourism. It is very likely that Ray Kennedy, a freight conductor and Thea's would-be beau, worked on the AT&SF. It is on a trip with Ray that Thea and her mother hear "Katie Casey."

The song underlines the connections between Harvey Houses, a chain of western hotels and restaurants begun in 1876 by Fred Harvey, and the AT&SF.⁷ Harvey Houses were integral to western tourism in the 1890s; by 1915, the year of *The Song of the Lark's* publication, the Harvey Company had greatly expanded its role in the hospitality business. Not content merely to provide tourists beds and meals, the Harvey Company began to mediate the most popular aspect of the Southwest for tourists—Indian life—by producing printed material with Indian imagery as well as staging diorama-like displays depicting "authentic" Native American life. The AT&SF

⁶ The railroad's significance is clear throughout *The Song of the Lark*, with Thea at one point explaining to her Chicago piano teacher Harsanyi "how the people in little desert towns live by the railway and order their lives by the trains" (184).

⁷ Leah Dilworth notes of the relationship between the Harvey Company and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway: "From the beginning it was a symbiotic relationship, based on the railroad's providing the transportation and infrastructure to make Harvey able to deliver standardized, high quality services. The Santa Fe owned the hotels and the Harvey Company furnished and operated them" (Wrobel and Long 145).

had already begun this process in the 1890s by employing artists, ethnographers, and photographers who specialized in representing Indian culture to promote western tourism (Dilworth 81). Leah Dilworth effectively notes how both of these highly commercial operations “wrapped themselves in an Indian blanket, so to speak, and used Indians to ‘naturalize’ their activities” (82). By the turn of the twentieth century, vacationing in the western United States had become an activity increasingly associated with Indian culture.

Both ethnographers and tourists found Native Peoples of the Southwest more historically and aesthetically compelling than the tribes who occupied The Great Plains. Plains Indians’ role as nomadic hunters seemed less appealing and less “civilized” to white Americans than the agrarian way of life practiced by the Native occupants of the Southwest.⁸ In terms of the evolutionary continuum on which late nineteenth-century anthropologists placed non-white peoples, certain tribes of southwestern Indians seemed closer to European culture (and thus more advanced) than tribes located in the Central United States. Itinerant southwestern tribes like the Apache and the Navajo did not enjoy the same ethnographic prestige and were often ignored by ethnographers who found them overly “primitive,” failing to recognize the rich culture and tremendous knowledge and organization that underpinned their nomadic lives. By the time Cather wrote *The Song of the Lark*, images of Plains Indians dominated popular perceptions of Native Peoples. Their aggressive attacks on wagon trains formed the plots of dime westerns, and their feathered war bonnets were staples of the period’s numerous Wild West Shows.⁹ As non-Indian Americans imbibed these images, individual Plains tribes were being systematically

⁸ According to the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Pueblo Indians possessed “sedentary agricultural characteristics” and lacked “the warlike disposition of the Plains Indians” (633).

⁹ Sitting Bull, the famed Sioux general who defeated Custer at Little Big Horn in 1876, joined Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show in 1885; in 1904 the Louisiana Purchase Exposition featured the Apache leader Geronimo. Both these incidents illustrate the ways in which frontier history and spectacle frequently interpolated. *Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull: Reinventing the Wild West*, Dilworth 150.

removed and exterminated.¹⁰ The omnipresence of these stereotyped depictions meant that to middle class culture seekers Plains Indians lacked authenticity. In contrast, more agrarian southwestern Indian tribes appealed to literate tourists who felt they had a legitimate intellectual and aesthetic interest in Native Peoples.

Willa Cather herself experienced the Southwest for the first time in April of 1912, journeying to visit her brother Douglass in Arizona a scant couple of months after that territory gained statehood. Arizona entered the United States on February 14, 1912, as the last of the forty-eight contiguous states, solidifying the country's border with Mexico; New Mexico had become the forty-seventh state in January of 1912. Cather's first visit to the Southwest thus coincided with the beginning of the region's official status as part of the United States. Although Cather's first trip to the Southwest occurred after Arizona's official statehood, according to the chronology of *The Song of the Lark* Thea's time in Arizona takes place in roughly 1897 when Arizona is still a territory.

In the early years of the twentieth-century, preoccupation with the Southwestern corner of the United States was not unique to Cather. In "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner does not include the American Southwest in his list of frontiers, indicating the flexibility of this space and its removal from typical routes of conquest and settlement.¹¹ With its ethnically diverse population and flexible borders, the Southwest in the later nineteenth century was not quite "American." This vision of the Southwest as space set aside from the main course of westward expansion is particularly relevant to *The Song of the Lark*, where it becomes for

¹⁰ Mike Fischer provides a discussion of the absence of Plains Indians in Cather's Nebraska novels.

¹¹ Caroline M. Woidat discusses Cather's use of the Southwest as an escape in *The Professor's House*: "The Southwest was a sort of detour from the main routes taken in the course of empire described by Turner . . . With 'Tom Outland's Story,' Cather embraces the popular sentiments of archaeologists and tourists at the turn of the century by turning to the Southwest as a means of living this myth and experiencing a frontier still 'open' to discovery" (24). Woidat's statement is also true of *The Song of the Lark*.

Then a refuge from modernizing America. Unlike the rest of the western United States, Southwestern territory could still function as a regenerative, imaginative space—one that allowed individual Americans who visited to recuperate and escape from modernity.

The central feature of the Southwestern United States that enthralled everyone from archaeologists, to tourists, to Willa Cather herself, was the presence of sites of ancient Puebloan ruins, known simply as “Cliff Dweller” ruins.¹² These structures, actually built into the rock face, were abandoned hundreds of years before the first white settlers arrived in the Southwest. Archaeological evidence shows an agrarian culture that had evolved a settled, domestic lifestyle. The exact fate of the former occupants of these dwellings has never been determined, adding a compelling layer of historical mystery to the region. On a national level, this interest in the Cliff Dweller ruins reflected, not only a need for another trajectory of exploration, but a real sense of ambiguity regarding the whole project of empire, both within the borders of the United States and abroad. Michael Tavel Clarke asserts, “The failure of the Cliff Dwellers contradicted American faith in the foreordained victory of civilization over savagery and thus also challenged American faith in its new program of overseas imperialism” (400). The notion that a people as “culturally superior” as the ancient Pueblos could simply disappear made Americans uneasy, since it seemed obliquely threatening to the continuance of their own civilization. Americans, eager to lengthen their own national history and produce historic monuments and ancient artifacts that could vie with Europe’s, showcased these ruins as national treasures. Paradoxically, though, the very ruins they proudly exhibited not only had no direct connection with their own national history but also emphasized the tenuous positioning and potential for extinction of all civilizations, regardless of how advanced.

¹² Ann Moseley observes that the particular ruins Cather viewed in Walnut Canyon (the real life counterpart of the fictional Panther Canyon) belonged to a pre-Columbian tribe retroactively named the Sinagua.

Cather, in *The Song of the Lark*, tries mightily to distance Thea from the West's thriving tourist industry and the popular appeal of the Southwest, but the very absence of tourist activity in the novel is somewhat conspicuous. When Thea and her mother take a railway trip from Moonstone to Denver to, in Mrs. Kronborg's words, "see the country," they travel, not on a passenger train, but in Ray Kennedy's caboose (118). This method of transportation frees the trip from any associations with commercial tourism. Although the term is never used to describe him, Ray Kennedy is certainly a tourist, having traveled all around the West and into Mexico as a self-conscious observer (neither *tourist* or *tourism* is used in the novel). It is he who first kindles Thea's interest in the Indian tribes of the Southwestern United States. Kennedy has even been to that ultimate tourist site, The Grand Canyon, and has, like many other tourists, tried to record his reactions to the geological marvel: "He still carried in his trunk . . . a notebook on the title-page of which was written 'Impressions on First Viewing the Grand Canyon, Ray H. Kennedy.' The pages of that book were like a battlefield; the laboring author had fallen back from metaphor after metaphor, abandoned position after position" (116). Kennedy's fascination with the Grand Canyon mirrors that of other Americans of the period. Discussing the phenomenon of tourism in the western United States, Hal Rothman notes, "The *fin de siècle* tourist understood the Grand Canyon as an affirmation of the nation" (114). Cather, however, mocks both Kennedy's "Impressions" and his touristy attitude, referring disparagingly in the next paragraph to his "travel lecture expressions," further reinforcing both his associations with tourism and the disdain she has for the institution. When Cather herself visited the Grand Canyon in 1912, she commented in a letter that she is favorably impressed by the lack of souvenir shops (Letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. 21 May 1912).¹³

¹³ Cather recommends visiting Mesa Verde in a 1916 *Denver Times* article, "Mesa Verde Wonderland is Easy to Reach." Here, Cather is certainly advocating tourism: she offers a potential sequence of trains to reach the town

Ray's travels in the Southwest are not, however, confined to the classic touristic activities of looking and recording; at one point he admits to Thea that he has "been with some fellows who were cracking burial mounds." Although he confesses that he "[a]lways felt a little ashamed of it," his hesitancy disappears as he describes the "remarkable things" he and his companions looted (116). The prize object was a "fox-fur cloak, lined with little yellow feathers that must have come off wild canaries." Ray and his friends find this wonderful garment on a female corpse, yet it is the cloak and not the preserved woman that is the "handsomest thing" and evidently the most valuable. Thea immediately exclaims, "She must have been a princess," and asks if Ray preserved a souvenir of the encounter; whereupon, he produces a turquoise from the woman's necklace (117). Relishing Thea's excitement, Ray reveals the bizarre Southwestern honeymoon he secretly has planned for them, describing it simply as a camping trip. He tells Thea how they will camp in the cliff houses and he will "go into the burial mounds and get you more keepsakes than any girl ever had before" (118). Ray misinterprets Thea's interest, thinking that it represents a typically feminine concern with trinkets and adornment.

Kennedy values the artifacts for their beauty and the meticulous craftsmanship they exhibit; he does connect them with the past, but to an abstract past that is cultural rather than individual. For Thea the artifacts immediately bring to mind the actual people who created and wore them. She values the turquoise from the richly dressed woman because of its connection to the long-dead woman, and not its intrinsic value or even aesthetic beauty. The archeological significance of the preserved figure holds no appeal for Thea; rather, she is interested in the corpse's former identity as a living prehistoric woman. Thea does not ask about the fate of the

nearest the mesa, mentions by name a guide who will transport visitors to the mesa "by wagon or motor," and, ever the gourmand, helpfully lets the reader know about the "excellent food" prepared by the Ranger's wife. Despite its evident support of Western travel, however, in this piece, as in *The Song of the Lark*, Cather omits any variant of the word *tourism*.

mummified woman and seems untroubled by Ray's desecration of her grave. The dead body is not important to her; however the space and life it occupied are. From her rich clothing, Thea romantically casts the woman as a princess. This special status resonates for Thea, who throughout her childhood is depicted as being set apart from more common people, a sort of princess herself. Ray Kennedy extends the identification between Thea and the preserved woman when he tells Thea the turquoise bead suits her, since "Blue and yellow are the Swedish colors" (118). The blue of the turquoise combines with the yellow of Thea's hair to form the Swedish flag, thus visually linking Thea, a descendant of European immigrants, to the indigenous past of North America.

Kennedy similarly attempts to connect his own life to that of the Native Peoples whose culture he admires even as he destroys their burial mounds and loots the corpses of their dead. He imagines a strange symbiosis between modern white Americans and ancient Indian tribes, musing to Thea, "You begin to feel what the human race has been up to from the beginning . . . You feel like it's up to you to do your best on account of those fellows having it so hard. You feel like you owed them something" (118). Kennedy imagines the achievements of contemporary white Americans somehow both commemorating and validating the lives of long-dead prehistoric peoples. Continuing the reciprocal relationship he envisions, the monuments left by these indigenous people are recast as part of a generic human past, allowing non-Indians to lay claim to them. Kennedy is placing himself at the contemporary end of a long chain of human endeavor and achievement. This idea of linear human progress was prevalent in the popular anthropology of the period; Kennedy with his study "general culture" and his love for "popular science" was probably familiar with these ideas and is Cather's mouthpiece for them.¹⁴ We learn

¹⁴ Christopher Schedler compares the hierarchical, non-comparative model of human development *The Song of the Lark* privileges to the novel's traditional structure of sequential events building to a climax and then subsiding.

from a story he tells Thea that Kennedy's father was a farmer; thus, his job as a railroad man represents a shift from a settled, agrarian life to a peripatetic existence linked to technology. He is also a regretful atheist: "It had cost him a great deal to give up his God" (51). Despite his slight pomposity, Kennedy's interest in the Indian ruins of the Southwest is not merely quasi-intellectual posturing; like other Americans of the period he needs the sense of permanence and continuity they offer.

That the Southwest and its prehistoric buildings became a *fin de siècle* antidote to anti-modern anxiety is not surprising. As Richard Slotkin has maintained, "The moral landscape of the Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization Indian/White border is the most basic. The American must cross the border into 'Indian country' and experience a 'regression' to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of 'the metropolis' can be purged and a new, purified social contract be enacted" (15). The escape the region offered was not only geographic but temporal: imaginative visitors could go back in time to a land that had not yet felt the imprint of European colonization and experience the mythic freedom of frontier America. Journeying to the Southwestern United States and viewing the Cliff Dweller ruins allowed Americans (including Willa Cather) to make this theoretical border crossing and escape modernity. The absence of living Indians in these ruins permitted white Americans to imagine themselves connected with these ancient civilizations. Pushing this fantasy even further, some Americans believed that the "advanced" Cliff Dwellers themselves were actually evidence of a lost white race. Clarke explains, "The fantasy of the white Cliff Dwellers offered biological support to claims of historical and cultural kinship between white Americans and Cliff Dwellers" (398-99). Although Cather never refers to

the fantastic “lost white race” theory, her characters’ linkage of their own existences to those of prehistoric people indicates a profound sense of the “cultural kinship” to which Clarke refers.

Kennedy’s interest in the Southwest initially captivates Thea; however, years pass and Kennedy himself dies before she sees the region herself. His death in a railroad accident marks both Thea’s move eastward toward cosmopolitan ideas and the death of her childish preoccupation with westward expansion. A six hundred dollar legacy from Kennedy allows Thea to make her way to the urban center of Chicago to study music. His inheritance begins the process of liberating her from the two main choices the novel presents for a woman in the American West: marriage or life as a spinster attached to another male family member. Either scenario would have been possible for Thea: Kennedy’s plans to marry her were so unsubtle that all of Moonstone divined them, and Tillie Kronborg, Thea’s unmarried aunt who helps her brother keep house, is a version of a western spinster. Despite its popular depiction as a place of limitless opportunity, the American West at the turn of the twentieth century in actuality has few palatable prospects for Thea.

Although *The Song of the Lark* deals overtly with Thea’s artistic growth, a concern with the development of her identity as an American runs beneath the surface of the narrative. The frontier’s absence in the novel means that permanent escape into an alternate America is not an option: the role of pioneer is only possible in a vicarious touristic context. The small town of Moonstone is narrowly judgmental, but the rapidly-growing city of Chicago is cruelly anonymous; marriage is a trap, and the family you are born into can turn on you. *The Song of the Lark* does, however, present opportunities for temporary escape in the form of non-white cultures, which in the context of the novel are seen as enriching, rather than threatening. Early in the novel, Thea vocalizes Cather’s own discomfort with a culturally homogenous, standardized

America, when she exclaims, “I used to be ashamed of being a Swede, but I’m not anymore. Swedes are kind of common, but I think it’s better to be *something*” (83). With this sentence Thea explicitly rejects the goals of assimilation and conformity that many Progressive Era intellectuals thought were the optimal pattern for immigrants in the United States.¹⁵ Thea, a descendant of Norwegian and Swedish settlers, frequently hears her mother “say that ‘she believed in immigration’” (219). Thea agrees with her mother: “This earth seemed to her young fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad, countries were given another chance . . . the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range” (219-20). This statement represents one of the moments of disjunction between the novel’s thematic and aesthetic purpose and the actual story of Thea Kronborg. The consciousness underlying the above comment is pure Cather, but the quotation seems to belong in a novel other than this one. The pastoral “earth,” although it is the great fact of *O Pioneers!*, makes few appearances in *The Song of the Lark*. Moonstone, partially based on Cather’s own Red Cloud, and meant to be a fairly representative American small town is not particularly “kindly” to Thea or anyone else who is slightly different.

The most conspicuous immigrant culture in the novel is that of the Mexican community found on the outskirts of Moonstone, the most prominent figure of which is the guitar player “Spanish Johnny.” Details from *The Song of the Lark* indicate that Cather had some understanding of the settlement patterns of Latinos at the end of the nineteenth century. She terms the Mexican community an oddity “north of Pueblo” (39), indicating an awareness of the presence of Mexican enclaves in southern Colorado. David Wishart credits the Latino migration to Colorado to two major factors: the construction of four rail lines running from central Mexico

¹⁵ Turn-of-the-twentieth century immigration restrictionists, among them Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and former Superintendent of the Census Francis A. Walker, saw the frontier as an assimilative space necessary to integrate immigrants into American society. The disappearance of the frontier thus served as a rationale for curbing immigration (Wrobel 48-50).

into California and New Mexico and the “social upheaval” of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 (348). The fact that men move to Moonstone first in search of work and then bring their families is typical of the migratory patterns of late-nineteenth-century Mexican workers. The handsome Ramas brothers, en route to their “job-as” in Salt Lake City, are originally from Torreon, a city in the Mexican state of Coahuila (193). One of the Ramases is transporting a double bass, probably indicating that he and his brother came to Colorado via one of the newly built rail lines from Mexico and could take a certain amount of bulky luggage. James Woodress establishes “Colorado” as “familiar territory” for Cather, because of regular visits to her brother Roscoe in Wyoming (4). Perhaps on these visits she gleaned some knowledge of aspects of Colorado’s Mexican population.

Despite distinct historical reasons for increased Mexican migration into Colorado and the novel’s own acknowledgement of the presence of jobs in Moonstone, *The Song of the Lark* states, somewhat curiously, that the Mexican community within the town’s borders “had come about accidentally” (39). According to Cather, “The Mexicans arrived so quietly, with their blankets and musical instruments, that before Moonstone was awake to the fact, there was a Mexican quarter, a dozen families or more” (39). It is difficult to see anything “accidental” about moving to a place with available jobs and then staying and putting down roots. In contrast to the purposeful homesteading of the other immigrant groups Cather depicts, the Mexicans suddenly appear. One way of looking at the Mexicans’ quiet arrival indicates that they divined (probably correctly) that provincial Moonstone might not have welcomed their presence in any large and permanent numbers. Read within turn-of-the-twentieth-century (as well as present-day) rhetoric surrounding immigration to the United States, however, Cather’s depiction of the Mexicans’ covert entrance into the community also seems disturbingly close to a portrayal of a non-white

group deviously infiltrating the country. Although Cather encountered Mexicans in Arizona during her 1912 trip, the section of the novel set in Arizona says nothing about them. The anomalous location of “Mexican Town” in northern Colorado allows Cather to explore cultural difference within a narrative and historical context that is controlled and non-threatening.

Notwithstanding the interest in Native American culture that runs throughout the novel, the Mexicans portrayed in *The Song of the Lark* lack any indigenous associations. As his name indicates, it is Spanish Johnny’s colonial Spanish background that the novel emphasizes. Indeed, he sometimes refers to himself as Spanish, rather than Mexican, at one point telling the well-traveled brakeman Ray Kennedy, “You been all over pretty near. Like a Spanish boy” (45). Johnny has a profile that is “strong and severe, like an Indian’s” (40), but his wife, known only as “Mrs. Tellamentez” possesses a type of face “not uncommon in Spain” (40). Superficially, it appears that Cather intentionally deracinates the novel’s Mexican inhabitants, stripping them of any indigenous background and depicting them as both ethnically and culturally Spanish. E. K. Brown obliquely refers to this phenomenon when he writes, “The picture of Johnny Tellamentez and his ‘Spanish’ friends in *The Song of the Lark* caught a great deal of what she must have felt in her first encounter with Indians and Mexicans in the Southwest” (130). Brown’s enclosure of the word “Spanish” with quotation marks questions the authenticity of the Mexicans’ European antecedents.

Discussing modes of self-representation among Chicano authors, Raymund Paredes explains that in the context of early twentieth-century American literature the use of the determiner “Spanish” for Mexicans was not particularly unusual: “Historically, the very term ‘Mexican’ has had so harshly pejorative a connotation in the United States that a number of Mexican-American writers shrank from it and, ultimately, from their true heritage, creating in its

place a mythical past of unsullied Europeanism. The New Mexicans particularly venerated and exaggerated the Spanish component of their heritage” (87). In an endnote, Paredes connects this idea specifically to Cather, using *The Song of the Lark* as an example: “The dynamics of this phenomenon are effectively portrayed by Willa Cather in *The Song of the Lark*. The novel features a Mexican named Juan Tellamantez who is so esteemed by the Anglo residents of Moonstone, Colorado, that they decorously avoid reference to his correct ethnicity; rather he is known as ‘Spanish Johnny’” (109 n. 63). Cather, at moments, seems to indicate an awareness of the phenomenon Paredes is addressing, remarking, “The ‘Spanish Boys’ are reticent about their own affairs” when explaining why none of Moonstone’s white residents know about the adobe dance hall in “Mexican Town” (193). Her use of quotation marks and her acknowledgment of the Mexicans’ discretion reinforce Paredes’s reading of the descriptor *Spanish* as a kind of tactful evasion. Paredes’s reference to *The Song of the Lark* appears in an article entitled “The Evolution of Chicano Literature” published in 1978, years before there was any significant critical discourse regarding Cather and race. That Paredes chooses to call attention to Cather’s novel in an article about Mexican American literary history indicates the historical significance of Cather’s portrayal of Mexicans. The interest Paredes, a Mexican American himself, takes in Cather’s portrayal of Mexican Americans also reflects the “critical urgency” that, according to Edward Said, underlies the act of reading for non-white scholars when they encounter white authors’ depictions of themselves and their communities (65).

The Mexicans’ precarious position in Moonstone and the dangers of proudly inhabiting a Mexican cultural identity are brought to the foreground when Johnny himself offers a rare detail of life in Mexico. During her birthday outing to the nearby sand hills, he casually remarks to Thea that Mexican families often keep a snake inside the house to prey on rodents: “They keep a

little mat for him by the fire, and at night he curl up there and sit with the family, just as friendly!” (145) Johnny tells this story outside the boundaries of Moonstone and in the presence of both Thea and Ray Kennedy, two white people with whom he feels comfortable. Moonstone prejudice nevertheless rears its head when Thea’s younger brother Gunner replies to this confidence with “disgust” declaiming, “I think that’s a dirty Mexican way to keep a house; so there!” (45) Thea’s brother’s aggressive prejudice reveals Moonstone’s less than positive attitude toward cultural difference and emphasizes Paredes’s interpretation of the Mexican community’s and Johnny’s “Spanish” identities as necessary cloaking devices.

Johnny responds to Thea’s brother by shrugging his shoulders and saying equivocally, “Perhaps” (45). Since Thea is only twelve in this scene, Gunner is still very much a child and has presumably been taught to respect adults, particularly grown men; his insolence, as well as the frank, intentional racism of his comment (capped by the aggressive and childish “so there”), indicates both his belief that the Mexican man, despite superior age, experience, and talent, is his inferior and his clumsy assumption of the privileges of white patriarchal authority. Johnny’s non-confrontational reply signals his own necessary acknowledgement of his subordinate position within the Moonstone hierarchy. The narrative obliquely acknowledges both Gunner’s racism and the necessity of Johnny’s passivity: “A Mexican learns to dive below insults or soar above them, after he crosses the border” (45). Cather, however, crucially does not explain why such evasive action is necessary, nor does she elaborate on what might befall a Mexican who chose to confront ridicule directly. Mob violence targeting Mexican Americans in the Southwestern United States was not uncommon in both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb have uncovered 597 documented lynchings of Mexican Americans between 1848 and 1928 (413). Although this number appears slight beside the recorded number

of lynchings of African Americans, the smaller numerical presence of Mexican Americans and the sparser population of the western United States increase the figure's statistical significance. As Carrigan and Webb explain, "Because of the smaller size of the Spanish-speaking population, the total number of victims was much lower, but the chance of being murdered by a mob was comparable for both Mexicans and African Americans" (414). Marilee Lindemann affirms Cather's knowledge of the racial dynamics at work within the novel, pointing to incidents where "the subversive, celebratory mood of *The Song of the Lark* is at times undercut by signs of dis-ease and anxiety about the security of white racial power and civilization" and claiming that "the text manifests some superficial awareness of these anxieties" (60). Lindemann gives two examples of this textual consciousness: one is the narrative's explanation of Johnny's evasive reply to Gunner's insult; the other is Mrs. Kronborg's comment, "No use spoiling your Sunday dinner with race prejudices" (201), offered as a rebuttal to Thea's brothers' complaints about her association with the Mexican community.

Moonstone's persistent racism and the latent threat of mob violence might also offer one explanation for Johnny's frequent disappearances. Johnny was the first Mexican to arrive in Moonstone and is the town's most visible and popular Mexican inhabitant. For many of Moonstone's white residents, he is no doubt the representative face of the Mexican community and accountable for their behavior as well as his own. At the same time, as a fluent English speaker and established independent artisan, Johnny is probably a mediating figure for his Spanish-speaking neighbors in their interactions with white Moonstone. The role of go-between for both communities must have been extraordinarily stressful. A talented decorator and painter, Johnny has no difficulty finding employment; however, he is periodically overtaken by a kind of mania and runs away, performing with his mandolin in various cities, and returning to his wife

impoverished and sick. Johnny's wanderings always take him across the border and into Mexico as he "plays his way southward from saloon to saloon." This behavior is depicted as utterly irrational or "crazy" (41). Admittedly, Johnny's actions could be the result of alcoholism; they could also be the frustrations of a gifted musician with no outlet for his talent. But the pressures endemic to double-consciousness might be the most plausible reason for what the novel calls his "craziness" (41). Mrs. Tellamentez tries to explain Johnny's periodic absences to Thea and Dr. Archie: "He is good at heart, but he has no head. He fools himself. You do not understand in this country, you are progressive. But he has no judgment, and he is fooled." She holds up a conch-shell to Dr. Archie's ear to illustrate her point, claiming that for Johnny the sound inside the shell "is the sea itself" (42). According to Mrs. Tellamentez's explanation, her husband simply has no sense of proportion and is unable to function in modern, "progressive" America.

Johnny, like Dr. Archie and Ray Kennedy, is one of those discerning people (they are almost all men) who recognize and affirm Thea's special status from the time she is a child. He introduces Thea to his neighbors, and "Mexican Town" in *The Song of the Lark* becomes for Thea an escape from the conformist and restrictive values Moonstone represents. A dance she attends serves as the catalyst for her break with the town and the majority of her family. This dance and the impromptu performance that follows provide a kind of dress rehearsal for the integrative and regenerative experience she will have a year later in Panther Canyon. Significantly, Thea's ultimate break from her family and the values of Moonstone coincides with her physical maturation and her alignment with non-white people. During Thea's first winter of musical study in Chicago, her focus changes from piano to voice. This realization that she is a singer and not a pianist begins to solidify the sense of artistic vocation she has felt since childhood. Thea's vocational confidence is reflected by the development of her own body and an

increasing awareness of her sexuality. Although she is seventeen when she leaves home and has ostensibly gone through puberty, the novel depicts her as significantly more physically mature when she returns from Chicago less than a year later.

Thea's dawning recognition and appreciation of her own healthy body occurs through her contact with a sick and frightened young woman she encounters on the long train journey home. The young woman coughs ceaselessly and shrinks into herself whenever a man passes. She may have had some sort of sexual trauma that makes her fear men or merely have been taught by an anxious mother that males are inherently dangerous and "only after one thing." The anxiety and illness of the girl in the seat behind her make Thea even more aware of her own physical vitality: "She put her hand on her breast and felt how warm it was; and within it there was a full, powerful pulsation. She smiled—though she was ashamed of it—with the natural contempt of strength for weakness, with the sense of physical security which makes the savage merciless" (217). Cather's casual comparison of Thea's "physical security" with that of a "savage" adumbrates the later associations she will make between Thea's body and those of Native women. Her heightened sense of vitality, stimulated by her contact with the sick woman, launches her into dreams of future achievement. Thea's mature, womanly body is fore-grounded in a different way when Mrs. Kronborg brings her breakfast in bed her first morning at home. Thea's "chest was fuller than when she went away, her breasts rounder and firmer . . . they looked rosy through the thin muslin. Her body had the elasticity that comes of being highly charged with the desire to live" (224). Cather filters this potentially sexual glimpse of Thea's body through the gaze of her mother, thus eliminating any hint of eroticism. Thea's newly-wrought awareness of herself as an artist coincides with her physical and sexual maturity, culminating in a depiction of her first real performance.

Thea's performance occurs in the context of the dance she attends in the Mexican section of Moonstone. This party is the longest and most detailed description of Thea's interaction with the Mexicans; it is also the event that incites her siblings' rage and ultimately causes her to break with her family. The dance takes place in the "adobe dance hall" whose existence the people of Moonstone are unaware of (193). Thea is immediately struck by how different this dance is from the Moonstone dances she has attended where "the boys played rough jokes and thought it smart to be clumsy" and "the bawling voice of the caller" was always in evidence (229). Noticing the apparent accord among the Mexicans, Thea questions "whether the Mexicans had no jealousies or neighborly grudges as the people in Moonstone had" (195). Ann Romines describes the Mexican dance as one of the novel's "artful liminal occasions of inclusion" that gives Thea entrance "into a world of art far more generous than anything Moonstone has to offer" ("Home Plot" 197). Cather's idealization of the Mexican community appears superficially positive; however, their community's designation as a utopian space forces the Mexicans outside the boundaries of America's historical framework and encourages them to be read as anachronistic and quaint. The picturesque velvet outfits the Ramas brothers and the other Mexican men wear during the dance give the scene an arcane quality; in fact, in *O Pioneers* Cather shows Emil Bergson wearing a similar "Mexican outfit" to the church bazaar as a type of fancy dress.

As the dance scene proceeds, the sharp distinctions between "Mexican town" and the rest of Moonstone fade into the background as Thea loses her slight awkwardness and becomes caught up in the festive atmosphere. The depiction of the Mexicans' difference has thus far, despite the twenty-first century reader's awareness of the dangers of cultural essentialism, been a positive thing, since, as Romines notes, the Mexican Americans' more generous attitudes compare favorably with Moonstone's narrow-mindedness and rigidity. Now, however, the locus

of contrast begins to shift until it situates itself between Thea and the Mexicans themselves. During the dance, the physical differences between Thea and the Mexicans begin to come into relief as Thea's blonde hair and white skin captivate the young Ramas brothers, who find her "dazzlingly beautiful" (195). Thea's beauty is described through a number of religious allusions. Silvo and Felipe Ramas say she is "'*Blanco y oro, semejante la Pascua!*' (White and gold, like Easter)!" (195-6). Silvo, when his brother asks if there will be girls like Thea in Salt Lake City rejoins, "'Plenty more *a paraiso* may-bee!'" (196). Later, when the group has left the dance hall and adjourned to Spanish Johnny's for a "'lil' *musica*,'" the brothers position themselves beside Thea "one on her right, one on her left." Johnny refers to Felipe and Silvo as "'*los acolitos*,' the altar boys" (196). These Christian, specifically Catholic, references to Thea, although seemingly innocent, and even humorous, subtly deify her; and she becomes a blonde goddess attended by darker ministrants. Although Thea, as she herself frankly admits, is the "poorest dancer" (229) there, the Ramas brothers gaze continually at her, even when they are dancing with other (Mexican) women—a feat that, according to Cather, "was not difficult; one blonde head moving among so many dark ones" (231).

Later in the evening, the dancers adjourn to Spanish Johnny's house for ice cream and singing. When Thea begins to sing, the physical boundaries that separate her from her ethnically different audience dissolve. She is again the center of attention, and her performance becomes a striking blend of sensory images. The brightness of the moon illuminates the scene, and the moon itself "looked like a great pale flower in the sky." The moonflowers that surround the Tellamentez's door are "wide open and of an unearthly white" (196). The faces of her Mexican audience appear "out of the shadow like the white flowers over the door" (197). The moonflowers, the moon itself, and the faces of Thea's listeners become lovely, interchangeable

images. The aesthetic confusion that renders the Mexican people so prettily at one with the natural world also makes them part of the background that effectively highlights Thea and her performance. As she sings for her audience “they turned themselves and all they had over to her” (232). Stout in her essay “Brown and White at the Dance” points out that Thea’s “ultra whiteness not only structures the hierarchy of the situation . . . but is expressly given tribute at the one point when the text presumes to reach into the minds of ‘the Mexicans’” (39). Thea is singing folksongs that belong to the culture of her listeners. Cather describes the Mexican audience’s faces as “eager, open, unprotected,” highlighting their vulnerability to Thea’s cultural theft (232). Her appropriation of their music is followed by the figurative acquisition of their very selves: She felt as if all of these warm-blooded people debouched into her. Mrs. Tellamantez’s fateful resignation, Johnny’s madness, the adoration of the boy who lay still in the sand; in an instant these things seemed to be within her instead of without, as if they had come from her in the first place (232). Thea’s ready seizure of the music and personalities of her audience is expressed in startlingly physical terms: what has been exterior, foreign, and “other” is now internal and native.

The bodily connection she feels with this racially and culturally different group of people foreshadows the connections she will make later in the novel in Panther Canyon. Hermione Lee reads this scene as having potential sexual implications that go unfulfilled (127). Demaree Peck is more concerned with Thea’s ready appropriation of Mexican culture: “Although on the surface Thea seems to incorporate *other* personalities and cultures, all selves collapse into her insatiable ego” (123). Both sex and race are at issue here; the scene, with its casual racism and depiction of a white woman as the desirable central personage thrown into relief by darker, peripheral figures,

invites twenty-first century judgment. Although it is undeniably problematic, Cather's vivid depiction of cultural amalgamation as a positive experience was radical for 1915.

The depiction of Thea's connection to the Mexicans in terms of commingled blood is particularly striking. In this passage, Cather clearly indicates that there are racial as well as cultural differences between Thea and the Mexicans who surround her, whose blood is literally different, "warmer," than hers. Blood in the early twentieth century was still seen as a racially marked substance. Shawn Smith explains, "Blood had increasingly become central to definitions of race and delineations of racial differences in the sciences of biological racism over the course of the nineteenth century, culminating in the science of eugenics at the turn of the century" (139). This mingling of blood is symbolically akin to miscegenation, foreshadowed by the handsome Ramas brothers lounging around Thea. Cather has to some degree (probably unconsciously because the rhetoric was so prevalent) assimilated this idea of blood as linked to race: the Mexicans are a "warm-blooded people" because they come from a warm place and are artistic and responsive. Significantly, Mexican blood flowing symbolically into Thea is a positive phenomenon rather than evidence of contamination. Thea takes the essence of these "warm-blooded" people and so thoroughly synthesizes it that she feels she has originated it. This combination of music, ethnic others, and sexuality is a potent mixture, akin to the scene in *My Ántonia* where Blind d'Arnault plays the piano for a white audience. Here, however, the situation is inverted: instead of an African American performer playing for a white audience in a parlor, we have a European American performer singing for a non-white group outside in the open air.

Thea's performance has additional listeners. Across the gully from "Mexican Town," the Kohlers hear her triumphant voice and exclaim "*Ach, Wunderschön!*" (234). The centrality of Thea's voice in this aural landscape reflects her body's earlier visual prominence. The Kohlers

can distinguish “Johnny’s reedy tenor” and “the bricklayer’s big, opaque baritone,” but “the others might be anyone over there—just Mexican voices.” Again, the individuality of Moonstone’s Mexican inhabitants is casually negated as their voices serve as mere background for Thea’s soprano: “How it leaped from among those dusky male, voices! How it played in and about and over them, like a goldfish darting among creek minnows, like a yellow butterfly soaring above a swarm of dark ones” (191). Even this soundscape is depicted in terms of color: Thea’s voice is gold while the other singers have dark, “dusky” voices to match their ethnicity. Thea’s whiteness, to use Stout’s earlier phrase, “structures the hierarchy” of the music itself, making great art categorically white. The progression of language and images in the Mexican dance scene is contradictory. Cather first establishes Thea as physically distinct from her Mexican listeners, then depicts a complete deletion of the boundaries between Thea and the audience, and finally redraws the borders, emphasizing the contrast between “*blanca y oro*” Thea and the darkness of the racially different people who surround her.

Thea’s performance creates additional, unintended personal consequences. When she comes downstairs the next afternoon, having slept late, she notices the disapproving faces of older sister and two older brothers. Thea responds to her brother’s sneers with a defense of the Mexicans, and her mother ends the conversation with the injunction regarding “race prejudices” that Lindemann cites as one of the moments when the novel abruptly confronts “anxiety about the security of white racial power and civilization” (60). To her siblings, Thea’s continued friendship with Spanish Johnny and Moonstone’s other Mexican inhabitants represents a violation of the town’s rigid social structures and a familial embarrassment. Relationships with non-white people may have been permissible when Thea was a young girl wandering freely around Moonstone, but as an adult she is expected to adhere to a different standard of behavior.

Cather's earlier description of Thea's physical development provides a clear indication that she is associating with her Mexican neighbors as a mature woman. That her sister Anna "expected to be teased because Bert Rice now came and sat in the hammock with her every night" (240), reveals the strict parameters governing the associations of opposite gender young adults. Thea's siblings' disgust at her behavior stems in part from the flouting of sexual mores she engages in by attending a dance populated by ethnic others.

Her siblings' criticism shows Thea that they are firmly entrenched in the social and cultural values of provincial Moonstone, whereas she has always existed in a larger context. Thea recognizes her sense of alienation from her brothers and sister will only increase, since "Nothing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to them, and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her" (240). The conflict with her siblings occasioned by her attendance at the dance and subsequent musical performance widens into an unbridgeable gulf between Thea and her family and community: "That Sunday in July was the turning-point; Thea's peace of mind did not come back" (245). Even her childhood bedroom ceases to be a refuge from the "hostility in the house" (238). Far from being a triumphant recognition of adulthood and independence, this realization is painful: "She was not ready to leave her little shell. She was being pulled out too soon" (238). Here, Cather's language indicates a type of rebirth for Thea, underscoring Rosowski's recognition of the novel's pervasive theme of double birth and her claim that *The Song of the Lark*'s focus is "that second self, its gestation, birth, and passion," rather than the first biological self (63). The remainder of Thea's visit home becomes a continuation of the agonizing process of relinquishing her old life. When she returns to Chicago at the end of the summer, however, she returns as an autonomous adult.

Thea's second winter in Chicago should be a positive experience. She has realized that her proper medium is voice and not piano and is training with a renowned vocal coach; furthermore, her open-air concert of the previous summer has revealed the thrill of performing for a "sympathetic" audience and given her a glimpse of her professional future. Despite these favorable circumstances, Thea's second winter in Chicago is fraught with anxiety and disillusionment. Despite his skill and knowledge, her new voice teacher is a petty, cynical man, and Thea imbibes his attitude. To pay for her own lessons she is forced to accompany many singers of lesser talent, leading her to resent both their sloppiness and the public's susceptibility to their vocal affectations. It is worth wondering whether Thea's resentment of the public approbation accorded her less-competent colleagues might have reflected Cather's own attitude toward the popular embrace of writers whom she viewed as less gifted than she. Thea's role as the talented vocalist who is forced to help advance the career of the less-gifted singer may have seemed to Cather analogous to her own position as Managing Editor at *McClure's*. The contempt Thea feels for these singers and their success with the public has its roots in her disappointed idealism; nevertheless, her antagonism impedes her own vocational development, since she is becoming devoid of the generosity Cather deemed so crucial to artistic greatness. The one seemingly positive event of the winter is the beginning of her relationship with Fred Ottenburg, heir to a brewery fortune and patron of the arts.

Thea's difficult winter illustrates the inevitable struggle and loneliness created by the single-minded pursuit of an ambitious goal, adding further emphasis to the novel's theme of double birth. Her depressing winter in Chicago takes a physical as well as an emotional toll. A bad cold turns into a nasty case of tonsillitis and a long recuperation. Having tea in a hotel with her friend Fred Ottenburg in April, she is "as gray as the weather. Her skin looked sick. Her hair,

too, though on a damp day it curled charmingly about her face, looked pale” (288). Thea’s lackluster appearance and overall despondency inspire Ottenburg to suggest a summer in the Southwest: “I don’t think I told you, but my father owns a whole canyon full of Cliff-Dweller ruins. He has a big worthless ranch down in Arizona, near a Navajo reservation, and there’s a canyon on the place they call Panther Canyon, chock full of that sort of thing” (289). The ranch is a private residence, not one of the West’s touristy “dude ranches” established in the 1890s and ubiquitous by 1915. It is run by a caretaker, who is happy to accommodate Fred’s guests free-of-charge. A vacation at a for-profit dude ranch with other tourists would interfere with the authenticity of Thea’s private, regenerative experience with Indian culture. Ottenburg suggests that a summer in the open air will make a “new woman” of Thea. Ottenburg’s use of the phrase is unintentionally ironic since a “New Woman” is exactly what Thea with her frantic routine of study and work in an urban center has become.

Thea’s ill-health may be partially explained by her bout of tonsillitis; however, her listlessness and general sense of malaise also resemble neurasthenia. An oft-diagnosed ailment at the turn of the twentieth century, neurasthenia was thought to be the consequence of a too-active involvement in the competitive arena of modern life.¹⁶ Women were diagnosed with the malady more often than men because they were considered constitutionally weaker and less fitted for the aggressive nature of the public sphere. The treatment often involved what Tom Lutz in his 1991 study of neurasthenia’s prominent place in American culture, *American Nervousness, 1903*, explains as “a reconstitution of the subject in terms of gender roles” (32). Women were forced to go on bed rest and prohibited any physical exertion, whereas men, thought to be feminized by the disease, were prescribed rigorous physical activity, often in a wilderness setting. Notably, both

¹⁶ The few discussions of neurasthenia in Cather center on Godfrey St. Peter, the protagonist of Cather’s 1925 novel *The Professor’s House*. See Todd Robinson.

male and female neurasthenics were encouraged to forgo intellectual activity. Fred's plan for Thea's regeneration combines the female rest cure with the male exercise cure. Thea is sent to an unfamiliar place and cared for by people she has no connection with; however, that locale is in the rugged American West near a "canyon full of Cliff-Dweller ruins" (289). The presence of Panther Canyon and the Indian ruins it contained also help Thea reconstitute and reinvigorate herself. Early twentieth-century Americans venerated all things Indian, believing the simple, authentic, and organic nature of Indian life could effect a regeneration from the innervating confusion of modernity.

Neurasthenia and an interest in Indian cultures, particularly those of southwestern tribes, were both important characteristics of the phenomenon historian T.J. Jackson Lears defines as anti-modernism. Cather's first visit to the Southwest followed an increasingly frustrating and innervating period at *McClure's Magazine*. Noting the strongly autobiographical nature of *The Song of the Lark*, Woodress points out that "Cather herself was at a crossroads in her career when she went to the Southwest for the first time" (14). Thoroughly tired out and sick, she needed the bodily respite the trip offered. Her appreciation of the aesthetic and historical qualities of the Southwest spurred her desire to move away from the increasingly stifling routine of her job as managing editor at *McClure's* and into the exhilarating but uncertain role of full-time novelist. This combination of physical rejuvenation and vocational clarification is exactly what Thea Kronborg gains from her visit to Arizona. Just as Cather's literary career had been journalistic, with her own fiction written as a sideline, Thea's musical career has never been entirely self-directed. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea's decision to consider herself an artist first and foremost is a fictional echo of Cather's realization that she must assume the role of full-time novelist. For both Cather and Thea, the Southwest provided the locale that inspired their

respective decisions. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea's retreat to Panther Canyon is a definite antimodern escape, a movement outside the boundaries of mainstream America. For Thea, who has failed to find contentment in the small town of Moonstone and found the urban center of Chicago similarly uncongenial, the Southwest functions as a refuge from both the provincial town and the anonymous city.

As Ann Moseley has explained, the Native people whose homes and relics Thea appropriates are the Sinagua, a tribe that disappeared before the first Europeans entered the Southwest. An interest in older, more "primitive" and "exotic" cultures was an important characteristic of the *fin de siècle* reactions to the increasing urbanization and mechanization of America. According to Philip Deloria modernity was a "paradigmatic moment" for playing Indian that "used Indian play to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and post-industrial life" (7). Turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, fully invested in the myth of the vanishing American, increasingly reached back to its own pre-history and viewed American Indians with retrospective nostalgia. In *Playing Indian* Deloria establishes two contradictory ways Americans have historically viewed and appropriated Indian peoples. Native Americans could be viewed as either *interior* figures "situated within American societal boundaries" or *exterior* figures "outside the temporal (and societal boundaries) of modernity" (103). Indians as interior, authentically American figures populated the imaginations of Revolutionary and nineteenth-century Americans, whereas the latter view of Indians, as exterior figures removed from normative American life, dominated the early-twentieth-century United States. As outsiders who had been both literally and figuratively pushed beyond the periphery of American society, these exterior Indians, in Deloria's words, "represented positive qualities—authenticity and natural purity—that might be expropriated, not for critique (as in the case of the

traditional noble savage), but as the underpinning for a new, specifically modern American identity” (103).

Indian Play in *The Professor's House* makes use of the Indian as an internal figure, a true American. By identifying with these authentic Americans, Tom Outland, the orphan without a distinct regional home, is able to establish his own birthright as a native son. In contrast, *The Song of the Lark* views Native Peoples as exterior figures removed from America's national consciousness. Dilworth lists several ways of appropriating Indian culture; the first example she gives is collecting: “Once collected (or represented) southwestern Indian life circulated as a spectacle for middle-class consumption in museum displays, books, magazines, and galleries, and as tourist attractions” (7). Tom Outland engages in collecting with his carefully excavated and catalogued finds and his trip to the Smithsonian. In *The Song of the Lark* Henry Biltmer, the elderly German caretaker of the Ottenburg ranch, is another collector who “had gathered up a whole chestful of Cliff-Dweller relics which he meant to take back to Germany with him some day” (303). In Biltmer we perhaps see an earlier prototype of the German collector in *The Professor's House* who buys the artifacts Tom and Roddy have accumulated and returns with them to Germany. Thea, although surrounded by artifacts in Panther Canyon, does not collect these objects: “Thea had a superstitious feeling about the potsherds, and liked better to leave them in the dwellings where she found them. If she took a few bits back to her own lodge and hid them under the blankets, she did it guiltily, as if she were being watched” (305). Sarah Wilson notes that, in contrast to Tom, who paternalistically possesses and mediates the relics on behalf of a country that is ignorant of their true value, Thea considers the Cliff Dweller artifacts outside of a specifically American worldview: “Unlike Tom, Thea sees the ancient Native American dwellings as neither a national right nor a national possession. Rather, she feels herself

‘a guest’ and finds in the ruins an individual inspiration to resist the worst side of American nationality, its assimilative hometown conventionality” (580). Thea views the Southwest as a personal rather than a national possession. Although she does not gather artifacts the way Tom does, she makes other appropriations. Her self-proclaimed status as a “guest” assumes a welcome that has never been proffered and becomes a disingenuous means of legitimizing her presence in the Sinagua’s long-abandoned homes.

Although Tom’s anthropological and nationalistic appropriation of the cultures of Indian people is easy to condemn, the uses to which Thea puts Native culture present problems that are more difficult to articulate. In the vein of Wilson’s article, most analyses of *The Song of the Lark* have cited Thea’s experience with Native culture as wholly positive, devoid as it is of the anthropological scrutiny and possessiveness that characterize Outland’s time on the Blue Mesa.¹⁷ This attitude crystallizes in Deborah Lindsay Williams’s statement that “When the two novels are juxtaposed, what emerges is Cather’s subtle condemnation of the desire to possess something as intangible as landscape: a critique of the colonizing impulse” (163). In an early feminist reading of the novel, however, Ellen Moers remarks, “The whole Panther Canyon section of the novel is concerned with female self-assertion in terms of landscape; and the dedication to landscape carries with it here the fullest possible tally of spiritual, historical, national, and artistic associations” (258). Williams is correct when she claims that Thea’s occupation of Panther Canyon does not involve physical possession and control, but as Moers indicates, Thea’s “self-assertion in terms of landscape” is not without a range of cultural and nationalistic ramifications. Both Williams and Moers are alive to the female dimensions of both the canyon itself—what

¹⁷ One notable exception is Lisbeth S. Fuisz, who not only recognizes the imperial dimensions of Thea’s use of the Southwest, but argues provocatively that we, as critics, are often guilty of unintentionally “reinscribing” such imperialism by wholeheartedly endorsing Cather’s own autobiographical designation of the Southwest as a place of potential and renewal” (40).

Moers famously calls “the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature”—and the artifacts that Thea finds there. What these critiques do not address is Thea’s whiteness and the distance it imposes between her and American Indian cultures.

When Moers claims that Thea’s “own artistic commitment makes her one with the Indian women, who with their pottery began the creation of beauty” (258), then, several lines later, remarks that “Thea relishes her aloneness” (258), she unwittingly reveals one of the great contradictions at the heart of Cather’s use of Pueblo culture. The Cliff Dweller ruins Thea explores are a model of communal endeavor, yet Thea repurposes them as a tribute to individual autonomy. Her treatment of Panther Canyon as a source of, in Wilson’s words, “individual inspiration” bears a startling resemblance to the uses New Age Americans would make of Native Peoples. Writing about appropriation of American Indian cultures in the New Age, Shari Huhndorf remarks that “‘Native’ traditions generally reflect a heavily European ethos . . . the fixation on self-discovery and self-healing articulate the very Western ideology of bourgeois individualism” (163). Thea’s use of the Native ruins for “self-discovery and self-healing” allows her to take her place as an individual in modern America. This anxiety about American individualism runs through the novel and is intimately connected to the fraught role of the female artist. *The Song of the Lark* frequently and somewhat stridently emphasizes the importance of individual achievement; however, according to Joseph Urgo, “Thea’s belief in her self-sufficiency is sharply qualified in the novel, for Cather makes it clear that one does not climb without stepping on something of someone” (137). This is certainly true, but there seems to be a kind of inevitability determining the roles of both the favored individuals who climb and those less fortunate ones on whose shoulders they stand. Ray Kennedy tells Thea fatalistically that the world is composed of winners and losers and “halfway people” who are “foreordained”

to “help the winners win and the failers fail” (123). Sixteen pages later, Dr. Archie informs Thea, “The people who forge ahead and do something, they really count . . . We all like people who do things even if we only see their faces on a cigar-box lid” (139). The “halfway people” who are fated to be mere instruments in the success or failure of others are not ultimately as important, or even worthwhile, as those who “do things.”

The Song of the Lark’s consistent linear focus on Thea’s upward climb echoes Turner’s conception of American settlement and progress. In his 1893 address Turner recounts how “the Indian trade pioneered the way for civilization. The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader’s ‘trace’; the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads” (14). Turner’s spatial paradigm of the Indian’s relation to the European allows him to naturalize European incursions into the North American continent. He continues, “The trading posts reached by these trails were on the sites of Indian villages which had been placed in positions suggested by nature, and these trading posts, situated so as to command the water systems of the country, have grown into such cities as Albany, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Council Bluffs, and Kansas City” (14). Turner imagines Indian villages fluidly transforming into large cities; these cities by virtue of their location on Native sites “suggested by nature” are themselves a part of nature rather than a corruption and a violation of the natural world. Turner’s model renders the transformation of the American landscape and the disappearance of Native Peoples as a process both natural and inevitable. The Sinagua disappear before European contact, so Cather is able to sidestep the issues of European conquest, land partition, and removal, topics that were particularly acute in the temporal context of the novel’s action. Turner performs a similar evasion, hypothesizing, “Long before the pioneer farmer appeared on the scene, primitive Indian life had passed away” (13).

Turner's designation of the Indian as the forerunner of the modern American dismantles the binary relation of savage and civilized that many white Americans used to understand their relation to indigenous people, creating a new paradigm with the Indian as the white American's evolutionary ancestor. Huhndorf claims that "[f]or Turner, it was the actions of individuals (in this case individual pioneers) engaged in historical processes, rather than the development of the race as a whole, that enabled civilization to advance. Turner's thesis thus develops social evolutionary theory by emphasizing competitive individualism and also articulates the ideology of industrial capitalism" (57). This aspect of Turner's thesis is what allows Ray Kennedy to link his own individual achievements as a nineteenth-century American with that of the pre-Columbian tribes who occupied the Southwest. Thea endorses such "competitive individualism" with regard to the Cliff Dwellers when she places the labor of the tribe's women on a hierarchical scale of value: "The stupid women carried water for most of their lives; the cleverer ones made vessels to hold it" (303). This division of labor comes very close to an articulation of a modern, capitalist ethos. Even as Thea revolts from not only the village of Moonstone but the modern city of Chicago, she brings some of the values of those communities with her to Panther Canyon.

Thea's regeneration is not only an individual but also a completely bodily project. The manner in which Thea engages in this Indian play differs from more mainstream examples of the phenomenon. In contrast to many of her male contemporaries who donned ersatz Indian dress and participated in Indian-influenced ceremonies as part of fraternal organizations, Thea's behavior is devoid of the props, pageantry, and communal activities that characterized more typical Indian play. Thea experiences purportedly Indian culture through acts of bodily mimicry that are not dependant on costumes or ceremony. The lack of material culture trappings enables

Cather to depict a fairly typical American activity as something portentous and mythic. Williams notes Thea's "physical, even visceral appreciation of the past" (157), and Marilee Lindemann describes "*The Song of the Lark*'s fierce and exuberant reclaiming of the body as a site of power, pleasure, and utopian possibility," claiming "the text stands not simply as a resistance to coercive heteronormativity but as a positive alternative to it" (56). In the Southwest, Thea resists the "coercive heteronormativity" that would have her stay in Moonstone and participate in one of the novel's disastrous marriages by enacting a kind of perfect domesticity, free of the often messy and tedious circumstances of childbearing and homemaking. Climbing the trail to Panther Canyon, Thea thinks about the native women before her who wore the path into the earth, carrying water to the houses above: "She found herself trying to walk as they must have walked, with a feeling in her feet and knees and loins which she had never known before;—which must have come up to her out of the unaccustomed dust of that rocky trail. She could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed" (253). Cather illustrates Thea vicariously experiencing that most uniquely female of all activities, motherhood. The wording of the last line of the passage emphasizes how literally physical this experience is. Inserting the word *almost* before *feel* would make the statement much more plausible: "She could *almost* feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed" makes a great deal more sense than the same sentence without the additional adjective. A literal physical experience is, however, what Cather means to convey: Thea is an artist whose medium is the voice, and this instrument, as the text repeatedly points out, is inextricably connected with her body. This experience of motherhood is remarkable in light of the novel's distrust of heterosexual domesticity. Until this point, maternity, and the heterosexual relations that precede it, have been things to be avoided at all costs. In fact, the domestic sphere in *The Song of the Lark* is considerably less idyllic than in Cather's other

fiction. Although Thea's mother is an admirable housekeeper and a sympathetic figure throughout the novel, her homekeeping appears to be more of a herculean effort against chaos than the rhythmic and creative process it is in other Cather texts.

As Lindemann indicates, the novel's problems with domesticity are rooted in ambivalence toward heteronormativity itself. Marriage is almost invariably a problematic institution. Although many of Cather's works exhibit a similar distrust of marriage, she reaches new and striking levels of vitriol in *The Song of the Lark*. Dr. Archie has a disastrously unhappy marriage. His wife dies gruesomely in an explosion that results from cleaning her upholstery with gasoline. Fred Ottenburg and his disagreeable wife live separately, and we learn from Dr. Archie that she has "general paresis (455)," often a complication of advanced syphilis. Both the doctor and Fred are essentially tricked by their conniving wives into their respective marriages. Even more troubling is the chilling Norwegian folktale Thea tells at the Nathanmeyers' house, which depicts an adulterous wife being danced off a cliff by her husband, and smashing with him on the rocks below. Themes of marital infidelity followed by graphic violence also occur in *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Leo Tolstoy, which a designing medical student lends Thea. In this novella, after deciding that romantic love is a fiction, a man catches his wife in adultery and brutally murders her. Moving from her characters' experiences to folk culture to Russian literature, Cather takes every opportunity to produce examples of marriages that have terrifying consequences, particularly for women. The paradigm in both the real and fictitious bad marriages is the same: the men are ensnared and betrayed by women, who are then doomed to die grotesquely. Most disturbing is the subtext that somehow these women deserve their violent ends, echoed in *The Professor's House*, where the mummified Mother Eve's death is cheerfully explained by Father Duchene as being the result of her husband catching her with another man.

Urgo interprets Thea's story about the wife being danced off a cliff as a kind of warning to Fred through which Thea "communicates the necessity of avoiding volitional dependence on others" (138). Indeed, when Fred, sitting with Thea in Panther Canyon asks, "suppose I were to offer you what most of the other young men I know would offer a girl they'd been sitting up nights about: a comfortable flat in Chicago, a summer camp in the woods, musical evenings and a family to bring up. Would it look attractive to you?" To which proposition Thea replies, "Perfectly hideous!" (317). The middle-class home life of the small town and the upper-class, urban domesticity that Fred offers are both equally unpalatable to Thea. Through mimicking the movements of Native women carrying both water and babies, Thea is able to experience female domestic labor and motherhood at their most ideal and organic, divorced from the cluttered and increasingly programmatic twentieth-century domestic realm.

Deloria suggests that for women at the turn of the twentieth century, "Indian role models demonstrated the difference between natural, domestic labor and unnatural work outside the home. They claimed a transcendent existence as expressions of the universal female activities of childraising and homemaking" (113-14). This elision of indigenous and European-American women's roles found its most concrete cultural expression in the organization known as the Camp Fire Girls. Founded in 1910, Camp Fire Girls began as the companion movement to Boy Scouts and illustrated the fear of the modern New Woman and her separation from the traditionally feminine roles of housekeeping and motherhood. The Camp Fire movement viewed American Indian women, traditionally seen as outside modernity, as domestic role models for American girls. Young women gave themselves Indian names, dressed in Indian attire, and did Indian dances, all the while earning "honor beads" for largely domestic activities. The use of beads as markers of achievement added another quasi-Indian touch to the Camp Fire Girls, while

avoiding the masculine and militaristic connotations surrounding the giving of badges. These correlations between traditional domesticity and Indian play tap into what Deloria terms “the importance of preexisting symbolic links between Indians and women” (111).

Such “symbolic links” undergird contemporary descriptions of the origins and purpose of the Camp Fire Movement. A 1912 article by Hartley Davis on Camp Fire Girls in the Protestant newspaper *The Outlook* rhapsodizes about the prehistoric roots of the firmly-gendered division of labor on which the group was based: “It was also in primitive days that the first grand division of labor was made. The man, the provider and defender of the family, went out into the wilderness to hunt, and the woman stayed at home and kept the fire burning and the pot boiling. And that division, with all the consequences that it entailed, has remained to a very large extent, in spite of all the changes in social life, until this day” (182). Hartley views women’s domestic labor as a kind of eternal verity enduring, “in spite of all the changes in social life,” right into the early twentieth century but tolls an ominous note with the phrase “until this day,” implying that without a hasty intervention traditional femininity faces extinction. Writing in 1919, James Franklin Page connects Camp Fire Girls’ formation more explicitly to the perceived difficulties of modern America:

The general aim of the Camp Fire Girls is to help girls prepare for a new social order, and to enable them to overcome the grinding tendency of modern machine work; to show that common life contains the materials for romance and adventure—that even the most commonplace tasks may prove adventures; to show the significance of the modest attainments of life; to put women’s work into measurable bundles; to develop in girls the power of cooperation, the capacity to keep step. (81)

Page acknowledges an altering “social order” and emphasizes the need to “keep step”; however, he believes, somewhat contradictorily, that young women can best acclimate themselves to such changes by embracing the pleasures of “common life” and “commonplace tasks”—that is to say,

domestic labor. In the words of Mary Jane McCallum, “Modern messages were imbued with anti-modernist appeal as Camp Fire organizers devised new ways for girls to participate in an increasingly industrial society without renouncing domesticity” (12).

In The Camp Fire movement striving and ambition, while encouraged, were carefully placed inside a narrowly-conceived regulatory framework. According to the their manual, *The Book of the Camp Fire Girls*, young women could earn honor beads in seven areas: “Home Craft, Health Craft, Camp Craft, Hand Craft, Nature Lore, Business, and Patriotism” (11). Notably, the categories in which girls could achieve recognition were limited to activities deemed socially acceptable for middle and upper-class women. Honors in “Patriotism,” for example, did not include agitating for the right to vote. Regarding women’s suffrage, the organization maintained a determinedly impartial official position.¹⁸ *The Book of the Camp Fire Girls* briefly addresses the issue with regards to the wearing of the ceremonial gown: “In the matter of partisan parades such as woman’s suffrage, the Camp Fire organization cannot take sides either for or against, although individual members among the girls and Guardians are entirely free to identify themselves as they choose. In such cases the ceremonial gown should not appear” (17). Despite Camp Fire’s stated neutrality regarding suffrage, the organization’s emphasis on female domesticity aligned it philosophically with anti-suffrage reformers who argued that woman’s primary civic duties were enacted within the home. In Elizabeth Duffield’s *Lucile the Torch Bearer*, one of the many novels that capitalized on Camp Fire’s popularity, when Lucile tells her father that she hopes to be a Camp Fire Girl, he responds, “Camp-fire girls

¹⁸ The 1914 edition of *The Book of the Camp Fire Girls* lists both Jane Addams, who by the twentieth-century was noted for her support of women’s suffrage as well as her settlement work (Knight 380), and Kate Douglas Wiggin, author of the beloved children’s book *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and an opponent of suffrage (“United States” 5), as members of the “Board of Electors” (“Camp Fire Girls” 6). Such disagreement on the specific nature of reformist principles reflects the miscellany of attitudes that could and did exist under the rubric of Progressive Era American thought.

you say? What's that? Anything like a suffragette?" Lucile "contemptuously" replies, "Well, Hardly," and enjoins her father to let her explain the goals of the Camp Fire Movement in order that he "can never make such a mistake again" (8).

A further goal of the Camp Fire organization concerned regulating the bodies of young American girls. In addition to the opportunity to earn honor beads in "Health Craft," one of the "Seven Points of the Law" included the injunction, "Hold on to Health." Charlotte Gulick, who together with her husband Luther founded the Camp Fire Girls, underlines the importance of physical health for young women: "I believe deeply and earnestly that spiritual health and development is a direct corollary of bodily vigor and control; that the joy that comes from the exercise of efficient muscles has its counterpart in the soul; that to exercise one is to exercise the other" (22). The organization's interest in physical wellbeing was symptomatic of the Progressive Era's concern with health and sanitation. Honors in "Health Craft" not only required girls to hike and play sports but encouraged them to "[s]leep out-of-doors or with wide open windows for two consecutive months between October and April" ("Book of the Camp Fire" 33). Girls' regulation of their own health was envisioned as translating into an increased interest in the health of other, more marginalized American women: One of the honors in Patriotism included writing a description of "Boards of Health and Labor Department requirements affecting ventilation and sanitation in stores and factories employing young girls and women in your state" ("Book of the Camp Fire" 42). The alignment of personal rejuvenation with civic responsibility provided a means of preparing young girls for participation in the public sphere, while simultaneously regulating the nature and scope of their involvement.

Thea's own experiences in Panther Canyon resemble those enshrined by the Camp Fire Movement: She hikes up ancient rock paths, ponders the soot from the cooking fires of the site's

prehistoric inhabitants, marvels at the fragments of woman-crafted pottery she finds, regains her physical and mental health, and contemplates her own place in the long line of historical endeavor. Although Thea's own Indian play initially revolves around the domestic roles of the tribe's women, she soon shifts from the traditional female role of the homemaker to the less traditional one of artist. The more she discovers regarding the tribe's women and their roles, the more Thea identifies with them, until even her daily bath, in Cather's words "came to have a ceremonial gravity. The atmosphere of the canyon was ritualistic" (304). Thea learns from Henry Biltmer that the women of the tribe were responsible for procuring and storing water, a vital task in that arid region. Biltmer informs Thea that "The stupid women carried water for most of their lives; the cleverer ones made the vessels to hold it" (303). Despite her earlier bodily identification with the water-carriers on the path, Thea is not destined to remain one of the stupid women who carry the water (or by extension the stupid women who carry infants strapped to their backs).

The Camp Fire Movement envisaged a hierarchical division of labor remarkably similar to that imagined by Henry Biltmer and embraced by Thea. The first rank in Camp Fire Girls was Wood carrier, the second Fire maker, and the third Torch Bearer. The organization envisioned young women's manual labor eventually translating into something sublime and symbolic. In much the same way Thea is able to translate mundane quotidian tasks into a larger conception of the role of the artist. During one of her now-ceremonial baths, Thea suddenly recognizes this integration of the domestic and the artistic, the contemporary and the eternal:

The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested

motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (304)

Thea unites the functional art of the Indians, high art enshrined in a museum, and her own ability to create music, recognizing all of these things as valid means of capturing what she thinks of as the essence of life. Only a writer as talented as Cather could render the common practice of Indian play virtually unrecognizable and ultimately use it to inspire a beautiful and highly modernist epiphany.

Thea's experiences in the Southwest seal her exile from her family and her community of origin. While there she completes this process of maturation and separation begun during the previous summer, when her open-air concert with her Mexican neighbors embarrasses her racist siblings, and she makes the painful realization that her brothers and sister "were among the people she had always recognized as her natural enemies" (240). In Panther Canyon Thea recalls her experience of the summer before and determines to jettison "whatever was left of Moonstone in her mind" citing the "older and higher obligations" (308) the Cliff Dwellers have taught her, which replace the more typical bonds to relatives, friends, and neighbors. In *The Song of the Lark*, playing Indian allows Thea to formulate an alternative female identity in which the role of the woman artist absorbs and contains the more traditionally feminine roles of mother and homemaker. In this all-encompassing feminine role, Thea, as Sharon O'Brien asserts, becomes "reborn as an artist—daughter to the earth and the women potters, mother to herself" (417). This creative rebirth echoes Harsanyi's dictate early in the novel that "Every artist makes himself born" (175) and Wunsch's even earlier remark, "The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing—desire" (76). The advice of her male teachers, both talented artists in their own right, does not resonate with Thea, who must see those ideas expressed in female form.

During Thea's first winter in Chicago her piano teacher, Harsanyi, confides to his wife that Thea "tires him to death" (188), and wonders how Thea herself copes with the unusual degree of talent and enthusiasm she possesses: "I've occasionally fancied that, if she knew how, she would like to—diminish" (192). Harsanyi's suggestive remarks indicate how exhausting and sometimes alienating Thea's vitality and intensity can prove, particularly during a period when women's open involvement in the public sphere was still relatively new. Contact with cultures outside the American mainstream gives Thea the freedom to grow and develop, avoiding the larger cultural pressure to "diminish" physically and emotionally into a role thought more suitably feminine. Through her appreciation of the cultural values of Moonstone's Mexican community and the generations of history and culture symbolized by the Sinagua, Thea transgresses both contemporary gender and cultural norms by gesturing toward an artistic tradition that is not defined by white masculinity. At the same time Cather makes use of established patterns of appropriation and commoditization to illustrate her character's radical self-hood. Ultimately, Thea's emergence as an opera diva proves a proto-feminist triumph; however, the art of both the novel's Mexican characters and contemporary Indian tribes such as the Navajo remains marginalized and subject to commoditization. This problem is exemplified by the jarring contrast between Spanish Johnny's role as performer for Barnum and Bailey's circus and Thea's performance as Sieglinde at the end of the novel. In *The Song of the Lark* Cather deals presciently with issues that still resonate today. The treatment of a white woman's self-affirming actions with ethnic others anticipates the problems modern feminism has had confronting racial plurality. Cather's depiction of Thea's struggle to regulate her body presages the theoretical work on women's bodies and the space they take up done in the 1980s and 1990s by Susan Bordo and others.

“WHAT WAS THE MATTER WITH HIM?”: CLAUDE’S STRUGGLE WITH SEXUALITY AND CAPITALISM IN *ONE OF OURS*

One of Ours, Willa Cather’s fifth novel, appeared in 1922 and was an immediate commercial success. 1922 was itself a signal year in literature, producing the high Modernist masterpieces *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* and ultimately becoming the year in which F. Scott Fitzgerald (heeding the prodding of Maxwell Perkins) would set *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Michael North, in *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern*, provides a lengthy exploration of the year he terms a “definitive break in literary history” (4). North’s calculated use of the term “literary history” in lieu of “literature” indicates that the year’s pivotal nature depended more on an alteration in attitudes about literature than any abrupt shift in the style or substance of the literature itself.¹⁹ 1922, after all, saw not only the advent of Virginia Woolf’s stream-of-conscious novel *Jacob’s Room* but also the publication of realist masterpiece *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis, still writing at the height of his power and popularity. Cather’s own 1922 novel concerns a rural Nebraskan named Claude Wheeler, whose eventual enlistment in the American Expeditionary Force and deployment to France prove to be the high points of his brief life. Throughout the first, pre-enlistment, portion of the novel, Claude displays a range of issues with normative masculinity and the status of the American economy. Cather constructs Claude’s

¹⁹ Cather performed her own retrospective interrogation of 1922 in her collection of essays *Not Under Forty* (1936), which included her famous remark, “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (v).

sense of alienation, not in terms of any problems with Claude himself but as a result of a deficient America.

Due in part to the shift in literary expectations 1922 witnessed, *One of Ours* has from the time of its publication consistently received a significant amount of critical scorn, initially inspiring a flurry of negative reviews from cultural luminaries, notably, H.L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, and Edmund Wilson.²⁰ The novel's widespread popularity among American readers and the conferring on Cather of the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 (an honor that was simultaneously dismissed as a mediocre tribute to bourgeois taste and anxiously coveted—often by the same individuals), further irritated the literary establishment. The negative reviews the novel originally garnered have through the decades been augmented by a steady trickle of academic disdain; the repeated disavowals of *One of Ours* by otherwise ardent Cather enthusiasts would lead Frederick Griffiths in 1984 to comment wryly, “For most Cather scholars the book still raises only the question of how Cather spent four years at the top of her powers writing a novel of which they do not approve” (2). A notable exception is David Stouck, whose 1975 book, *Willa Cather's Imagination*, includes a discussion of Cather's use of irony in *One of Ours* that sparked a still-lively critical debate.²¹ Stouck's sympathetic reading of the novel initially existed in something of a critical vacuum, but beginning in 1984 with Griffiths's analysis of the mythic underpinnings of *One of Ours* in “The Woman Warrior: Willa Cather and *One of Ours*,” the novel has

²⁰ Mencken, who had previously described *My Antonia* as “sound, delicate, penetrating, brilliant and charming” (O'Connor 87-88), though approving of the Nebraska portion of *One of Ours*, found in Cather's depiction of war “a lyrical nonsensicality . . . that often grows half pathetic” (O'Connor 142). Anticipating (and perhaps inspiring) Hemingway's dismissal of the theatricality of the battle scenes in *One of Ours*, Mencken acidly opined that Cather's novel the war occurs “not in France, but on a Hollywood movie lot” (142). Sinclair Lewis similarly chastises Cather for indulging in “all the commonplaces of ordinary war novels” (O'Connor 129). Edmund Wilson also finds fault with Cather's war descriptions, but for reasons opposite those of Mencken and Lewis. Wilson accuses Cather of engaging in a lifeless sort of verisimilitude, claiming “she has told us with commendable accuracy almost everything about the engagements she describes except the one thing that is really germane to the novel—what they did to the soul of her hero” (O'Connor 144).

²¹ For a comprehensive discussion of critical responses to *One of Ours*, particularly the sincerity versus irony debate, see Steven Trout 3-7.

consistently received more thoughtful critical attention. In 1986 Susan Rosowski called for a reappraisal of the novel, claiming it is “better than has been recognized,” and arguing that “critics’ difficulties may come partially because Cather attacks precisely those expectations by which it is being evaluated. These concern male characters and, especially, war novels, and they are represented most memorably by Hemingway” (110).

Cather separates herself from Hemingway and other modernists who treat World War I by devoting a significant amount of narrative space to Claude’s prewar life. In fact, in the same way that her treatment of war presaged what Hemingway himself would write about, the scathing critique of middle American values she offers in the first part of *One of Ours* may have impinged too closely on Mencken’s and Lewis’s own critical and literary territories. Structurally, *One of Ours* is divided between Nebraska and France, linked by the time Claude spends crossing the Atlantic on the troop ship, the *Anchises*. The contemporary setting of *One of Ours* forces Cather in the Nebraska section of the novel to write more directly and explicitly than is her wont about contemporary issues. The cataclysm of the Great War provoked Cather, like other modernists, into writing a novel that openly questioned the values of contemporary America. Surprisingly, the most pointed criticism of the United States occurs during the bucolic Nebraska portion of the book. The intrusion of World War I and Claude’s eventual enlistment, rather than increasing the scope of the novel’s realism and political engagement, allow Cather to escape from the problems of quotidian American life into the encapsulated world of warfare and Europe. One of the goals of my analysis is to determine why such a shift, from an economic perspective, is necessary.

Hemingway’s first novel treating World War I, *The Sun Also Rises*, appeared in 1926, four years after *One of Ours*, and, like Cather’s novel, concerned a male protagonist uneasy with

both his masculinity and his nationality. An aspiring but unpublished novelist when *One of Ours* came out, Hemingway may have felt intimidated by the tremendous popularity of the novel and Cather's own rising prominence. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, Hemingway penned the following legendary dismissal of the novel: "Prize. Big sales. People take it seriously. Wasn't that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *The Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode. Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere" (105).²² Guy Reynolds shrewdly suggests that perhaps Cather's "meditations on masculinity and culture" (116) unsettled the younger writer by striking too closely at his own future literary territory: "She placed at the centre of the story a young man who, in his fervent desire for culture and for Europe, became a fictional precursor of the American expatriate writers of the 1920s. The troubling confluences of the novel, especially this conjunction of a feminized sphere of culture with the sphere of stylized combat, are closer to Hemingway's confused masculine ideology than most readers, including Hemingway himself, have been prepared to admit" (116). In the same vein, Jennifer Haytock has noted a usually-unrecognized strain of "tension and attraction to domesticity" that appears in Hemingway texts that treat the First World War, further linking the younger writer with Cather (116). Alex Vernon pushes this idea further, suggesting that it might be impossible for Hemingway to write about combat without treating women: "In 'Big Two-Hearted River,' the other significant absence from Nick Adams' consciousness is love. No women in Nick's life appear in the story, as if to suppress thoughts of one—war or women—he necessarily must suppress the other" (92).

²² As Margaret O'Connor notes, Hemingway's epistolary dismissal of the novel, despite its deliberately offhand tone, was composed in November of 1923, almost immediately after Cather received the Pulitzer Prize for that year—and more than a year after *One of Ours* was released in September of 1922 and Wilson reviewed it in October of the same year (xx). The "prize" Cather received and the "big sales" of the novel perhaps weighed more heavily upon him than the authenticity of Cather's depiction of World War I.

Rosowski's earlier hint that *One of Ours* "attacks" certain "expectations" regarding "male characters" (110) illuminates a phenomenon that runs through the first portion of the novel: Claude's lack of normative masculinity. Christopher Nealon notes that despite their scornful dismissals of *One of Ours* as an inauthentic war novel, in the case of the novel's contemporary reviewers, "the evidence they use to determine that unreality is not drawn from battle episodes—they point instead at the failure of the novel to fulfill its heterosexual imperative" (75).²³ Claude's difference runs like a refrain throughout the first half of *One of Ours*: "Claude knew, and everybody else knew, seemingly, that there was something wrong with him" (90), and later, "What *was* the matter with him, he asked himself entreatingly" (104). Ample textual evidence suggests that Claude is attracted to men, and that his homosexuality forms a portion of his difficulties with American society.

Claude's conspicuous difficulty fitting into his environment recalls another titular Cather protagonist, Paul, from the short story "Paul's Case," included in *The Troll Garden* (1905). Like Claude, Paul is alienated from other male characters and the economic and social life of the surrounding community, which he finds completely devoid of beauty or sympathy. The story is set in the industrial Pittsburgh of the steel magnates, and the entire city seems geared toward the

²³ Despite their castigation of the inaccurate nature of the novel's war scenes, at no point do these reviewers cite specific examples of what exactly Cather got wrong; nevertheless, as Nealon indicates, they become expansive when discussing Cather's treatment of Claude's masculinity. Both Lewis and Wilson single out Cather's depiction of Claude's relationship with Enid for particular criticism. Lewis thinks Cather misses a golden narrative opportunity in not elaborating on the failure of Claude's marriage, which he describes as that of "a person of fine perceptions, valiant desires, and a perfectly normal body married to an evangelical prig who very much knows what she doesn't want" (128). He claims that Cather, with the "Enid problem," sets up a scenario with "infinite of possible interest" but then "throws it away" by sending Claude off to war (129). Wilson again faults Cather for a lack of intensity, complaining that the reader cannot "*experience* the frustration of Claude when his wife will not return his love" (144). Even Mencken, who is largely complimentary of Cather's treatment of the Nebraska material, chooses only one scene on which to bestow specific praise: Claude's encounter with Madame Schroeder-Schatz, the opera singer cousin of the friendly Ehrlich family from Lincoln. This scene is negligible within the novel as a whole, but it is very heteronormative (142). It becomes apparent that beyond the novel's depiction of the realities of warfare, the real area of perceived deficiency is Claude's failure to engage in typically masculine behavior. Each reviewer attributes Claude's lack of "normal" male reactions to authorial incompetency on Cather's part, never stopping to think that with Claude Cather may have consciously created a character that embodies a different type of masculinity.

acquisition of capital. Paul's father and the other men in the community "interspersed their legends of the iron kings with remarks about their sons' progress at school, their grades in arithmetic, and the amounts they had saved in their toy banks" (177). Despising Pittsburgh's industrial griminess and hemmed in by the narrowness of his father's expectations and the patriarchal civic and religious authority represented by the portraits of George Washington and John Calvin that hang above his bed, Paul, like Claude, longs for escape of any sort. For a while he is able to find congenial company and fulfill his desire for beauty through his job as a theater usher, but then that outlet is closed, and Paul becomes desperate. The theft of a thousand dollars from his employer and his subsequent flight to New York City to experience briefly the beauty and luxury he has always desired are depicted as the inevitable result of his elders' actions—"when they had shut him out of the theatre and the concert hall, when they had taken away his bone, the whole thing was virtually pre-determined" (183).

With Claude, Cather at first almost seems to be rewriting the character of Paul, since the two young men share many similarities. Neither character fits into the community surrounding him: Agrarian Nebraska stifles Claude just as industrial Pittsburgh frustrates Paul. Each boy has a strained relationship with his father and emphatically dislikes the pattern of masculinity to which he is expected to adhere. When his father determines that he is to leave college to run the Wheeler homestead, Claude's inability to resist his father's edict mirrors Paul's helplessness when his father makes him quit his job as a theater usher. Claude's father's decision forces him to leave his friends the Erlichs and the congenial community he has found for himself, creating an exile akin to Paul's own. Both Paul and Claude also gravitate toward modes of life that are not thought of as strictly masculine. Claude's attraction toward domesticity appears to be another version of Paul's longing for the theater and concert hall. Additionally, both young men are ill-

at-ease with themselves and long to be different. Paul, looking in the mirror after having sartorially transformed himself by dint of his stolen money, thinks with satisfaction, “he was exactly the kind of boy he had always wanted to be” (184). Claude’s own opinion of his appearance—“He was exactly the sort of looking boy he didn’t want to be” (17)—is Paul’s, pre-transformation.

Despite their apparent similarities, however, Paul and Claude diverge in the matter of physical and mental health. While Paul, with his compulsive lying and “morbid” desires (175), is pathologized as a “case,” Claude is depicted as physically healthy and normal. Paul’s physical problems become clear in Cather’s initial description: “Paul was tall for his age and very thin, with high cramped shoulders and a narrow chest. His eyes were remarkable for a certain hysterical brilliancy, and he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy. The pupils were abnormally large, as though he were addicted to belladonna, but there was a glassy glitter about them which that drug does not produce” (170). Paul’s narrow chest and cramped shoulders rule out physical vigor, while his “glassy” eyes with their dilated pupils indicate illness. One day when he falls asleep in a class, his poor health is discerned by a teacher, who “noted with amazement what a white, blue-veined face it was; drawn and wrinkled like an old man’s about the eyes, the lips twitching even in sleep” (172). Paul’s frailness, combined with the effeminacy of his exaggerated gestures, reflects contemporary depictions of gay men. Despite the obvious deficiencies in turn of the twentieth century Pittsburgh, the problem in this story is Paul himself. Claude, unlike the sickly Paul, has a “good physique” with “smooth, muscular arms and legs, and strong shoulders” (17). The health and normalcy of his body are repeatedly commented upon. Although he has difficulty with heterosexual relationships, he is obviously attractive to women. While attending college in

Lincoln, he is convinced by Peachy Millmore, a student at the neighboring university, to pose for her life drawing class because she thinks he has “a magnificent physique” (50).

In a reflection of his unhealthy body, Paul’s greed for sensory experience is portrayed as unwholesome, leading to “a morbid desire for cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers” (175). His desire to separate himself from his peers causes him to lie compulsively, telling them “incredible stories” (180) of nonexistent friendships and experiences. In contrast to Paul’s desire for importance and sensuous pleasure, Claude possesses more existential longings. His inexpressible desire for “something splendid” distinguishes itself against Paul’s material yearnings. Whereas Paul glorifies consumption, believing that material goods can make him “the kind of boy he had always wanted to be” (184), Claude quickly realizes the fallacy of attempting to find happiness through the acquisition of things. In a vain attempt to appear sophisticated, Claude “bought collars that were too high and neckties that were too bright” (30). He goes so far as to put himself in the hands of an enterprising tailor who, sensing his client’s ignorance, “persuaded him that as the season was spring he needed light checked trousers and a blue serge coat and vest” (31). Realizing how ridiculous his new clothes appear, and uncomfortably aware that they make him look even more provincial, Claude puts them away and ceases his experimentation with fashion. Later he realizes the gulf between consumption, embodied by his brother Ralph’s ceaseless acquisition of mechanical appliances, and contentment: “Machines, Claude decided could not make pleasure, whatever else they could do. They could not make agreeable people either” (39). Machines for Claude represent the whole glut of consumer goods available for purchase in modern America.

Unlike Claude, Paul’s use of materiality to fashion a new identity proves successful, and his charade as a young man of means goes off without a hitch, even under the supercilious gazes

of the Waldorf Astoria's urbane staff and clientele. For Jane Nardin, "Consumer capitalism—with its tacit promise that a man can actually be what his possessions imply that he is—bears much responsibility for the manner in which Paul attempts to solve his identity problem" (36). There is no reason to believe, however, that Paul cannot be "what his possessions imply that he is." A consummate actor, once Paul can "dress the part" (186), he plays his role faultlessly and no longer stands out as an oddity. Suitably garbed and situated in front of an appropriate stage set, his formerly abnormal body ceases to be conspicuous. The fraud he is perpetrating paradoxically makes him more honest, eliminating the subterfuge that was so much a part of his character in Pittsburgh: "The mere release from the necessity of petty lying, lying every day and every day, restored his self- respect. He had never lied for pleasure, even at school; but to make himself noticed and admired, to assert his difference from other Cordelia Street boys; and he felt a good deal more manly, more honest, even, now that he had no need for boastful pretensions" (186). The word *manly* suggests that the problem of Paul's gender ambiguity has been resolved now that he has assumed his desired role of an urban dandy. The absence of a privileged background and hereditary wealth do not interfere with Paul's convincing inhabitation of the part of a wealthy and cosmopolitan young man, suggesting that the lifestyle of an upper-class elite is merely a social role that can be studied and learned, as opposed to the rarefied outcome of ancestry and cultivation. Paul's own talent at playing his part indicates a certain talent at acting and reinforces his status as a frustrated actor amid *The Troll Garden's* gallery of artists.

In *One of Ours* Claude's failure to "dress the part," or project a different version of himself via material goods, illustrates Cather's departure from the Naturalism of "Paul's Case." It also, however, represents a deeper and more pointed questioning of consumer capitalism and the promises it holds out. The acuity of Cather's economic critique is aided by her decision to

place the action in *One of Ours* entirely in the twentieth century, well after the closure of the frontier. Congruence between a novel's temporal setting and its publication date is rare for Cather. Even novels that are not categorically historical fiction are often set twenty or thirty years in the past. *A Lost Lady*, which appeared in 1923, the year after *One of Ours*, is set "thirty or forty years ago" (7). In contrast to *A Lost Lady*'s retrospective opening, Claude Wheeler, in the third sentence in *One of Ours*, tells his brother Ralph, "Come down and help me wash the car" (943). Cather not only avoids the nostalgic backward glance but actively asserts her novel's contemporaneousness when she mentions the car, a hallmark of early twentieth-century progress and prosperity.

Despite Claude Wheeler's upbringing on a Nebraska farm, *One of Ours* does not possess the scenes of rural struggle that appear in Cather's earlier Nebraska novels. Claude's father, a white Protestant Yankee who was born in Maine, owns a large amount of land and lives on the income his rented farms produce. *One of Ours* thus differs markedly from *O Pioneers* and *My Ántonia*, both of which show immigrants working the land to extract a living for their families. *One of Ours* does possess many of the typical lineaments of a farm novel: the Wheelers live amongst their fields, not in town; they have hired men; the seasons of the agricultural year are duly noted. Despite its agrarian setting, *One of Ours* lacks the optimistic associations with farming and the land that resonate throughout Cather's previous Nebraska novels. As she does in both *O Pioneers* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather uses the closure of the frontier to indicate a corresponding decline in American potential and optimism. Chronologically, *One of Ours* begins just after the action in *O Pioneers* and *My Ántonia* (1918) ends. The prosperous farms in *One of Ours* should be the logical continuation of the fertile, well-watered acres that Alexandra Bergson possesses in Part Two of *O Pioneers* and the thriving homesteads owned by

My Ántonia's former hired girls and their families. *One of Ours*, however, makes the roles of landowner and farmer on the modern prairie entirely male.

Literarily speaking, this change from female to male land husbandry reflects the pervasive marginalization of women in *One of Ours*. Viewed historically, however, the agricultural landscape's lack of female workers and managers indicates the evolution of farming into an increasingly middle-class occupation in the post-frontier United States. Established farmers no longer needed to put their daughters into the fields to work as in the early days of Nebraska's European settlement. Despite the hand-wringing of American intellectuals regarding the psychic effects of the vanishing frontier, the early twentieth-century's shortage of unencumbered land proved lucrative for established farmers. The increasing agricultural prosperity Cather depicts at the end of *O Pioneers* and *My Ántonia* and the beginning of *One of Ours* owed itself not only to the generous land and the able management of intuitive agriculturalists like Alexandra, but to the discrepancy between the United States' increasing population and its agricultural output. As David M. Wrobel explains, "The early years of the twentieth century were generally good years for American farmers. With the agricultural demand of a growing population rising to meet the decelerating level of supply, farm prices rose" (86). The fact that Nathaniel Wheeler, Claude's father, is able to rent out his land to "good farmers who liked to work" (947) and live off the resulting profits indicates the shortage of homesteads and the corresponding rise in tenancy. The prosperity the Wheeler family enjoys comes as a direct result of the decreasing availability of arable western land and the corresponding increase in America's urban populations. Simply put, the disappearance of frontier lands partially enabled the solid agricultural success that the Wheelers and their real life counterparts enjoyed.

Land acquisition and the resulting prosperity, while it catapulted Americans like Claude's family to new levels of economic and political power, simultaneously contributed to the class stasis of other Americans, who, in contrast to years past, were unable to begin acquiring land and building their own independent economic futures. As a wealthy landowner, Claude's father exercises undeniable political influence in his community: "He was active in politics; never ran for an office himself, but often took up the cause of a friend and conducted his campaign for him" (8). Nat Wheeler appears at the novel's beginning to be a perfect picture of progressive community awareness: "Wheeler gave liberally to churches and charities, was always ready to lend money or machinery to a neighbor who was short of anything" (8). As Protestant members of the new middle class, the Wheeler family appears to be in sync with the progressive ethos; however, their vast land holdings complicate this picture.

Cather's discomfort with early twentieth-century norms of land ownership and usage can be partially gauged by the depiction of farm life in *One of Ours*. Despite the Wheelers' prosperity, the actual business of farming in this novel appears much less appealing than in Cather's earlier novels of the soil. Although *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* both accent the difficult aspects of farming and the violence that can sometimes erupt among overworked and isolated people, both novels ultimately portray farm life as profoundly satisfying and even ennobling. *One of Ours*, in contrast, focuses consistently and disagreeably on the unpleasant details of agrarian life. Cather plies the reader with a wealth of images, from the "stinking hides" Claude has to drive into town on the day of the circus to the "warm and smoking" bodies of the suffocated hogs he discovers after their pen collapses under a particularly heavy snowfall. Going well beyond the conventions of literary realism, the novel's depiction of the sordid incidents with which Claude must contend verges on the grotesque. Dan and Jerry, the hired men in *One of*

Ours, are vulgar and coarse and form unsettling counterparts to the farm laborers in Cather's previous novels: otherworldly Ivar in *O Pioneers!*, with his intuitive understanding of living things, and *My Ántonia*'s Otto Fuchs and Jake Barnes, who take such solicitous care of young Jim Burden. Unlike the land workers of an earlier, more pastoral Nebraska, Claude cannot engage harmoniously with the natural world but pits himself against the land as if it were an adversary. When his father's departure to join his younger brother Ralph on the Colorado ranch leaves Claude free to run the farm the way he chooses, he "flung himself on the land and planted it with whatever was fermenting within him, glad to be so tired at night that he could not think" (69). Perceived (and often imaginary) sexual connotations are inevitable in any description of farming, but the D. H. Lawrence-like tone of this particular line, especially when read within the context of the entire novel, links Claude's work on the land fairly explicitly with his uneasy sexuality. Planting is figured as almost an assault on the earth, and the resulting relief of his spent impulses finally allows Claude to rest.²⁴

The novel's nervous attitude toward land husbandry ties into larger concerns about the changing US economy, particularly the increasing consolidation of land and capital among an ever-smaller group of individuals. Indeed, at certain points in the first half of the novel, Claude comes very close to articulating Progressive Era economic thinking:

He knew that his father was sometimes called a "land hog" by the country people, and he himself had begun to feel that it was not right that they should have so much land,—to farm, or to rent, or to leave idle as they chose. It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn't have it were slaves to them. (71)

²⁴ Cather's figuration of Claude's farming as an attack on the land comes directly from the Classical Ovid's description of farming as a desecration of the pastoral. There is a deliberate contrast with Alexandra's effortless husbandry. Her remark about her agricultural success that "We hadn't any of us much to do with it. . ." echoes Virgil's description in Eclogue 4 of the earth bearing spontaneously.

This “question of property” formed a crucial part of Progressive Era economic debates. In interrogating the legitimacy of individual property ownership, Claude echoes economist Henry George, who believed that land belonged collectively to all Americans. Robert Wiebe declares, “In *Progress and Poverty* (1879) George explained how all inequities in wealth, power, and privilege stemmed from the right of a few to monopolize the rising values society placed on land” (137). Claude’s meditation on land ownership is inspired by the words of the Wheelers’ hired man Dan, who is helping him harvest corn. Dan tells him, “It’s alright for you to jump at that corn like you was a-beating carpets, Claude; it’s your corn, or anyways it’s your Paw’s. Them fields will always lay betwixt you and trouble. But a hired man’s got no property but his back, and he has to save it. I figure that I’ve only got about so many jumps left in me, and I ain’t a-going to jump too hard at no man’s corn” (70). Dan’s critique makes sense to Claude, who realizes that the hired man is a victim of a type of neo-feudalism, a “slave” to the landowner. Again, Dan’s blunt statement of economic fact is a departure from *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, where farmers take a solicitous interest in their hired help, and often the hired help needs the benevolence of the employer.²⁵

Curiously, Claude’s analysis also makes slaves, not only of landless workers, but of well-heeled property owners themselves. In *One of Ours* Bayliss Wheeler’s enclosure in the “little glass cage” (10) of his farm implement business mirrors his larger enslavement to capital.²⁶ In a

²⁵ In *O Pioneers*, Alexandra employs the vulnerable Ivar, using her prosperity and position within the community to protect him from those who would harm him. In *My Ántonia*, when Jake and Otto strike out on their own, Jim’s grandmother worries about what will happen to them. These examples are not meant to suggest any condescension or paternalism in Cather’s depiction of these relationships. The alliances between land owners and their laborers are obviously mutually beneficial, and both the labor and special talents of the hired help (Ivar’s horse doctoring, Otto’s carpentry) are valued. These relationships do, however, illustrate a harmonious and non-exploitative co-existence of land owners and laborers within clearly-established class boundaries.

²⁶ Celia Kingsbury notes the ways in which life in Frankfort occurs in a version of Foucault’s panopticon with Bayliss as the punitive “enforcer” (137). The glass cage where Bayliss does his book keeping, however, itself

parallel image much later in the novel, when Claude meets fellow serviceman Victor Morse aboard the *Anchises*, Victor, who has escaped his father's bank in Crystal Lake, Iowa, for the Royal Flying Corps, says he has nightmares "and find myself sitting on that damn stool in the glass cage and can't make my books balance; I hear the old man coughing in his private room, the way he coughs when he's going to refuse a loan to some poor devil that needs it" (281).

Landowning capitalists control the destinies of working people, but they are also the victims of their own successes, desperate Babbits who exist in narrow and proscribed circumstances. Victor tells Claude that he would "rather be a stevedore in the London docks than a banker-king in one of your prairie states" (263), and Claude dismisses his secure life in Nebraska as not "worth the trouble of getting up every morning" (89). Claude's discomfort with the culture of getting and spending that surrounds him expands until he questions the efficacy of a currency-based economy itself: "He could not see the use of working for money, when money brought nothing one wanted" (89). Retreating in dismay from his subversive thoughts, he feels vaguely ashamed of what he thinks of as a "childish contempt for money values" (88). Claude is engaging in a legitimate and timely critique of America's capitalist economic ethos and seems very close to thinking of alternative economic propositions, yet Cather undercuts the seriousness of this debate by the word *childish* and her depiction of Claude throughout the first portion of the novel as rudderless and ineffectual. Taken in context, Victor Morse's biting criticism of Midwestern provincialism proves similarly shaky. A foppish, dissolute character, Victor reverences his middle-aged English girlfriend as the epitome of European high culture, failing to discern that she is probably a prostitute. His dissipation is further highlighted when he sends the naive Claude to procure a remedy for what the ship's skeptical doctor intimates to be venereal disease.

functions as a miniature panopticon, leaving Claude's brother paradoxically as vulnerable to the gaze of others as they are to his scrutiny.

With its running critique of the petty financial goals and defective aesthetic tastes of Nebraskans, the pre-World War I portion of the novel directly questions and indicts American economic and social attitudes. At many points during the novel, Claude's curiously mature disillusionment seems to be the author's own. Writing about *One of Ours*, Blanche Gelfant has noted a "continuum between personal desire and public life that is markedly uncharacteristic of Cather's fiction" (62). Reynolds is more critical of the congruence between Claude's feelings and Cather's authorial voice: "The free indirect discourse, positioned as it is between narrator and character, irony and complicity, embodies Cather's divided response to progressivism's fading idealism. Cather's narrative voice is at once 'with' Claude in all his gaucherie and ironically distanced from him. For this reason—the merging of the narrator's voice with that of the protagonist—Cather's vaunted artistic control seemed to have slipped in the composition of this novel" (105). During the years leading up to the publication of *One of Ours*, Cather herself was not entirely comfortable with America's increasing economic prosperity and its human and environmental costs; however, as Reynolds maintains, her attitude toward progressive reforms was equally vexed. While her economic critique of the United States resembles that of progressive reformers, her distrust of organization-based benevolence and dislike of government interference keep her from advocating progressive solutions to these problems.

The closeness with which Cather's perspective often adheres to Claude's voice emerges definitively through the similarities a segment of a 1923 article written by Cather and entitled "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" shares with a passage from *One of Ours*. The journalistic piece, which appeared in *The Nation*, provides a partial index to Cather's views about post-World War I USA. While the article expresses a general sense of satisfaction in the direction the country is moving, Cather adds a cautionary note:

There is the other side of the medal, stamped with the gaudy crest of materialism . . .

Too much prosperity, too many moving picture shows, too much gaudy fiction have colored the taste and manners of so many of these Nebraskans of the future. There, as elsewhere, one finds the frenzy to be showy; farmer boys who wish to be spenders before they are earners, girls who try to look like the heroines of the cinema screen; a coming generation which tries to cheat its aesthetic sense by buying things instead of making them. (238)

In the relevant passage of *One of Ours*, Claude Wheeler meditates on the contemporary corruption of farm life, figuring it as an economic exchange of valuable agricultural products for worthless objects:

The farmer raised and took to market things with an intrinsic value; wheat and corn as good as could be grown anywhere in the world, hogs and cattle that were the best of their kind. In return he got manufactured articles of poor quality; showy furniture that went to pieces, carpets and draperies that faded, clothes that made a handsome man look like a clown. Most of his money was paid out for machinery,—and that, too, went to pieces. A steam thrasher didn't last long; a horse outlived three automobiles. (88)

The striking similarities between *One of Ours* and Cather's essay "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" demonstrate that Cather, like Claude, is ill at ease with agriculture's change from a largely subsistence lifestyle into a profit-making enterprise. In subsistence farming, of necessity most goods were handmade products of a domestic economy. The beginnings of the modern phenomenon of agribusiness dynamically changed the relation of farmers to the land, turning the soil from a source of sustenance to a source of profit. The resulting disposable income provided the impetus to purchase instead of make clothing and domestic articles. Cather makes a notable linkage between faulty economic ideals and faulty aesthetics, equating consumption with a desire to be "showy" and a corruption of "taste." Claude himself experiences the humiliation of inappropriate clothing when he wears his new and ostensibly fashionable tailor-made pants, only to realize belatedly that "there wasn't another pair of checked pants in Lincoln" (31).

Reynolds reads the quotation from *One of Ours* through the lens of progressivism: “The attack follows Cather’s familiar assault on manufacturing and the standardisation of modern America. Moreover it is a typical example of the nostalgia which was one aspect of the ‘innovative nostalgia’ of the progressives. The materialism of modern America is blasted; the integrity of an earlier, purer America is held up as an ideal” (102). Unlike Progressive Era intellectuals and reformers, however, Cather offers no solutions to this cultural dilemma—there is nothing “innovative” in her nostalgia. In fact, she directs a jab at the American Arts and Crafts Movement and its utopian vision of democratic design by having the tasteless and vulgar Ralph advocate the redecorating of the old-fashioned Wheeler parlor in “Mission oak” (44). The design and production of Mission style furniture represented an attempt to revive an interest in the work of American craftsman and create a uniquely American decorative aesthetic through the construction and sale of sturdy, aesthetically-pleasing furniture that was affordable enough for the rising middle class to purchase.

The distaste for contemporary “materialism” Reynolds describes and the resultant nostalgia manifest themselves most clearly in the dichotomy between mass-produced and handcrafted objects that crops up repeatedly in the Nebraska portion of *One of Ours*. In the first half of the novel, machine culture and the conformity that has begun to permeate the country are styled as mostly masculine phenomena. Whereas Claude dislikes both patent machines and the consumer economy that produces and promotes them, his brothers embrace America’s abundance of consumer goods. Claude’s younger brother Ralph is a diligent purchaser of machines, and his older brother Bayliss owns a prosperous farm equipment dealership. Claude’s mother, in contrast, despairs of a complicated cream separator, telling her youngest son Ralph who claims “every up-to-date farmer uses a separator” that “it’s a great deal more work to scald

and fit together than it was to take care of the milk in the old way” (957). Mahailey, the Wheelers’ hired woman, has similar difficulties with the expensive gadgets Ralph buys: “As soon as Mahailey had got used to a washing-machine or a churn, Ralph, to keep up with the bristling march of events, brought home a still newer one. The mechanical dishwasher she had never been able to use, and the patent flat irons and oil-stoves drove her wild” (957). Ralph’s concern with the family appearing “up-to-date” causes him to buy machine after machine, most of which wind up collecting dust in the cellar. When Claude remonstrates with him, Ralph tells his older brother reproachfully: “Mother’s entitled to all the labour-saving devices we can get her” (957). In this exchange, Cather transparently mocks the rhetoric of American innovation by having foolish Ralph deploy such trendy advertising catch-phrases as “up-to-date” and “labour-saving,” while illustrating how powerless Claude is in the face of his brother’s bland satisfaction with manufactured goods.

Positive evocations of material culture in *One of Ours* emerge exclusively from the novel’s female characters and are domestic in substance and context. Within the modern Nebraska of *One of Ours*, however, the domestic realm proves unstable and vulnerable. While men represent an increasingly programmatic and homogenous America, the novel’s significant female characters seemingly exist outside the economic maelstrom and embody the nostalgia Reynolds finds to be an integral element of progressivism. An antidote to Ralph’s cellar full of gadgets and the increasing prevalence of factory-made objects can be found in Mahailey’s quilts, aesthetically-pleasing domestic objects that owe nothing to machinery and mass production. Mahailey’s finest—and indeed almost her only—possessions are three patchwork quilts in different patterns sewn by her mother and “given to her for a marriage portion” (64). These quilts (pieced in the “log cabin,” “laurel leaf,” and “blazing star,” patterns) have traveled with

Mahailey from the mountains of Virginia where she was born all the way to Nebraska. Intricately hand-pieced and quilted and “interlined with wool off the backs of Virginia sheep, washed and carded by hand” (64), these quilts are the product of a local domestic economy that is the antithesis of mass production. Mahailey, whose loving and unconditional acceptance of Claude is one of the best things about his early life, plans to give him the blazing star patterned quilt, the finest of the lot, when he gets married. Discussing quilts in the context of Cather’s life and fiction, Ann Romines explains that the blazing star pattern was often used by nineteenth-century women for their ““masterpiece quilts,”” creations that demonstrated the full scope of a quilter’s ability (19). Mahailey’s plan to bestow on Claude a quilt that is both a technical demonstration of quilting skill and a tangible representation of her own mother’s love indicates her view of him as a surrogate son, while also placing him within the feminine tradition of the creation and reception of woman-made objects that historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has enduringly termed “the female world of love and ritual.”

As the quilts suggest, Claude’s relationship with Mahailey finds correlatives in the world of domestic objects. At the novel’s beginning, when he gets out of bed on the morning of the fair Claude bypasses the relative luxury of the up-to-date wash room with its “two porcelain stands with running water” because the “bowls were ringed with dark sediment” (3), preferring to wash his face in an old-fashioned but clean “tin basin” belonging to Mahailey. Claude recognizes and shares Mahailey’s feelings about the importance of simple, utilitarian objects:

When she broke a handle off her rolling pin, he put on another, and he fitted a haft to her favorite butcher knife after every one else said it must be thrown away. These objects, after they had been mended, acquired a new value in her eyes, and she liked to work with them. When Claude helped her lift or carry anything, he never avoided touching her,—this she felt deeply. She suspected that Ralph was a little ashamed of her, and would prefer to have some brisk young thing about the kitchen. (22)

By repairing Mahailey's butcher knife rather than simply buying her a new one, Claude quietly separates himself from Ralph and the world of commercial, machine-made objects. Furthermore, his care of her worn and damaged utensils reflects his respect for Mahailey's own aging, work-worn body, which Ralph would reduce to the status of an out-of-date and inefficient appliance. Mahailey's renewed appreciation of her kitchen implements reflects the layer of individuality Claude's repairs have added to these items. Similarly, Mahailey's own idiosyncrasies of speech and behavior, lovingly recounted by Cather, show that the hired woman, like her cherished kitchen tools, has through long experience attained an irreplaceable individual identity.

Illiterate and poor, Mahailey is one of the most disenfranchised characters in *One of Ours*. Despite her eccentric demeanor and lack of formal education, Mahailey is "shrewd in her estimate of people" (21). She also asserts herself against the masculine dominance of Ralph, both on her own and Claude's behalf. When Ralph is packing up household goods to take with him to the new ranch in Colorado, Mahailey is "outraged" (64). Fearing Ralph will also requisition her few possessions, she removes her quilts and featherbed from their summer storage in the attic to her own room where she can keep an eye on them. When Mrs. Wheeler remonstrates with her Mahailey retorts, "I'm just a-goin' to lay on my fedder bed . . . or direc'ly I won't have none. I ain't a-goin' to have Mr. Ralph carryin' off my quilts my mudder pieced fur me" (65).

Continuing to pillage the domestic stores, Ralph tells Mahailey to pack a barrel with preserved fruit including his favorite "pickled peaches," but she tells him there are no peaches because air got into the jars during canning, spoiling the fruit. Mahailey has actually hidden away the peaches and various other choice preserves for Claude and Mrs. Wheeler and fobbed off the remains of the previous year's canning on Ralph (66-7). As trivial as these self-assertions seem,

they represent Mahailey's courageous autonomy within her own world, the domestic sphere of the Wheeler farm.

Unlike Mahailey, Claude's mother is both unable and unwilling to resist masculine control—particularly that of her spouse: “She accepted everything about her husband as part of his rugged masculinity, and of that she was proud, in her quiet way” (963). The nature of Mr. Wheeler's “rugged masculinity” reveals itself in one particularly vicious practical joke he perpetrates when Claude is five. Mrs. Wheeler has asked her husband to pick the cherries from an overburdened tree, since she cannot reach the limbs, and using a ladder would injure her back. She speaks “complainingly,” irritating her husband, who “was always annoyed if his wife referred to any physical weakness, especially if she complained about her back” (963). Unbeknownst to his wife and son, Mr. Wheeler proceeds to chop down the tree, then announces the cherries can now be picked “as easy as can be” (963). Confronted by the “bleeding stump” of the massacred tree, Claude flies into a rage, but his mother negates his anger: “Son, son,” she cried, “It's your father's tree. He has a perfect right to cut it down if he wants to” (964). Mrs. Wheeler masochistically accepts her husband's lesson in compliance, affirming not only his dominance of her but his patriarchal control over the natural world itself. Addressed twice as “son,” Claude becomes an unwilling subordinate in his father's paradigm of controlling masculinity. The “beautiful round-topped cherry tree, full of green leaves and red fruit” (963-4) is a feminine image of life and fertility, but its destruction, as Pearl James indicates, is a figurative castration (98).²⁷ Such a mutilation paradoxically becomes, not a symbol of male impotence, but a terrifying image of female powerlessness in the face of male authority.

²⁷ Cather's fiction draws numerous parallels between women and trees, particularly fruit-bearing trees. The reader may remember Antonia in the orchard at the end of *My Antonia*; Marie's comment to Emil in *O Pioneers* that she could have worshiped trees, before the two of them die beneath a mulberry tree; Lucy's frantic protection of her family's orchard in *Lucy Gayheart*; and Nancy sitting in the cherry tree in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

The cherry tree's destruction reflects the vulnerability of the Wheeler farm's female inhabitants: Mrs. Wheeler, Mahailey, even the mare, Molly, whom the hired man Jerry mercilessly abuses, are all susceptible to the capricious masculinity of Claude's father. So long as his allegiance lies with the household's women and the feminine values they represent, Claude himself is similarly vulnerable to his father's whims. Nathaniel Wheeler's action carries an economic lesson as well: in the mercantile, machine-driven world of the novel, fruit-bearing trees have little value: "The orchards, which had been nurtured and tended so carefully twenty years ago, were now left to die of neglect. It was less trouble to run into town in an automobile and buy fruit than it was to raise it" (89). The farmers' disregard for their orchards in *One of Ours* contrasts with the veneration of trees in Cather's earlier Nebraska novels, again reminding the reader that the twentieth-century agrarian landscape in *One of Ours* is not the pastoral realm of *My Ántonia*, where Ántonia tells Jim Burden that in the early days of her married life the trees in her newly-planted orchard "were on my mind like children" (329).

As the episode of the cherry tree illustrates, Claude is doomed to be a victim of his mother's eager capitulation to male authority in its various forms. Gelfant traces Claude's inability to assert himself to his mother's example: "Claude has learned from his mother the lesson of resignation and silence, a way of behaving helplessly that constitutes a subtle complicity in his own victimization" (69). Rosowski maintains that Mrs. Wheeler represents "a denial of physical reality and an indiscriminate adherence to abstraction" (101). Later in the novel Mrs. Wheeler, with her dualistic, apocalyptic worldview, will embrace the inchoate but idealistic rhetoric surrounding the war. While Claude's somewhat ineffectual mother's transformation into the novel's most vigorous proponent of America's entry into World War I

appears superficially puzzling, it is precisely this tendency to retreat from reality into a vague idealism that enables Mrs. Wheeler to display such fierce hawkishness.

The embrace of abstract ideals leads Claude's mother to adhere to a particularly rigid version of Christian orthodoxy. In direct opposition to the radical and often culturally-subversive feminine Christian values with which many nineteenth-century female authors imbued their heroines, Cather casts Mrs. Wheeler's devout Christianity as yet another conduit for paternalistic influence. Lacking Mahailey's perceptiveness about people, Claude's mother "was not discriminating about preachers" and "believed them all chosen and sanctified" (966). Her reverence for men of the cloth leads her to take the advice of the unctuous Brother Weldon and send Claude to Temple College instead of to the academically-superior State University. Claude rejects what he views as an emasculating version of Christianity, despising "the young men who said in prayer meeting that they leaned on their Saviour" (981) and refusing to become one of their number.²⁸ Despite his rejection of organized religion, Claude nevertheless allows himself to be socialized into a feminized pattern of conduct and is unable to combat the control of his father or brothers.

Mrs. Wheeler and her relationship with her son form one of the chief puzzles of *One of Ours*. Claude's mother's vague, ineffectual nature has disastrous consequences for Claude. Although she reveres her husband's domineering nature, Mrs. Wheeler expects Claude to emulate her own model of submissive piety. Despite the fact that Mrs. Wheeler at times seems unconsciously to collude with others in confining and thwarting her son, her love for him is

²⁸ Despite his distrust of religion's supernatural aspects, Claude admires the teachings of Christ and considers himself a Christian. According to Reynolds, "his idealism is the Christianised Utopianism of progressivism" (102).

genuine, and he, in turn, possesses a fierce affection for her.²⁹ Mrs. Wheeler has passed on to Claude her tendency toward abstract idealism, although in him it takes a different form than his mother's extreme religiosity. Perhaps because of this tendency toward abstraction, Claude's mother is an avid reader, and in the course of the novel we see her enjoying *Paradise Lost* and *Bleak House* and quoting Longfellow. It is she who tells her son the story of Joan of Arc that fires his imagination, and Claude's sensitivity to art and literature is a direct inheritance from her. Paradoxically, the very aspects of Claude's mother's character that are so frustrating to both Claude and the reader partially constitute what makes Claude himself unique.

Despite their frequent disagreements about religion and education, Claude is able to unite with his mother, as with the novel's other women, in the realm of tangible objects. Mrs. Wheeler, like Mahailey and Claude, dislikes the newfangled machinery procured by Ralph, preferring to perform certain chores by hand. She and her son both enjoy strong, well-brewed coffee during meals, a pleasure abstemious Bayliss frowns on. Mrs. Wheeler and Claude are likewise joined in their desire to protect the old-fashioned parlor from Ralph's efforts to "re-furnish the room in Mission oak" (44). Furthermore, although he is incapable of choosing attractive, appropriate clothes for his own wardrobe, the subdued "grey material" Claude selects for his mother's new housedresses pleases both of them (69). Claude himself rationalizes the contradictions in his mother's nature by invoking something akin to Matthew Arnold's idea of "the buried life" as expressed in the 1852 poem of the same name: "In his own mother the imprisoned spirit was almost more present to people than her corporeal self" (178).³⁰ In his own frustration, Claude

²⁹ Mrs. Wheeler is another version of Aunt Georgiana from Cather's early short story "A Wagner Matinee." Both characters were based on Willa Cather's own Aunt Franc, a musician and graduate of Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary who moved to Nebraska the same year Cather did.

³⁰ "The Buried Life" resonates throughout *One of Ours*, as it does in other modernist texts as diverse as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. In Arnold's poem, the following lines might refer directly to Claude: "There rises an unspeakable desire /After the knowledge of our buried life; /A thirst to spend our fire and restless force /In tracking out our true, original course" (47-50).

identifies with the novel's similarly repressed female characters; not only his mother, but Mahailey and Gladys Farmer have these captive spirits, these "unappeased longings and futile dreams" (179), reflecting Arnold's "nameless feelings that course through our breast" and are doomed to "course on for ever unexpress'd" (62-3).

Gladys Farmer, Claude's old classmate and now the music teacher at Frankfort's high school is perhaps the female character with whom Claude most strongly identifies. North proposes that "Gladys's name, which is the female version of Claude, suggests that she is not just suited to him, but perhaps *is* him, expressed in female form" (186).³¹ North's idea is reinforced by Gladys's status as Claude's "aesthetic proxy" during high school.³² It also partially explains why the two never have a romantic relationship, something Sinclair Lewis wondered at in his review of *One of Ours*. Gladys is romantically involved with Claude's unsympathetic older brother Bayliss, and Claude resents her for this compromise, obtusely failing to see that his relationship with Enid Royce betokens a similar surrender. Bayliss and Enid, with their implacable moral stances and delicate digestive systems, are remarkably similar characters, further indicating the doubling between Claude and Gladys.

From her Dutch grandfather, Gladys has inherited a "rich tulip-like complexion" (1029) and "the full red lips, brown eyes, and dimpled white hands which occur so often in Flemish portraits of young women" (1028). Despite these physical attributes, her appearance is not universally admired: she is "a trifle too heavy, too mature and positive to be called pretty" (1028-29). Gladys's full, old fashioned figure contrasts with the fashionably slender "heroines of the cinema screen" of whom Cather takes such a dim view in "Nebraska: The End of the First

³¹ *Gladys* is a Welsh variant of *Claude*, Latin for "lame." Cather's naming represents both the characters' duality and the way they are hobbled by the society in which they live.

³² Linda Westervelt addresses the presence of opposite gender doubles in Cather's fiction.

Cycle.” Old fashioned in more than appearance, Gladys also represents the now-arcane values of frontier Nebraska. The daughter of a Kentucky-born widow in straitened circumstances who must work for her living, Gladys is a throwback to the hired girls whose industry Cather lauds in *My Ántonia*. Like the hired girls she is enriched by her connection to the older cultures of her Dutch grandfather and southern American mother. Her appreciation of the Trevor place, one of the area’s first homesteads, further associates her with the values of Nebraska’s pioneer past. She is also able to enter imaginatively into Claude’s feeling for the house he builds for Enid, again illustrating the novel’s coherence between women and domestic spaces.

Despite these positive qualities, Gladys is emblematic of the failure of female power and domestic inadequacy that the novel addresses. Celia Kingsbury judges her pretty clothes and hats evidence of her nonconformity (and indeed the town does condemn her extravagance); however, her focus on purchasing attractive clothing rather than paying the back taxes on her mother’s home could also represent a capitulation to the materialistic values that Cather excoriates in “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle.” Gladys’s focus on clothing, while treated neutrally in *One of Ours*, becomes problematic in the context of both Cather’s earlier Nebraska novels, where young women eschew frivolous purchases in order to help their families buy farms and attain prosperity. Gladys’s acceptance of furs from Bayliss and her willingness to be courted by him when she obviously detests the values he embodies provide further evidence of her surrender to male control. Even though, as Kingsbury establishes, Gladys’s behavior can on one level be read as a subversive flouting of Frankfort’s stifling social norms; in a larger sense such a rebellion is ultimately unproductive and serves to restrict her behavior further. Since Bayliss’s gift of furs has made her conspicuous, in order to placate the town gossips she must give up the

concert in Omaha to which she has looked forward. For the music-loving Gladys, this is a great aesthetic loss.

Although Mahailey, Mrs. Wheeler, and Gladys all provide some degree of support to Claude, as women living within the restrictive confines of this modern, masculine version of rural Nebraska, they are restricted in the impact they can make on society. Although they are able to offer him sympathy and companionship, they are powerless to create any real avenue of escape. Claude at last finds a genuine alternative to his family's shallow materialism when he becomes acquainted with the bohemian and intellectual Erlich family, whom he meets while attending the denominational college in Lincoln that he loathes. Americans who embrace their German heritage, the Erlichs introduce him to a life focused on culture and good conversation rather than accruing wealth and airing dogmatic opinions. Claude envies the Erlichs' lifestyle and assumes they must be wealthy but finds himself mistaken: "They merely knew how to live . . . and spent their money on themselves instead of machines to do the work and machines to entertain people. Machines . . . could not make pleasure, whatever else they could do" (976). A family of six sons presided over by a widowed mother, the Erlich household is for Claude an idealized fraternal space uncorrupted by patriarchal control.

The easy comradeship Claude finds among the Erlich brothers prefigures the "band of brothers" he will later belong to as a soldier, while the family's Old World sensibilities introduce him to the European culture he experiences during his deployment. Like other aesthetic experiences in *One of Ours*, Claude's time with the Erlichs is suffused with political significance. In the Erlichs' comfortable sitting room Claude learns to engage in debate and defend his own opinions, practices that counter the intellectual complacency to which he is accustomed: "It wasn't American to explain yourself; you didn't have to! On the farm you said

you would or you wouldn't; that Roosevelt was alright, or that he was crazy. You weren't supposed to say more unless you were a stump speaker,—if you tried to say more, it was because you liked to hear yourself talk. Since you never said anything, you didn't form the habit of thinking. If you got too much bored, you went to town and bought something new" (40). Claude connects economic consumption with intellectual poverty, positing cheap consumer goods as a kind of opiate of the masses. His interactions with the Erlich brothers mark the first time in the novel Claude feels at home with a group of men; however, it is Mrs. Ehrlich's presence that makes this utopian male space possible.

Mrs. Erlich, the matriarch of the Lincoln family Claude admires so extravagantly, like Gladys Farmer, is described pictorially. In appearance she is "old fashioned and picturesque" resembling "the ladies in old daguerreotypes" (974). Both Gladys and Mrs. Erlich are figuratively framed by Cather as anachronistic portraits. Mrs. Ehrlich's tasty cooking, her "lentil soup, and potato dumplings, and wiener schnitzel," provides a palatable alternative to the "plain fare" (1009) offered by Mahailey and Mrs. Wheeler. The Erlichs are German, and Mrs. Erlich carries on traditional foodways, telling Claude as he watches her holiday baking about "the almost holy traditions that governed this complicated cookery . . . She told off on her fingers the many ingredients, but he believed there were things she did not name: the fragrance of old friendships, the glow of early memories, belief in wonder-working rhymes and songs" (41). By learning food preparation from Mrs. Erlich, Claude figuratively becomes a daughter to her, further illustrating the novel's depiction of nontraditional familial relationships. Just as Mahailey's hand-made quilts repudiate mass-produced domestic objects, Mrs. Erlich's European Christmas cakes with their arcane and time-consuming preparation are the antithesis of the

standardized recipes that were being promoted by women's magazines and the emergent domestic science movement.

The modern domestic science movement emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and advocated the application of scientific principles to the running of the American home, with particular emphasis placed on the preparation of food. A 1913 cookbook review in *The Boston Cooking School Magazine* opines, "Food to the body is as fuel to the engine. Good wholesome food hygienically prepared gives life, vigor, energy, and efficiency. Therefore modern cookery has become, not merely an art, but a science" (Hill 318).³³ Reformist efforts were often specifically directed at the households of recent immigrants to the United States who were instructed to forgo their traditional recipes in favor of a blandly homogenized "American" cuisine. According to Laura Shapiro the advice of these "cooking authorities" disrupted cultural and generational continuity, since "the homely, practical advice of a mother or grandmother was too primitive to be taken seriously any longer" (85). To Claude and Mrs. Erlich food has the power to preserve cultural traditions and evoke memories. In contrast, the "science" of "modern cookery" views the body as a machine and food as just so much fuel.

Even though Cather's depiction of Mrs. Erlich is uniformly positive, her influence, like Mahailey's, does not extend beyond the tiny realm of her own home, and she is powerless to exert any influence on the relentless current of American progress. Indeed, the house itself, site of so much happy masculine camaraderie, may be in danger. Several of the Erlich boys have gone into business together, using the family home as collateral. Claude's brother Bayliss, exhibiting his usual pessimism, predicts failure for the Erlichs, sneering, "That old woman will

³³ The cookbook to which this review refers is *The New Cooking* by Lenna Frances Cooper. Cooper was a nurse and eventual dietician who worked at John Harvey Kellogg's sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan. Cather probably intended the "Michigan sanatorium" (1071) Enid Royce and her mother visit annually to be a reference to Battle Creek.

find herself without a roof one of these days” (78). Bayliss is an unimaginative and unsympathetic character, but as an emissary of the world of business and capital, his economic prophecies have a way of coming true. When he proffers Claude an analysis of the Erlichs’ business prospects, telling his brother, “I expect they’re too fond of good living. They’ll pay the interest and spend whatever’s left entertaining their friends” (78), he is probably correct. In the capital-driven American world of *One of Ours*, those who put people and happiness before the acquisition of possessions are doomed to failure. Gladys Farmer believes that all good things “were shut up in a prison, and that successful men like Bayliss Wheeler held the keys” (134). Bayliss and those like him dominate the Nebraska of the first part of the novel. With his pocket notebook of expenses and his belief that coffee is a harmful “stimulant,” Claude’s older brother is a risible character, yet he wields undeniable power.³⁴ His economic authority is a different kind of masculine control than the physical power and force of character exhibited by his father, but it proves equally powerful. Gladys’s initial, unwilling acceptance of Bayliss’s dominance indicates not only female characters’ ineffectuality, but how closely that powerlessness is aligned with larger economic concerns involving land and capital.³⁵

The first part of the novel illustrates Claude’s formless anxiety and sense of difference condensing into a specific critique of the lifestyles of his family and their neighbors. The influence of the Erlichs encourages him to expand his critique from his immediate surroundings to larger social and economic ideas. Claude’s questioning of economic and social norms thus moves beyond the realm of his family’s farm and the Midwest, ultimately building into a larger

³⁴ Bayliss’s dismissal of coffee is another indicator of his kinship with the moral and hygienic crusades of reformers like Kellogg, who inveighs against the harmful nature of coffee and its relation to sexual deviancy, claiming, “The influence of coffee on stimulating the genital organs is notorious” (392).

³⁵ In certain novels, most notably *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *The Hamlet* (1940), William Faulkner similarly equates masculinity and the acquisition of capital with the subjugation and disenfranchisement of women.

interrogation of the priorities and future of the United States as a whole. After he has left college to run the Wheeler farm and just before he begins his courtship of Enid, Claude spends a month in Colorado visiting his brother Ralph at the ranch the Wheeler family has recently acquired and traveling around the unfamiliar state.³⁶ In Colorado Springs, he wants “to talk to some of those pretty girls he saw driving their own cars along the streets, if only to say a few words” (103). Indeed, during this trip the most exciting thing that happens to Claude is having a conversation with one of these “pretty girls” who offers him a ride in her car: “It was only twenty minutes or so, but it was worth everything else that happened on this trip” (103). Claude concludes his trip with a visit to the Denver State House, where he examines “the collection of Cliff Dweller remains” the building housed (103).³⁷ After his visit to the Natural History Society’s holdings, he sits on the State House steps watching the sun set behind the mountains and meditating on the painful nature of youth and his own feelings of loneliness. Claude’s gaze moves from the silhouette of the mountains in the background to the Capital’s statuary in the foreground: “The Statue of Kit Carson on horseback, down in the Square, pointed Westward; but there was no West, in that sense any more. There was still South America perhaps; perhaps he could find something below the Isthmus. Here the sky was like a lid shut down over the world; his mother could see saints and martyrs behind it” (104).

In the space of a page Cather presents a seeming mishmash of events and ideas that in reality bear a significant, if convoluted, relation to one another, linking as they do Claude’s private struggles with larger national dilemmas. Claude is a tourist in Colorado, a prime spot for

³⁶ The acquisition of this “fine, well-watered” (58) Colorado ranch illustrates both Claude’s father’s business acumen and the shortage of productive farmland.

³⁷ Cather is referring to the State Historical and Natural History Society of Colorado, which administered “a library and a museum with historical, ethnological (largely cliff dweller), and natural history collections, occupying rooms at the State House in Denver and formally opened to the public Aug. 14, 1896” (Thompson 168).

tourists in the early twentieth century. He wants to talk to young women but does not know how and is elated when one gives him a ride, viewing it as a validation of his normalcy. These young women drive cars, indicative both of prosperity and the liberated “New Woman.” He is discontented, and the sublime beauty of the sun setting behind the mountain ranges only magnifies his unhappiness: “It was a lonely splendour that made the ache in his breast even stronger. What *was* the matter with him, he asked himself entreatingly. He must answer that question before he went home again” (104). The pretty, modern girls with their cars in the thriving resort town of Colorado Springs indicate the changing West and provide a contrast to the Cliff Dweller remains in Denver, which literally embody the prehistoric West that figured so prominently in *The Song of the Lark* and will later animate *The Professor’s House*. Claude, sitting on the State House Steps, sees the statue of Kit Carson pointing westward to a non-existent frontier line and realizes with finality that the Old West is gone for good.³⁸ Even the western sky eludes its typical depiction as a limitless vista extending the landscape, becoming instead a claustrophobic dome effectively capping the world. For Claude the only escape seems to be the spiritual transcendence in which his mother, with her visions of “saints and martyrs,” engages. But because of his pragmatic rejection of the more supernatural manifestations of Christianity for the progressive social gospel, this avenue of retreat, like the frontier, is closed to him.

Cather’s insertion of this scene is initially puzzling. The frontier, mythic or literal, has never seemed to be a preoccupation of Claude’s: there are no childhood incidents in the novel

³⁸ Claude’s dismissal of the meaningless statue of Kit Carson reflects the distaste for American institutions found in the first half of *One of Ours*. In contrast, when Claude leaves New York for France and he and his fellow soldiers catch a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, he feels a “thrill” at the beauty and power of one of the most indelible symbols of America: “Post-card pictures had given them no idea of the energy of her large gesture, or how her heaviness becomes light among the vaporish elements” (234). The tremendous difference in Claude’s responses to these respective pieces of statuary indicates the transformation in his attitude toward the United States wrought by his enlistment in the American Expeditionary Force.

that correspond to Jim Burden's reading *The Life of Jesse James* on the train to Nebraska or Thea Kronborg gazing at the remains of the great wagon trails in Wyoming. This image of the closed frontier, while typical of Cather, seems faintly anachronistic within the context of *One of Ours*. The Wheelers' agricultural prosperity may result from the diminishing availability of frontier land, but Claude, the child of transplants from New England, does not grow up with a sense of himself as a pioneer. Wrobel connects Claude's acknowledgment of the absent frontier with his eventual journey to France and World War I: "[T]he war in Europe represented a release from the claustrophobia of the closed-frontier West . . . and Wheeler shipped overseas to be like the heroic pioneers" (96).³⁹ Wrobel's elegant linkage of the American West with the Western Front helps explain Claude's view of Kit Carson and the closed frontier. Other aspects of this scene remain unclear, however, namely Claude's anxiety around young women and his determination to discover "What was the matter with him?" (104).

In *The Song of the Lark* Thea Kronborg is able to use the last remaining American frontier space, the desert lands of the Southwestern United States, to reconcile gender anxieties stemming from the contradictions between the role of the artist and normative femininity in turn of the twentieth century America. In contrast, Claude can find no space within the boundaries of the United States in which to reinvent himself, a fact that, as Wrobel notes, eventually causes him to appropriate the trenches of France as a proving ground for his masculinity. For Claude, France also represents place of possibility where American idealism can flourish. In fact, once Claude realizes the magnitude of World War I and accepts the necessary involvement of the United States on the side of the Allies, his thoughts make a peculiar leap backwards to the moment on the State House steps: "He was afraid for his country, as he had been that night on

³⁹ Wrobel's use of this scene from *One of Ours* in a broadly-conceived work of Western history illustrates the novel's connection to larger ideas regarding the American West.

the State House steps in Denver, when this war was undreamed of, hidden in the womb of time” (198). Claude’s problems with expressions of heterosexual masculinity combine with his unease regarding America’s current economic situation and its relation to the absence of frontier space to help determine his belief that the United States should enter the War. For Claude, combat in France is ultimately necessary to shore up his status as both a man and an American, his patriotism having become as questionable as his masculinity. More immediately, however, Claude chooses to establish normative masculinity by returning home to Frankfort and pursuing his childhood friend Enid and a heterosexual relationship.

In contrast to the other women in *One of Ours*, Enid Royce is not old fashioned in her sensibilities; rather, she embodies male attitudes of control and modernity. Enid is the most complete example of a progressive woman in Cather’s canon, and her opinions and activities represent the programmatic, reform-minded aspects of progressivism that Cather loathed. Her vegetarianism and the yearly trips she and her mother take to a Michigan sanitarium indicate her embrace of dietary fads; her housekeeping reflects contemporary principles of hygiene and efficiency embodied by the domestic science movement. Separating herself from Mahailey and Mrs. Wheeler, who eschew most labor-saving devices, Enid embraces current housekeeping technology, even using a washing machine. Her bland, uninspired cooking sets her apart from Mrs. Erlich and her traditional German recipes. A meal Enid prepares for Claude consists of “a dish of canned salmon with a white sauce; hardboiled eggs, peeled and lying in a nest of lettuce leaves; a bowl of ripe tomatoes, a bit of cold rice pudding, cream and butter” (173). The conspicuous lack of seasoning in this meal signals Enid’s allegiance to Progressive Era tenets of food preparation. In the matter of seasoning, Ellen FitzSimmons Steinberg and Eleanora Hudera Hanson quote Ella Kellogg, wife of physician and dietary reformer John Harvey Kellogg, as

claiming that “‘high seasonings lead to intemperance’” as a result of “‘the perversion of the use of the sense of taste’” (91). As Enid’s dressed-up canned salmon illustrates, white sauce, one of the mainstays of the laboratory kitchen, was the pallid stand-in for the prohibited savor of onions, garlic, or mustard. According to Shapiro, “There was virtually no cooked food that at one time or another was not hidden, purified, enriched, or ennobled with white sauce—among scientific cooks it became the most popular solution to the problem of undressed food” (86). The very color of white sauce must have reassured modern cooks, indicating as it did hygiene and purity.

The reformist attitude Enid adopts extends well beyond the kitchen. Having read in her “poultry books” that hens will lay without the ministrations of a rooster, and the resulting infertile eggs have less chance of spoiling, Enid confines the farm’s unfortunate rooster to a separate coop and celibacy. Claude’s friend and neighbor Leonard Dawson is outraged by Enid’s innovative methods of husbandry exclaiming, “That woman’s a fanatic. She ain’t content with practising prohibition on humankind; she’s begun now on the hens” (175). On its surface, the “prohibition on humankind” to which Dawson refers is the Prohibition of alcohol, culminating in the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919. Enid is a fervent proponent of Prohibition and works tirelessly on its behalf. Dawson’s remark, however, also refers to Enid’s dislike of sexual activity—for both chickens and humans. Immediately after their wedding, Enid banishes Claude from the stateroom they are to share with the devastatingly banal remark, “I’m not feeling very well. I think the dressing on the chicken salad must have been too rich” (167). Her dislike of sex persists after the honeymoon ends and the couple is at home: “Everything about a man’s embrace was distasteful to Enid; something inflicted upon women, like the pain of childbirth—for Eve’s transgression perhaps” (180). Enid obviously views sex with her husband as a punishment, and

Claude at times “hated himself for accepting at all her grudging hospitality” (181). Dawson’s linkage of the prohibition of alcohol with the control of sex and procreation affirms Cather’s recognition that adherence to food fads and support for Prohibition often coincided with a repressive attitude toward human sexuality. John Harvey Kellogg linked the enjoyment of both highly-seasoned food and alcohol with ungoverned sexual impulses. According to Kellogg, “The exciting influence upon the genital organs of such articles as pepper, mustard, ginger, spices, truffles, wine, and all alcoholic drinks is well known” (292). Kellogg’s view of appropriate female sexuality resembles Cather’s depiction of Enid’s feelings on the matter: Read within the contemporary discourse of dietary reform, Enid with her bland food and her dislike of sex proves to be a cultural exemplar rather than an anomalous figure of rigid repression.

Claude’s impatience with Enid’s lack of sexual interest appears ironic in light of the ambivalence toward sex he has manifested through most of *One of Ours*. While he is attending Temple College, he becomes attached to Peachy Millmore, a pretty college student, until Miss Millmore’s lack of “reserve” is revealed. Mary Ryder notes that Claude is able to participate in all the usual heterosexual courtship rituals with Peachy, from picking up dropped handkerchiefs to teaching her to ice skate (3). Despite his willingness to squire Peachy around, the thought of any level of physical intimacy repulses Claude: “Her eager susceptibility presented not the slightest temptation to him. He was a boy with strong impulses, and he detested the idea of trifling with them. The talk of the disreputable men his father kept about the place at home, instead of corrupting him, had given him a sharp disgust for sensuality” (988). Claude’s dislike of “sensuality” leads him to Enid, whose “smooth, pale skin and large, dark, opaque eyes” (108) come into relief against Peachy’s “yellow” hair, “vivid blue eyes, and “generous blush of color” (49). Cather describes Peachy’s face as so flushed that “one had a desire to touch her cheeks to

see if they were hot” (49); in contrast, Enid gives Claude her “limp, white fingers” and has arms that “were thin and looked cold, as if she had put on a summer dress too early” (108). Peachy somewhat disagreeably pulses with color and warmth; Enid is cold and colorless. When Claude first kisses Enid’s “soft cool mouth” (133), she reminds him of “a shivering little ghost” (134). This tepid kiss, which occurs immediately after Enid agrees to marry him, perfectly foreshadows the lack of warmth and physical satisfaction that will characterize their marriage. With Enid and Peachy, Cather presents a version of Henry Adams’s dichotomy between the Virgin and the Venus. Both women’s inadequacy in their respective roles underlines Adams’s declaration that “in America neither virgin or venus had power as force—only as sentiment” (383). Rather than demonstrating any real erotic power, Peachy in her role as Venus is demoted to the status of a designing, small-town belle. Similarly, Enid’s version of chastity is neither the strength of the mythological Greek huntress Artemis and her Roman counterpart Diana, or the symbolically life-affirming and generative virginity of the Roman Catholic Virgin Mary, but rather a denial of corporeality and sustenance.

Enid appeals to Claude at least partially because of his own trepidation regarding sex. He possesses, “an almost Hippolytean pride in candour” (51), indicating, not only his honesty, but also his rejection of eros. In Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, spurns romantic love and Aphrodite, preferring to venerate the chaste Artemis. Aphrodite exacts revenge by causing his stepmother Phaedra to fall in love with him. Hippolytus learns of Phaedra’s illicit desire and inveighs against her and all women. Devastated at the revelation of her secret love, Phaedra commits suicide and leaves a vengeful note telling Theseus that Hippolytus has raped her. Hippolytus answers his father’s questions honestly but refuses to reveal his dead stepmother’s secret, and Theseus banishes and curses his son. While Hippolytus

is driving his chariot along the shoreline, Theseus's curse summons a sea monster who bellows loudly, causing Hippolytus to lose control of his team of horses and be dashed to death on the rocks. As Frederick Griffith establishes, the manner of Hippolytus's death bears a striking resemblance to a plowing accident Claude has following his trip to Colorado and shortly before his marriage to Enid (276-77). The accident occurs when his mules are startled by a noisy gasoline truck and bolt, pulling him into a barbed wire fence. The gas truck is a contemporary monster, to use Leo Marx's term, a literal "machine in the garden." The lack of rapport between Claude and his father also mirrors the idealistic Hippolytus's troubled relationship with Theseus, and the gas truck, like the sea monster, becomes a type of patriarchal punishment. Claude's rejection of eros and subsequent punishment, stemming as both do from his romanticism, then are very much connected with his problems with the contemporary economic order, continuing the novel's elision between gender roles and economic ideas.

Like the unfortunate Hippolytus, Claude with his "sharp disgust for sensuality" rejects Aphrodite and is punished. His wounds become infected, and he is housebound for weeks. Enid begins visiting him daily, even bringing him flowers in what Ryder calls "a reverse courtship ritual" (4). As he convalesces from the infection brought on by his wire cuts, Claude's "blood seemed to grow strong while his body was still weak, so that the in-rush of vitality shook him . . . Waves of youth swept over him and left him exhausted" (126). Curiously, Enid's daily visits do not contribute to Claude's returning vigor, rather, her presence "restored his equilibrium" (126). Claude, somewhat naively, is unperturbed by his lack of amorous response to Enid's company: "This fact did not perplex him; he fondly attributed it to something beautiful in the girl's nature, a quality so lovely and subtle that there is no name for it" (126). His feelings for her, however, undergo an alteration when she is not present. At night, "the thought of Enid would start up like a

sweet burning pain, and he would drift out into the darkness upon sensations he could neither prevent nor control” (126). Cather’s language has distinctly sexual connotations, perhaps hinting at a nocturnal emission or masturbation. A few sentences later, Claude transforms his nocturnal, secret desire for Enid into a lofty manifestation of his discretion and restraint:

She should never know how much he longed for her. She would also be slow to feel even a little of what he was feeling; he knew that. It would take a long while. But he would be infinitely patient, infinitely tender of her. It should be he who suffered, not she. Even in his dreams he never wakened her but loved her while she was still and unconscious like a statue. He would shed love upon her until she warmed and changed without knowing why. (126)

It is abundantly clear that before their marriage Claude not only realizes that Enid is physically unresponsive but actually values her coolness. As Ryder explains, his conception of Enid as a statue that will come to life beneath his touch recalls the mythological figure of Pygmalion who, like Hippolytus, rejects women as irretrievably flawed and corrupt (Classical 189). Pygmalion attempts to mitigate his loneliness by carving a statue of a perfect woman and promptly falls in love with his creation, embracing it and showering it with gifts. Thanks to the intervention of Venus, the statue comes to life, and an incredulous Pygmalion feels his creation stir beneath his hands. This allusion to Pygmalion underscores Enid’s symbolic function in *One of Ours*. Her role as the unknowing receptacle for Claude’s prurient fantasies broadens until she embodies all of Cather’s anxieties about contemporary womanhood and modern America. Claude initially welcomes what he perceives as Enid’s chastity and emotional restraint, realizing too late that she is uninterested in either physical or intellectual intimacy. Once he is actually engaged to Enid, and eventual sex with her becomes a real possibility, his dreams change. Rather than erotic imaginings, he dreams he is naked and exposed and must hide himself from her, “like Adam in the garden” (130).

Claude optimistically believes marriage to Enid will render him normal—“she was to be the one who would put him right with the world and make him fit into the life about him” (127). Continuing the novel’s connections between masculinity and economic mastery, he reasons that embracing the societally-sanctioned gender role of husband will eliminate his feelings of alienation from the economic life of the community around him. On a larger level, Claude perhaps feels that marriage will somehow mitigate his dislike of the mechanics of American capitalism. As a recognized symbol of independence and adulthood, marriage and the subsequent establishment of his own household may prove to be antidotes to the “childish contempt for money values” for which Claude earlier castigates himself (88). The house he meticulously designs and situates beside a grove of trees he has loved since childhood signifies a harmonious fusion of ideas that had previously been opposed. Claude is building on a piece of land that belongs to his father, indicating his new sense of comfort with Nathaniel Wheeler’s massive land holdings; furthermore, his view of the land as his birthright and willingness to raise a family there mark his embrace of the identities of son and heir, legitimizing both patriarchy and the hereditary transfer of wealth. Claude’s location of his house near a group of “neglected” trees (150) that he can protect complicates this assumption of masculine authority, though, since his love of the trees and resolution to “trim them and care for them at odd moments” (150) represents a refutation of his ax-wielding father’s destruction of the cherry tree and his own resolution to be a different type of landowner. The design of the house itself embodies the unity of aesthetic satisfaction and domestic comfort that Claude has continually sought. Marriage to Enid theoretically provides a way for him to transform the masculine control of land and property, previously opposed to harmonious domesticity, into a means of creating and protecting

old fashioned domestic values. The reality of his life with Enid, of course, proves disastrously different from Claude's projected ideal, and after fewer than two years of marriage, Enid leaves Claude to go to China and nurse her sister, a missionary who has fallen ill.

CLAUDE AND WAR

From the first reviews of *One of Ours* to current critical interpretations, one of the most perennially bothersome aspects of the novel has been the alleged dissonance of its two halves, narratively linked by Claude's journey overseas on the transport ship, the *Anchises*. Dissenting from the majority viewpoint, Janis Stout rejects any sense of bifurcation between the novel's Midwestern and European halves, arguing that "*One of Ours* is really a novel of war *and* peace, with the emphasis on the conjunction, the *and*. Whether it is more one or the other is a continuing debate but a false one" (167). Building on Stout's assertion, I would add that in *One of Ours* war and peace frequently interpenetrate. Violence and ugliness repeatedly appear in the first pre-war portion, and Claude's sojourn in France is marked by a number of peaceful interludes and provokes the most abiding sense of contentment. Claude's time as a soldier in France actually contains only one battle scene, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in which Claude is killed. The overwhelming impression the second half of the novel leaves is that for Claude, France is a refuge from America, and World War is the catalyst that enables him to express his own representation of masculinity.

Once Enid leaves for China, Claude quickly makes the decision to try to get a military commission. The seeming abruptness of Claude's enlistment in the American Expeditionary Force has been one of the most perennially criticized issues in *One of Ours*, but Cather adumbrates Claude's interest in war throughout the novel, showing him enacting various forms

of quasi-martyrdom and depicting his consuming interest in Joan of Arc. In childhood “he imposed physical tests and penance upon himself” (27) in order to test his bodily endurance. After his plowing accident, while he endures the pain from his infected wire cuts, he lies awake contemplating “dark legends of torture,—everything he had ever read about the Inquisition, the rack and the wheel” (124). In an argument with Ernest Havel about the need for “something splendid” outside the realm of the self and beyond the routine of daily life, Claude uses “the martyrs” to validate his argument, claiming that they “must have found something outside themselves. Otherwise they could have made themselves comfortable with little things” (48). Recalling Claude’s dreamy musing that “It should be he who suffered, not she” (126), it seems that a masochistic anticipation of martyrdom forms part of the initial appeal of his relationship with Enid. Mrs. Wheeler even performs a kind of proxy martyrdom on her son’s behalf: “And now, as she grew older, and her flesh had almost ceased to be concerned with pain or pleasure, like the wasted wax images in old churches, it still vibrated with his feelings and became quick again for him. When he was hurt and suffered silently, something ached in her” (998). The strikingly sensuous description of the vicarious suffering his mother endures on Claude’s behalf both emphasizes the feminine nature of martyrdom and underlines the upcoming role reversal that will see Claude becoming a proxy for female characters.

Claude’s interest in martyrdom paradoxically both aligns him with the novel’s female characters and prepares him for his ultimate identity as a casualty of trench warfare. What begins as a feminine performance with strong connotations of masochism and victimhood subtly alters until it becomes a legitimate masculine role. Cather partially enables this shift through Claude’s identification with the figure of Joan of Arc. Claude’s interest in martyrdom takes concrete, academic form in the thesis on Joan of Arc he writes for his European History professor, but his

acquaintance with the Maid of Orleans goes back to his childhood, when he learns her story from his mother after finding a picture of her “in armour, in an old book” (56). The apparent gender contradiction of a young woman clad in armor could well be what initially catches Claude’s attention, reflecting as it did his own conflicts regarding gender roles. During Joan’s trials, a key complaint of the prosecution proved to be her donning of male clothing. As Marina Warner notes, “Joan’s dress formed the subject of no less than five charges, so although we know nothing of Joan’s appearance, we have detailed information on her clothes” (143). Since Claude’s history course is “based upon the reading of historical sources” (34), and research for his thesis involves reading an English translation of the *Proces*, he would have been familiar with the emphasis placed on the French heroine’s transvestism.

The outrage occasioned by Joan of Arc’s deviation from gender norms softened over the centuries, until by the early twentieth century her cross-dressing was purged of any tinge of gender ambiguity and instead interpreted as both a utilitarian battlefield necessity and a mechanism for avoiding rape while in prison. Her rehabilitation became complete when she was canonized in 1920 by her old inquisitor, the Catholic Church. Susan Crane affirms the significance of Joan’s gender-bending but rejects constructing it along binary terms, arguing instead for “an interpretive register of gender” (314) and asserting that “Joan’s testimony . . . draws on femininity and masculinity to present a *habitus* that matches neither” (313). If Joan of Arc is the ultimate symbol of France for Claude, she may very well embody a culture where he can resolve his own fraught relationship with gender roles. Steven Trout emphasizes the importance of Joan of Arc’s story to *One of Ours*, positing it as the conduit through which “Claude first imbibes the romance of the Middle Ages and receives his first impressions of the country where he will lose his life” (48). For Claude, Joan represents both the chaste warrior he

will one day become and an ideal woman whom he can venerate. Like Gladys Farmer, the French woman warrior is a type of alter ego, a proxy for Claude.

Cather's use of Joan of Arc in a WWI-era novel is not surprising. Joan of Arc's identity as a French national possession did not prevent wartime propagandists from appropriating her image for use in the United States, where she joined Edith Cavell, female Lusitania passengers, and a host of nameless Belgian women and infants on wartime printings.⁴⁰ Propaganda proved both a significant influence on America's entry into the War on the side of the Allies and a means of justifying to the American people the validity of participation in the war at all. In addition to horrifying depictions of German atrocities, American-created propaganda, as Philip M. Taylor explains, often exhibited a lofty and philosophical tone, employing rhetorical strategies that played on American pride in freedom and fear of autocracy:

A major concern of the Creel Committee was how to bring home to ordinary Americans why they were now involved in a war being fought over 4,000 miles away. Despite the U-Boats, and given that the first trans-Atlantic flight did not take place until 1919, the American homeland itself was not distinctly threatened. Making it appear so was done in a variety of ways. Firstly, official speeches suggested that America was fighting a war for peace, freedom, and justice for all peoples. Even ordinary Germans deserved the benefits of democracy rather than the oppression of autocrats and ruthless military machines. (Taylor 184)

The noble goals outlined in "official speeches" exerted a profound influence over "ordinary Americans" of all stripes, from the unworldly Mahailey to Claude's stolid neighbor Leonard Dawson. Concern over the war even unites Claude's wholly dissimilar mother and father. When Claude tells Leonard that he is joining the army, his neighbor replies that he is going "to try for the Marines" because of "Belgium, the Lusitania, [and] Edith Cavell" (1125). Pearl James notes of this scene that "Leonard lists the highlights of the Allied propaganda movement," explaining

⁴⁰ A popular poster informed Americans that "Joan of Arc saved France" while enjoining them, "Save Your Country: Buy War Savings Stamps" (Joan). The text surrounds a picture of a stereotypically feminine young woman dressed in armor that seems shaped specifically for her hourglass proportions.

that such portrayals “appealed particularly to men by presenting the war as assaults on vulnerable women” (James 236).

The varying portrayals of Edith Cavell, the British nurse who was executed by the Germans for helping Allied prisoners escape occupied Belgium, prove particularly intriguing with regard to public perceptions of gender and combat. Although at the time of her execution she was forty-nine years old and a veteran nurse and trainer of student nurses, wartime propaganda frequently portrayed her as a naïve and inexperienced young girl. Anne-Marie Claire Hughes dissects the two different versions of Cavell’s narrative, claiming that it was the “distorted but highly emotive portrayal of her as the girlish, innocent victim of a ruthless enemy” that “occurred most often in wartime propaganda, especially in the postcards and newspaper illustrations produced during the war, implying that men should enlist and prevent further such atrocities” (428). In this role the middle-aged Cavell often appears youthfully pretty, her loose, abundant hair matched by the flowing draperies of her nurse’s uniform, only recognizable as such by the red cross affixed to its bosom. The second version of Cavell’s story emphasized her courage and agency, depicting her as a “mature, patriotic, dignified and incredibly brave woman who did her duty for her country and sacrificed herself to save her friends” (Hughes 429). Leonard Dawson’s outrage was probably occasioned by the first (and more distorted) image of Cavell. Catalogued with victimized Belgians and Lusitania passengers, Cavell becomes a powerless damsel-in-distress in need of Dawson’s help, rather than a patriotic woman who engineered the escapes of numerous Allied soldiers from occupied Belgium and fully understood the risks involved in such an activity. It seems more than a little ironic that a woman who rescued so many male soldiers became translated for propaganda purposes into a female victim in need of masculine protection and avengement.

As with Joan of Arc's inquisition, questions about gender roles ran through Edith Cavell's trial. Pearl James indicates that one of the central questions on which Cavell's conviction hinged was whether to classify her as "a civilian (a woman) or a soldier (a man)" (238). In 1916 the categories of soldier and woman appeared almost as dichotomous to most Americans as they had to Joan of Arc's contemporaries five-hundred years earlier. The outrage occasioned by Cavell's execution and harnessed for propaganda purposes was based on the nurse's classification as a helpless civilian victim rather than an active anti-German agent. Such a view of Cavell undermined the significance of her avowed patriotism by making her martyrdom passive rather than intentional. Many Americans seemed more comfortable viewing Cavell as a victim rather than as a war hero, possibly because the latter category was reserved for male combatants.

Despite twenty-first century eye-rolling at the sexist and sensational nature of these propaganda images, many World War I-era American women apparently identified strongly with the victimized women depicted in posters and pamphlets. In an article on the gendered nature of World War I propaganda, James explains how the images of female victimization that so inflamed men possessed a parallel resonance with women: "Graphic depictions of mutilated women told female viewers that German aggression could bring them sexual and physical harm. Though such images construct women as narrative objects . . . they nevertheless invite female viewers to cast themselves in analogous roles and speak with a sense of urgency generated by the fear of victimization" (284 "Images"). These images of victimization included disenfranchised older women as well as attractive young girls. Mahailey's anxiety over a Red Cross poster that depicts "an old woman poking with a stick in a pile of plaster and twisted embers that had once been her home" (217) reflects the female identification James cites. The "charcoal drawing"

(217) of the homeless woman is real to Mahailey, who tells Claude, “She’s over there where you’re goin’ Mr. Claude. There she is, huntin’ for somethin’ to cook with; no stove nor no dishes nor nothin’—everything all broke up. I reckon she’ll be mighty glad to see you comin’ (217). Mahailey identifies, not with the youthful victims of purported German atrocities, but with elderly women like herself whose domestic worlds have been torn apart. When Claude leaves home for his deployment, Mahailey again expresses her sympathy for “them old women, with their dishes ‘an their stove all broke up,” telling Claude “Maybe you can help ‘em mend their things like you do mine fur me” (223). Mahailey’s belief that America entered World War I because of a desire to help disenfranchised elderly women seems ludicrous, a product of the hired woman’s simplicity and insularity. Ridiculous though they might sound in the light of twenty-first century views of World War I, the humanitarian goals Mahailey articulates were shared by numerous more mainstream Americans and nourished by the endless stream of propaganda provided by the Red Cross and other agencies.

Despite her acknowledgement of propaganda’s centrality to America’s involvement in the war, Cather covertly questions the realism of both the images and the inflammatory rhetoric. During a perusal of “newspaper cartoons, illustrating German brutality” (185), Mahailey unwittingly reveals the fallacious nature of propaganda when she innocently asks Claude, “how comes it all them Germans is such ugly-lookin’ people? The Yoeders and the German folks round here ain’t ugly lookin’” (185). Claude himself appears impervious to the influence of propaganda: when his mother recommends an article about “the execution of that English nurse,” he replies “listlessly” that he has read about the event and is unsurprised: “If they could sink the Lusitania, they could shoot an English nurse, certainly” (184). Claude’s surprisingly apathetic response occurs while he is married to Enid, providing a further illustration of the fact that the

energy he expends trying to accustom himself to his unhappy marriage leaves little room for any other emotional or ideological investment. His initial lack of outrage contrasts sharply with his mother, who like Leonard Dawson later in the novel, reacts strongly to the case of Cavell, comparing her execution with that of the storied abolitionist John Brown. Mrs. Wheeler's equation of Cavell's death with Brown's opens the possibility that as an older woman she, unlike Dawson, recognizes the purposeful and heroic nature of Cavell's actions.

The deliberate comparison Mrs. Wheeler makes between Edith Cavell and John Brown also suggests an intriguing parallel between World War I and the American Civil War and renders Mahailey's persistent association of the two wars as emblematic of something more than the hired woman's provinciality. Mahailey sees the events surrounding World War I in terms of her childhood memories of the Civil War, expecting Claude's uniform to be blue "like those she remembered" (216) and failing to comprehend the purpose of gas masks, which she surmises must be used by army cooks to protect their eyes from onion fumes (200-1). Although she is a Southerner, Mahailey's memories are not partisan. She recalls how Union soldiers used to drink and bathe their feet at the family's spring and her mother's present of a clean shirt (a generous gift from a family as poor as Mahailey's obviously was) to one young soldier who was eaten up by body lice. Leafing through garish "newspaper cartoons" (185) of German cruelty, Mahailey is incredulous, telling Claude that "it wasn't like that in our war; the soldiers didn't do nothing to the women an' chillun. Many a time our house was full of Northern soldiers and they never so much as broke a piece of my mudder's chiney" (186). Mahailey grew up in the hills of Virginia—a vigorously contested region whose white residents exhibited divided allegiances during the War—and this may provide some explanation for her Northern sympathies. It is worth noting, however, that Cather is careful to add the detail that five of the hired woman's brothers

fought on the side of the Confederacy, and Mahailey watched at least one die gruesomely. In light of her family's evident Confederate allegiance and the very different memories many other white Southerners had of Northern soldiers, Mahailey's favorable attitude toward the Union is striking. Even her assumption that Claude's uniform will be blue instead of khaki indicates the centrality of the Union in her mind.

Although Mahailey's memories seem to indicate a strong sympathetic bias toward the North, *One of Ours* also contains favorable references to the Confederacy. The minister who marries Claude and Enid "had been a drummer boy in the Civil War, on the losing side, and. . . was a simple and courageous man" (164). Gladys Farmer's mother is another sympathetic Southerner: "There weren't four steady legs on any of the stuffed chairs or little folding tables she had brought up from the South, and the heavy gold molding was half broken away from the oil portrait of her father the Judge, but she carried her poverty lightly, as Southern people did after the Civil War" (95). These depictions have a distinct flavor of the Lost Cause and balance Mahailey's positive portrayal of Union soldiers. Cather's evenhanded treatment of the Civil War seems to indicate a nation at peace with its fairly recent violent past. The novel's persistent references to the Civil War stress heroism and reconciliation rather than pervasive sectionalism; Cather seems to be intentionally softening aftereffects of the most divisive conflict in American history in order to show a unified nation on the brink of World War I. Her positive portrayal of soldiers and their behavior in what Mahailey terms "our war" also foreshadows the gentlemanly doughboys she depicts later in *One of Ours* and represents her attempt to ennoble the American fighting force. Not surprisingly, one of the issues some of her reviewers had with the novel was her soldiers' conspicuous lack of vulgarity and profanity. These Civil War references represent

Cather's own continuing preoccupation with the conflict and indicate the connections she felt between these two American wars.

Claude enlists in an army that is different from that of either the Union or the Confederacy. Through enlisting, Claude voluntarily exposes himself to the kind of scrutiny and surveillance that, until this point, he has tried to escape. When he tells his father "they may not want me. I haven't an idea what the requirements are" (202), his remark, although "lightly" (202) proffered, indicates his fear that he will be judged inadequate by the military authorities. Later, when Claude shares his decision to enlist with Leonard Dawson, he says in confidence to his neighbor, "Don't mention it to my folks, but if I can't get into the army, I'm going to enlist in the navy. They'll always take an able-bodied man. I'm not coming back here" (204), signaling his vague, seemingly groundless worries that he may not win a place in the army—worries that are particularly strange, since, as he himself points out, he is perfectly "able-bodied." Claude's success in garnering a commission solidifies his shaky identity, representing as it does the first time in the novel that he has been deemed normal by communal standards. Whereas Claude's marriage to Enid seems born of a misplaced desire to prove his masculinity, enlistment for Claude proves to be a joyful expression of his identity as a man. Once he gets his commission he goes to training camp, where his confidence increases further. Despite the significance of Claude's time in training camp, *One of Ours* does not contain any scenes set in camp or include any details of the nature of Claude's training, emphasizing the fact that Cather was less interested in the realities of the modern military than she was in the mind of Claude.

One specific detail that emerges regarding Claude's time in training camp is the fact that he helps the medical examiner evaluate and process the new recruits. Since his enlistment Claude has moved from the object of others' scrutiny into the opposite role of observer and judge. In his

job at camp, Claude would have looked closely at a great many naked male bodies and realized the relative normalcy of his own. It is also possible to speculate that in the fraternal atmosphere of training camp, living as he did in such close proximity with other men, Claude loses much of the paralyzing physical self-consciousness that haunts him throughout the first part of the novel. In a belated similarity to Paul, once he can “dress the part” in a khaki uniform he suddenly acts appropriately. In contrast to the ridiculous clothes he purchases as a young man in an attempt to look urbane, his AEF uniform lends him dignity and character. On the train journey home from camp the other passengers notice “a red-headed young man with long straight legs in puttees, and broad, energetic, responsible-looking shoulders in close-fitting khaki” (208-9). His fellow passengers’ admiring gaze is a marked contrast to the amused stares he provokes back in Lincoln when, after he dons the “light checked trousers” that are the fruit of his ill-advised foray into fashionable attire, “the eyes of everyone he met followed his smart legs down the street” (31). Garbed as a soldier, Claude possesses an aura of masculine gravity that he lacked as a civilian.

His newfound confidence in himself and the camaraderie he experiences at camp spur his appreciation of other men, which manifests itself in what John Anders describes as a “passage of vibrant cataloging again recalling Whitman” (84):

They came together from farms and shops and mills and mines, boys from college and boys from tough joints in big cities; shepherders, street car drivers, plumbers’ assistants, billiard markers . . . “show men” in cheap, loud sport suits, ranch boys in knitted waistcoats, machinists with the grease still on their fingers, farm-hands like Dan, in their one Sunday coat. Some of them carried paper suitcases tied up with rope, some brought all they had in a blue handkerchief. (213)

Notably, the list includes both educated “boys from college” (earlier versions of Claude himself) and manual laborers—“farm-hands like Dan, in their one Sunday coat” (213). Enlistment thus proves superficially leveling, since men from disparate economic circumstances unite for a

common cause and under a common set of circumstances. Explaining how frequently state companies were broken up and reconstituted because of casualties and simple logistics, Trout indicates that “most members of the AEF viewed their overseas experience as an enlightening introduction to American diversity and, more importantly, commonality” (99).⁴¹ Cather takes this notion one step further and shows such diversity appearing *before* Claude has even left Nebraska. Enlistment for Claude neatly solves the economic dilemmas he has been pondering, allowing him to think that he and Dan are at last on equal footing.⁴² Masculinity for Claude has now become a sign of democracy and equality; previously it was inextricably linked with autocratic males like his “land hog” father and his controlling older brother.

Claude’s idealistic view of these enlists persists as he continues: “But they all came to give and not to ask, and what they offered was just themselves, their big red hands, their strong backs, the steady, honest, modest look in their eyes” (213).⁴³ Here, the army for Claude becomes the opposite of a profit-driven American economy: instead of an exchange of labor for money, Cather figures a scenario where labor is freely given with no expectation of a return. This utopian vision of the AEF as a classless entity recurs throughout the novel.

Due in part to what he views as the startling miscellany of the AEF and the exhilaration of finding common cause with so many men, Claude’s most intense feelings of nationalism occur *after* his enlistment. The novel has already shown him journeying home to Frankfort a few times, and the prospect of returning to his provincial hometown has never filled him with delight;

⁴¹ Trout also notes the limits of the diversity Claude so appreciates, discussing the pervasive disenfranchisement of black soldiers and, concluding, “The military’s Jim Crow policies, which basically rendered blacks invisible to their white counterparts, explain why African American soldiers never appear in *One of Ours*” (99).

⁴² Since Claude and the other “boys from college” could usually garner commissions, but “farm-hands like Dan” entered as privates, the idea of equality proves somewhat superficial.

⁴³ This passage may allude to the short poem “O Tan-Faced Prairie Boy” from *Drum Taps*, Walt Whitman’s collection of Civil War poetry, reflecting as it does the lines “till at last/among the recruits, You came, taciturn, with nothing to give—we but look’d on each/ other,/ When lo; more than all the gifts of the world you gave me.”

usually the homeward journey provokes complaints about his family or meditations on the inadequacy of America in general. On the railway trip home from training camp, however, he is positively cheerful as he looks out across the fields: “The country that rushed by him on either side of the track was more interesting to his trained eye than the pages of any book” (209). Claude’s “trained eye” has a double meaning, since he now has the expertise of both the farmer and the soldier. After spending most of his life feeling dissatisfied with the region in which he grows up and grasping at intellectual escape, suddenly the land, with its latent economic possibilities, is more compelling than the printed page. The word *country* refers directly to the rural Nebraska countryside, but it also expands to mean the United States as a whole, reflecting Claude’s burgeoning patriotism and its removal from the harsh realities of war. Scenes such as this one that combine a rhapsodic depiction of military service with a complete lack of quotidian detail no doubt fueled the anger of Cather’s fellow writers and critics and led to the derisive comments about “lady novelists” writing about war.

The harassment of Mrs. Voigt, the German woman who runs the station lunch counter, somewhat dampens Claude’s expansive mood; paradoxically, however, combating anti-German sentiment makes him even more convinced of the rightness of the war and his role as soldier, further reinforcing his “Quixotic ideals”(213). Cather’s earlier positive depiction of the very German Erlich family also eliminates any possibility of anti-German bias and xenophobia, as does her questioning of exaggerated cartoons of Germans. Claude comforts Mrs. Voigt and reprimands the boys who have been threatening her, proud of his role as defender of the powerless. Claude’s protection of the German woman reinforces his belief in the noble and chivalrous nature of America’s entry into the Great War. Even as the chivalry of Claude’s protection of Mrs. Voigt remains uncontested, the chivalric nature of the war itself and its

promise to aid “ordinary Germans” who also “deserved the benefits of democracy” (Taylor 184) is undercut when Mrs. Voight tells Claude:

But it ain't all so bad in de Old Country like what dey say. De poor people ain't slaves and they ain't ground down like what they say here. Always de forester let de poor folks come into de wood and carry off de limbs dat fall, und de dead trees. Und if the rich farmer have maybe a liddle more manure dan he need he let de poor man come und take some for his land. De poor folks don't get such wages as like here, but dey lives chust as comfortable. (211)

Mrs. Voight's sincere defense of her country of origin provides a justification of agrarian feudalism that complicates the novel's economic picture. In other Cather texts wage labor is designated as an unsatisfactory alternative to land ownership, particularly in the short story “Neighbor Rosicky,” through Rosicky's belief that “to be a landless man was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing” (36). Mrs. Voight's explanation thus appears credible, perhaps indicating how Cather would like the contemporary economic problems of America to be solved— by a return to older social and economic systems as opposed to innovative progressive economic theory.

Claude's defense of Mrs. Voight marks his transition from a young man who throughout his life has been protected and shielded by women to a defender of womanhood, again illustrating the very personal motivation he feels as a soldier and its linkage to embattled ideas of gender. The references to Joan of Arc in the first portion of *One of Ours* are not repeated once war has broken out in Europe, even though there are numerous points where it would seem natural for Claude to remember the topic of the history project that he found so all-consuming. For instance, when Claude and his mother learn that Paris is in danger of falling to the Germans and Claude begins to read the relevant encyclopedia entry, there is no mention of Joan of Arc and her earlier defense of the city. In an even more surprising omission, when Claude is in France the sole direct reference to the woman warrior is a casual, even joking, aside when the

American Expeditionary Force enters Rouen: “Everybody knew what happened in Rouen—if anyone didn’t, his neighbours were only too eager to inform him! It had happened in the market-place, and the market-place was what they were going to find” (290). Joan of Arc is stripped of the gallantry she formerly embodied and transformed by the American propaganda machine into a two-dimensional image. Relegated to the debased status of tourist attraction, she is forced to abandon the role of soldier to Claude and the other members of the AEF.

The erasure of Joan of Arc reflects the fading importance of the American women who stood out as such pivotal figures in Claude’s life prior to his enlistment. Once Claude is aboard the troopship *Anchises* with its all-male community and begins his journey to France, Mahailey, Mrs. Wheeler, Mrs. Erlich, and Gladys begin to recede in importance. The very name of the ship represents a type of male community that is closed to women: In the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas flees Troy, he carries his father, Anchises, on his back and holds the hand of his young son, Ascanius. His wife Creusa is left behind in Troy. Like Creusa, the American women in *One of Ours* are left metaphorically waving on the shore as the troopship departs. The feeling that the events of his pre-military life have a quality of unreality is not unique to Claude. When he first meets Victor Morse in the cabin they share on the troop ship and asks the young man where he is from, Victor says vaguely “Crystal Lake, Iowa. I think that was the place” (239). Steven Trout finds this “affectedly blasé response” very funny, categorizing Morse, with his put-on English accent and mannerisms, as “one of Cather’s greatest achievements, the one memorably comic figure in a novel otherwise lacking in humor” (76). Beyond its undoubtedly comedic quality, however, Morse’s comment illustrates how the outlines of these young men’s former lives are beginning to blur. He later tells Claude that his life in Frankfort, Nebraska is “nothing—a sleeping sickness” (263) and describes his own previous life in Crystal Lake as “death in life” (263), unwittingly

deploying Matthew Arnold's famous phrase and neatly echoing Claude's own thoughts earlier in the novel. Of his former fiancé, "the preacher's daughter," Victor offers no information, apparently having forgotten about her entirely. War has allowed Morse to replace his straitlaced American love interest with the cosmopolitan Maisie, who does not expect either economic support or sexual fidelity. In the same way, the war has enabled him to exchange the monotony of life in a glassed-in booth within his father's bank for the exhilaration and uncertainty of aviation.

While Claude is aboard the *Anchises* influenza strikes. Claude's responsibility for his group of young recruits becomes intensified by the outbreak. Expanding on his job helping the medical examiner during training camp, Claude begins to assist the doctor in caring for the numerous ill and dying men. Claude's assumption of the role of nurse forms another aspect of the reconciliation of opposing gender roles that war paradoxically allows. Regarding this transformation, Anders notes that "War provides opportunities for alternatives, and in making himself over, Claude firmly resists the cultural authority forcing him to live through an 'aesthetic proxy'" (86). Cather's decision to include the influenza outbreak deserves greater examination, since she makes an intentional historical error by moving the outbreak up several months. The decision to depart from strict chronological accuracy by depicting the devastation the flu wreaks aboard the *Anchises* contradicts critics who think Cather's aim in *One of Ours* was to glorify the war, ignoring its sordid realities. Cather chooses to include the epidemic so that she can illustrate Claude witnessing suffering and death before he arrives on the western front. The horrific conditions of the ship do not dampen Claude's enthusiasm, even though, realistically, they probably should.

It is at this point in *One of Ours* that the authorial perspective breaks away from that of Claude, and Cather abandons “the merging of the narrator’s voice with that of her protagonist” (Reynolds 105) for a more distanced and objective narrative voice that often mediates against Claude’s own viewpoint. Numerous critics have failed to recognize this change in narrative consciousness, continuing to read Claude’s perspective as inseparable from Cather’s own and imbibing a false sense of her idealistic view of war. The contrast between the misery aboard the troopship and Claude’s idealism is evident when Cather writes, “Claude seemed to be living a double life these days. When he was . . . down in the hold taking care of the sick soldiers, he had no time to think . . . But when he had a half an hour to himself on deck, the tingling sense of ever-widening freedom flashed up in him again” (259). The hold for Claude is a kind of underworld that he continually enters and escapes. The filthy conditions of the ship’s makeshift hospital are described succinctly: “There was almost no ventilation and the air was fetid with sickness and sweat and vomit” (254). In his book on the 1918 flu epidemic, *The Great Influenza*, John M. Barry describes the disease-ridden troopships as “death ships” (304). No amount of misery, however, can impede Claude’s idealism

Claude’s inexperience with mental and physical illness is further exemplified by his naïve reaction to the character known as “the Lost American.” Walking the streets on his first night in St. Nazaire after dining with Victor (having virtuously declined the latter’s invitation to “play with some girls” 281), Claude notices a young man and woman who seem “different. . . from all the other strolling, affectionate couples” (282). The man, who is attired in an AEF uniform, has lost the lower portion of his left arm and holds his head at an awkward angle; Claude notices, “His lean dark face wore an expression of intense anxiety, his eyebrows twitched as if he were in constant pain” (283). Claude’s view of the soldier’s appearance reveals his naiveté, since a more

experienced soldier would have interpreted the man's strange posture, facial tics, and constant anxiety as evidence of a traumatic brain injury. When Claude goes to the hospital the next day to visit one of his men, he recognizes the man he saw the night before and learns from Dr. Trueman, his old friend from the *Anchises*, that he is "a star patient. . . a psychopathic case" (287) who suffers from memory loss following a battle injury. Having "forgotten almost everything about his life before he came to France," this man becomes a more extreme type of both Victor Morse and Claude himself. Even more strikingly, it is the Lost American's "recollection of women that is most affected" (287). According to Trueman, "He can remember his father, but not his mother; doesn't know if he has sisters or not . . . His photographs and belongings were lost when he was hurt, all except a bunch of letters he had in his pocket. They are from a girl he is engaged to, and he declares he can't remember her at all; doesn't know what she looks like or anything about her, and can't remember getting engaged" (287).

Like Claude and Victor, the Lost American has abandoned "a nice girl in his own town who is very ambitious for him to make the most of himself" (287). In contrast to his brisk American fiancée, the young woman with whom Claude first sees him appears child-like and inexperienced: "Her face, young and soft, seemed new to emotion, and her bewildered look made one feel that she did not know where to turn" (284). Cather continues, somewhat disturbingly, to reinforce the girl's youth and vulnerability, cataloguing "wide, blue eyes, innocent looking" that inexplicably "were full of tears" (283). In what Trout refers to as "a disconcertingly eroticized detail" (74), Claude focuses on the "space between her two front teeth, as with children whose second teeth have just come" (283). Without yet knowing anything of the man's background, Claude begins shadowing the unlikely couple, following them from the hectic brightness and noise of the town's nightlife to a residential street of "natural darkness"

illuminated only by the moon, “where the houses looked as if they had been asleep a long while” (284). Eventually the young man and woman move into the doorway of the town’s church and engage in an “embrace so long and still it was like death” and from which they “drew shuddering apart” (284). Trout notes “the disturbing coupling of sex and death” (74) both in the couple’s death-like embrace and in the soldier’s later recumbent posture at the girl’s feet as she begins “stroking his head so softly that she might have been putting him to sleep” (284). The eroticized confluence of voyeurism, sleep, and sex, filtered as it is through Claude’s idealism, recalls his previous nocturnal fantasies about Enid where she becomes as Ryder expresses, “at once, the mother-ideal he worships, a chaste goddess, and a woman” (Classical 189). Cather also injects the couple’s poses with deliberate hints of medievalism and martyrdom. Their extended embrace, enacted as it is in the shadow of a church, turns the two figures into a type of effigy. Similarly, the soldier’s position across the lap of the woman is reminiscent of a pieta. Once the reader learns of the catastrophic injuries the Lost American has suffered, his status as a martyr seems clear.

Astonishingly, however, the soldier’s war wounds at first figure as a stroke of good fortune rather than a reason for anger or pity. His brain injury allows him, not simply to disassociate himself from his eager American fiancée—the woman “who is very ambitious for him to make the most of himself” (287)—but to forget her entirely and replace her with another, more compliant love interest. In the same vein, he is able to exchange his old American family for a new French one. Claude is told that after his injury the soldier initially deserted and took up residence on a farm with a family “where the sons had been killed and the people had sort of adopted him. He’d quit his uniform and was wearing the clothes of one of the dead sons” (287). The Lost American is initially able to shift seamlessly from the modern American life laid out

for him back home into the pseudo-pastoral role of a French farmer. So successful was his transformation that his disappearance would have succeeded had not someone noticed the distinctive way he held his damaged head and turned him in, forcing the young man back into the care of the “psychopathic doctor” whose “pet patient” he is. Claude knows nothing of the soldier’s background when he is doing his nocturnal shadowing; nevertheless, he is curiously drawn to the couple, perhaps because in their strangeness he finds a parallel for his own sense of difference. Becoming a self-appointed “sentinel” for the couple, Claude stands solicitously over them “ready to take their part should any alarm startle them” (284). The self-aggrandizing and even ludicrous dimensions of Claude’s self-designation as the protector of the Lost American and his female companion lead Trout to comment drily that “the word ‘stalks’ also presents itself” (73). Strange as it appears, however, Claude’s surveillance of the couple is merely an extension of the role of observer and protector that began when he enlisted in the army.

Once Claude learns the Lost American’s whole story, his sense of protectiveness only increases, and he wishes he could liberate the young man both from the speculative, pathologizing gaze of the psychiatrist and the ambitions of the forgotten American fiancée. Claude easily projects his own anxieties onto the other man, whose visible disabilities reflect Claude’s own internal sense of difference, and who, like Claude himself, has been stifled by an unsympathetic New Woman and scrutinized by an authoritative gaze that would determine “what *was* the matter with him” (104). Curiously, the Lost American resembles other characters besides Claude: Sitting behind a glass door at a desk “enclosed by a railing” (285), observed by passers-by and minutely examined by the psychopath who is writing a book about him, the Lost American occupies the same paradoxical position of exposure and surveillance as Bayliss Wheeler and Victor Morse in their glassed-in “cages” back in the United States. When Dr.

Trueman tells Claude of the Lost American, “He can’t recall what his home town looks like, or his home. And the women are clear wiped out, even the girl he was going to marry” (288), Claude replies, “Maybe he’s fortunate in that” (288), illustrating his own desire not only to escape the social and economic order of his life in the United States but perhaps to forget that life entirely and forge a new existence in France. Like David Wrobel, Trout connects Claude’s war experience in France with the absent American frontier, positing that “the lost American symbolizes the rich potentialities offered by the only true frontier left in the novel—the uncharted territory of another culture” (72).

For Claude, the Lost American’s new identity rests on the young girl from the previous night. Trout believes the reader is meant to assume that the girl is a member of the soldier’s adopted French family and thus another conduit for escape into the countryside, and this is probably what Claude himself surmises when he hears the Lost American’s story (72). It is entirely possible, however, that the young woman is engaging in sex work and the disabled soldier is a client. Claude assumes that the young woman’s tear-filled eyes indicate her compassionate response to the plight of the injured soldier, but they may point to fear or despair at her own situation. Likewise, her “bewildered look” and countrified attire could signify that the upheavals of the war have forced her to venture into the nearest town to eke out a living in whatever way she can. Cather’s ironic location of the couple immediately below the illuminated red sign reading “*Amour*” also points to prostitution as does the fact that Claude encounters the couple immediately after he has high-mindedly refused Victor’s suggestion that they go and “play with some girls” (281). Claude’s idealization of French women, as well as his general naiveté, renders him incapable of drawing this conclusion.

Claude's overwhelming response to the Lost American's situation illustrates the intensely subjective, personal nature of his experiences with both France and World War I. Claude again links women with economic pressures, since the forgotten fiancée represents the ruthless grind of American business, and the gentle French girl symbolizes a simpler agrarian existence. Continuing his voyeuristic interest in their relationship, Claude wishes he could help the Lost American "get away and be lost altogether in what he had been lucky enough to find" (288). This lucky find is, on the surface, the young girl, whom Claude fixates on: "All day as Claude came and went, he looked among the crowds for that young face, so compassionate and tender" (288). Just as with Claude's initial romantic view of Enid, the young French girl becomes an idealized repository for all desirable feminine qualities. Her arcane status as a "country girl," which Claude establishes for himself from her quaint attire of "silk shawl, and little bonnet with blue strings and a white frill" (283) indicates her isolation from modernity and representation of the older cultural values and gender roles Claude so admires. For Claude, the Lost American's girlfriend becomes emblematic of France itself and its dissimilarity to the United States. One type of young woman, the powerful androgynous figure of Joan of Arc, has been replaced as France's symbol by another version of femininity, this one totally non-threatening and subordinate.

The protective, nurturing attitude Claude adopts in relation to the Lost American and his young female companion seems on the surface to reflect the personality shift begun on his way home from training camp when he takes on the role of protective intermediary in his defense of Mrs. Voight. Later, on the *Anchises* Claude assumes the quasi-maternal function of nurturer of his frightened troops, and during the influenza outbreak onboard, he moves even more deeply into a traditionally feminine role during his time as amateur nurse. Just as Enid's earlier

defection begins his process of gender normalization, Claude's assumption of the role of nurse, rather than emasculating him, solidifies his sense of manhood. Claude's transformation does not last long: his occupation of the role of caretaker is limited to his time on the *Anchises*. Rather than a continuation of the actively-nurturing role of nurse that Claude occupies aboard the troop ship, Claude's concern for the Lost American is, in reality, a type of narcissistic self-regard. He projects all of his own feeling regarding the deficiencies of America on the disabled serviceman. Released from the ship's all-male world, Claude's role as a caretaker diminishes, and he resumes his old position, one of being cared for by women—the crucial difference being that French women, like the European Mrs. Ehrlich, are empowered to do a better job of caring for men than their American counterparts.

Once in France, Claude is free to luxuriate in the domestic comfort he has always longed for but never been able to attain. His accommodations with David Gerhardt at the Jouberts, replete as they are with bacon omelets, milky coffee in crockery bowls, and lavender-scented sheets, remind the reader more of a well-run bed and breakfast than a wartime billet. When Claude awakens on his first morning in the Joubert home, he thinks “about Mahailey and breakfast and summer mornings on the farm” (298), but those associations soon fade. Mrs. Joubert, when Claude first meets her, appears to him “like a New England woman” and brings to mind “photographs of his mother's sisters and schoolmates” (296). In the same way that Victor's English mistress and the Lost American's youthful girlfriend become perfect replacements for their American fiancées, Mrs. Joubert functions as a kind of idealized mother, the way Claude's own mother (and by extension Cather's Aunt Franc) perhaps would have been had she not left the settled comfort of New England to have her vitality destroyed on the harsh prairie. Cather's insertion of a cherry tree into the scene further indicates the European woman's more positive

fulfillment of the maternal role. The whole, unblemished cherry tree under which Mrs. Joubert sits sewing is a reconstruction of the “bleeding stump” of the Nebraska cherry tree, the destruction of which Claude’s mother was powerless to prevent. Suggestively, the Jouberts’ two sons have died in the war, hinting at the possibility that Claude himself could become a surrogate son, replicating the Lost American’s attempt to assume a different familial identity and disappear into rural France.

Claude’s relative satisfaction with France in relation to America rests heavily on his idealization of French women. In addition to Mrs. Joubert and the Lost American’s young country girl, Claude meets a whole range of women and optimistically imagines the best of each. When he and his fellow soldiers encounter a tubercular French refugee with her four children in tow, and learn from ’Toinette, the frank and enterprising young daughter, that the baby is “a Boche” (308), conceived with a German soldier after her own father’s death at the Marne, Claude and his men immediately assume the French woman has been raped. All the doughboys are shocked, and sensitive Bert Fuller, who is particularly affected, “was afraid he might cry again, so he kept muttering, “By God if we’d a-got here sooner, by God if we had” (308). Obviously, rape is one possible, and perhaps even probable, explanation for the half-German baby’s existence; however, it is interesting that this is the first conclusion the men leap to and the only one they entertain.

Taking the assumptions of Claude and his friends as truth, the French woman’s ordeal serves as both a reinforcement of the propaganda that emphasized German depravity and a vindication of the purported humanitarian goals of the AEF. Cather, however, complicates this interpretation of the French woman’s half-German baby later in *One of Ours* when she depicts a consensual relationship between a French woman and a German soldier. While Claude and his

troops are quartered in the town of Beaufort, he learns the story of the local priest's niece, Marie Louise, and her affair with an injured German soldier. When first billeted in her town, the young German pursued Marie Louise, who repeatedly rejected him, but after he returned from Verdun "sick and almost deaf" she began an affair with him (372). Shunned by her friends for consorting with the enemy, one night Marie Louise picks up her lover's revolver and shoots herself. The old woman who tells Claude this story proudly indicates that such a gesture proved the unfortunate Marie Louise "was a Frenchwoman at heart" (373). The formerly disapproving friends begin to decorate her grave with flowers as Marie Louise's suicide transforms her from a fallen woman to a French martyr.

In reality, Marie Louise martyrs herself twice: First, she compromises both her status within the community and her patriotic ideals out of compassionate regard for an injured and defeated man who needs her ministrations. Then, as a type of absolution, she shoots herself, proving her ultimate loyalty to France. Only through suicide is she able to serve the conflicting need of masculinity and country and merge the dichotomous roles of virgin and whore. With this scenario Cather underscores parallels between female sexuality and national identity, and Marie Louise becomes a slightly more complex rendition of Lucretia falling on the sword to avoid bringing shame to her community. Lest we, or, more probably, the novel's initial 1922 audience, be tempted to envision Marie Louise and her German officer sharing chaste moonlit walks, Cather deliberately indicates the relationship's sexual dimension. After Mary Louise shoots herself, the German officer does likewise, provoking an enquiry from the Kommandant; during the subsequent trial, the Lieutenant's orderly "wasn't very delicate about the details he divulged" (373). Sex blends with death and a disturbing element of female subordination just as in the story of the Lost American. The graveyard adjacent to the village church in which Marie Louise meets

her lover and where she is eventually entombed is reminiscent of the church where the Lost American and the young girl cling together. Lieutenant Muller's severe war injuries make him a German type of the Lost American, while both Marie Louise's youth and her compassionate regard for the damaged body of her German lover connect her to Claude's conception of the Lost American's wide-eyed young girlfriend.

Immediately after the story of Marie Louise, Claude meditatively tells his friend David Gerhardt, "I like the women of this country as far as I've seen them" (374). With the qualifying prepositional phrase that alludes to the narrowness of his experience, Cather, as she does elsewhere in the novel, reveals the limitations of Claude's perspective. Claude's optimistic view of French women reflects his belief that in France the domestic sphere is still powerful. Paradoxically, war-torn France, devoid of its young men and still reeling from the German occupation, is portrayed as more stable than the chaotic flux of modernizing America. Claude gets a glimpse of this cultural resilience when he accompanies his fellow officer, the cultured violinist David Gerhardt, on a visit to some friends whom Gerhardt has not seen since before the war. Gerhardt was at a Parisian *conservatoire* with the son of the family, a fellow violinist who was killed at Verdun. Looking out of the salon windows into the Fleurys' garden with its "ancient yews" and "fine old lindens," Gerhardt comments with satisfaction, "They have kept it up, in spite of everything. It was always lovely here" (350). The French family's maintenance of their garden in the face of the privations of war and the death of their son at the front represents the durable cultural values Claude reveres. One unremarked-upon aspect of the garden's aesthetic appeal, however, is who exactly performs the labor of tending the "beds of gorgeous autumn flowers" and pruning the "two rows of plane trees, cut square" (350-51). The family now consists of a middle-aged woman, her teenaged daughter, and her young son, none of whom

is a likely candidate for gardener. When Claude and David arrive, the door is opened by an “old valet” (350); the same “old servant” (355) is summoned later in the evening by Madame Fleury to light the fire laid ready in the hearth. If Madame Fleury and her daughter are not accustomed to lighting their *salon* fire, it is doubtful that either has either the skill or the inclination to work in the garden. In addition to his domestic duties, the elderly retainer may handle the grounds, or, more probably, there is an unnamed gardener who performs the exacting work of maintaining the stylized perfection of a French garden. The settled beauty of the Fleurys’ lifestyle, even in the midst of all the upheavals of war, still depends on the labor of servants. Here, again, is the veiled but harmonious presence of a stable class system.

Strikingly, the cultural continuity embraced by the Fleurys is not indicative of their insularity, illustrating that adherence to tradition does not necessitate a retreat from contemporary realities. Claude realizes, rather, that “for these women the war was France, the war was life, and everything that went into it. To be alive, to be conscious and have one’s faculties, was to be in the war” (354). Mlle. Fleury’s account of the current circumstances of the *Conservatoire*’s female students indicates the upheaval the war has caused for many young French women:

[T]his one was singing for the soldiers; another when she was nursing in a hospital which was bombed in an air raid, had carried twenty wounded men out of the burning building, one after the other on her back, like sacks of flour. Alice, the dancer, had gone into the English Red Cross and learned English. Odette had married a New Zealander, an officer who was said to be a cannibal; it was well known that his tribe had eaten two Auvergnat missionaries. (354)

These women’s activities are simply accepted without comment as an essential part of the war effort and a response to France’s increasingly multi-cultural, cosmopolitan character. The sensational and fear-mongering reference to cannibalism suggests that the New Zealand officer Odette marries is Maori. During World War I 2,227 Maori fought with the Allies, both in their

own battalions and alongside European New Zealanders (Hill 108). Because of white imperial squeamishness about the implications of non-white colonials taking up arms against Europeans, these men started out in skilled non-combat tasks such as trench construction, itself a dangerous occupation, since it was often performed under fire. Eventually, as Richard S. Hill indicates, the Maori “troops became inexorably involved in fighting on the western front” (106).⁴⁴ The situation of Maori soldiers illustrates the truly global dimensions of the First World War, while simultaneously revealing that even as imperial powers like France and England extolled the virtues of freedom and democracy, those ideals were reserved solely for people of European descent.

Cather’s passing reference to a French woman’s marriage to a Maori officer finds a parallel in Claude’s encounter with Mlle. Olive de Courcy, who occupies a convent turned Red Cross distribution site near the headquarters of Claude’s battalion. Describing the changes wrought by the war, Mlle. de Courcy tells Claude, “I was twenty-one when the war came, and I had never been anywhere without my mother or my brother or sister. Within a year I went all over France alone; with soldiers, with Senegalese, with anybody. Everything is different for us” (333). The upheaval of the war again is figured, not only by the differing roles French women must inhabit, but also by their exposure to colonized non-whites. While minor in the context of the narrative action the references to Maori and Senegalese troops subtly expand and enrich the context of the novel, demonstrating Cather’s awareness of a multi-racial Allied force. These matter-of-fact references to French women marrying and traveling with people of color also

⁴⁴ Maori soldiers principally served in the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion, a group that was reorganized periodically and saw several incarnations throughout the war. In 1917, military authorities granted the Maori soldiers’ petition to have an entirely Maori battalion and authorized the New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion (Hill 108). Even though Maori of necessity did fight alongside European Allied troops, Hill points out that the Pioneer Battalion’s official “designation as a non-fighting body meant that a perceived race-based slight continued” (106). The Maori soldiers’ situation was very similar to that of African Americans fighting for the United States, who were given the most disagreeable jobs to do.

provide a means of questioning Claude's own romantic ideal of Gallic womanhood, offering a different and less traditional perspective. These women's willingness to behave in ways that defy contemporary gender expectations certainly connects them to a version of pre-modern France, but one far closer to the war-torn medieval nation of Joan of Arc than the pastoral tourist destination of Claude's imagination.

The French woman whom Claude most romanticizes—Mlle Olive de Courcy, who administers aid under the auspices of the Red Cross—also proves to be the most adaptable and modern. Unlike Enid and Mrs. Wheeler, Mlle. de Courcy is able to unite abstract ideals with earthly concerns. She has adapted matter-of-factly to the contingencies of war and devotes her energies to helping the town's devastated civilian population. Claude is particularly impressed when he sees the warehouse of canned goods, many bearing American labels, and Mlle de Courcy informs him that the local people would not have gotten through the winter without them. The novel's previous reference to canned goods had been entirely negative, indicative of American standardization and domestic neglect. Such negative associations quickly disappear, however, as Claude swells with pride at the "long arm" of America's farms and factories. When Claude follows his hostess into her "light and airy" living room, he notices "coloured war posters on the clean board walls, brass shell-cases full of wild flowers and garden flowers, canvas camp-chairs, a shelf of books, a table covered by a white silk shawl embroidered with white butterflies" (327). Mlle de. Courcy's bedroom has a "low iron bed, like a soldier's, with a pale blue coverlid and white pillows" (327-28). These spaces illustrate a harmonious and aesthetically-appealing synthesis of the feminine domestic sphere with the masculine world of warfare, and when combined with the economic benevolence Mlle. De Courcy represents, provide an alternative to the problems with aesthetics, gender, and wealth Claude grapples with

in Nebraska. Of course, the encapsulated bit of harmony Claude finds will not provide a workable solution to the problems in the United States, and indeed Mlle. De Courcy will not be able to solve the post-war problems of a France that is missing an entire generation of young men. To know that such harmony is possible, and finally to feel that he belongs and nothing is wrong with him is, however, not without value for Claude, since it is what he has been searching for since the beginning of the novel.

The ultimate criticism of the United States occurs in the last pages of *One of Ours*, when Mrs. Wheeler receives word of Claude's death in combat and thinks, "He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And they were beautiful beliefs to die with. Perhaps it was well to see that vision, and then to see no more. She would have dreaded the awakening,—she sometimes even doubts whether he could have borne that last desolating disappointment" (390). From Mrs. Wheeler's words it is apparent that had Claude returned to the United States he would find it unchanged, and his disillusionment would have been all the greater. Claude's death in combat is affirmative, not because his sacrifice creates any meaningful change but because it prevented his return to America. The devastating ending of *One of Ours* foreshadows the extreme pessimism of the three Cather novels that follow it: *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy*. Within the larger body of Cather's work *One of Ours* can be read as a bridge between her optimistic frontier novels and the disillusioned, highly modernist works of the mid-nineteen twenties.

**“TOM ISN’T VERY REAL TO ME ANYMORE”: FAILURES OF REPRESENTATION
IN *THE PROFESSOR’S HOUSE***

The Professor’s House, published in 1925, currently receives more critical attention than any other Cather novel and possesses a secure place within the canon of American modernist fiction. Just as in *One of Ours*, the bulk of the action occurs in the present historical moment. The novel concerns the middle-aged history professor Godfrey St. Peter and the increasingly irksome responsibilities of his professional and personal lives. Despite its contemporary setting, however, *The Professor’s House* has a long embedded narrative “Tom Outland’s Story” that takes the novel’s action out of the present into the near past of pre-World War I America. A significant portion of “Tom Outland’s Story” involves Outland’s excavation of a “lost” Cliff Dweller city atop the “Blue Mesa,” a fictional Mesa Verde. Tom Outland is former student of St. Peter’s, and his memory captivates to varying degrees all of the novel’s major characters. Despite his narrative prominence, Outland is a curiously wraith-like, disembodied character. The physical ambiguity with which Cather represents Tom opens the rest of the narrative to critique, revealing that his insubstantiality is the most significant of a number of slips in representation in the novel. Tom needs to flesh out not only his historical sense of himself but his body. This is in contrast to a character such as Thea Kronborg in *The Song of The Lark*, who needs to regulate and channel her own overabundant vitality. Outland’s own body is at the heart of the narrative’s aesthetic focus. Other characters’ bodies are cluttered, fickle, ugly even in beauty, whereas

Outland's very body is empty and blank. This insubstantial presentation of Tom's appearance, suggests the novel's ultimate mystery—Outland himself.

The Professor's House is rife with instances of imperfect or skewed aesthetic representation that reveal discrepancies between art and reality. Kathleen, St. Peter's younger daughter, demonstrates a talent for painting figures and is told by a teacher that she should take classes at Chicago's Art Institute. Kathleen's best paintings are portraits of her father; she has less success painting her mother and sister. Whenever she paints Lillian St. Peter, "the face was always hard, the upper lip longer than it seemed in life, the nose long and severe" (52). Under Kathleen's brush, her mother's "beautiful complexion" becomes "something cold and plaster-like" (52). In contrast to the rigidity of her paintings of Lillian, Kathleen's depictions of Rosamond are "all very sentimental and curiously false" (52). Kathleen's portraits of her mother are too harsh; conversely, her paintings of her sister prove overly sweet and idealized. Kathleen's failure to create credible portraits of her mother and sister appears to indicate more than her deficiencies as an artist. Her portraits clearly represent the difficulties of representation, one of the central issues in *The Professor's House*.

Kathleen chalks her apparently inaccurate portraits up to a lack of talent, concluding that further artistic study in Chicago would be a waste of time: "No, I can't really do anybody but Papa, and I can't make a living painting him" (65). St. Peter agrees with his daughter's self-deprecation, casting it as a virtue: "The only unusual thing about Kitty," her father used to tell his friends, "is that she doesn't think herself a bit unusual. Nowadays the girls in my classes who have a spark of aptitude for anything seem to think themselves remarkable" (65). In this instance, as in many things, St. Peter's judgment is questionable. It is probable that Kathleen's art teacher, an instructor at the college where St. Peter teaches, is a better judge than either St. Peter or his

daughter of both Kathleen's talent and painting in general; however, the reader is left with an impression of Kathleen's paucity of talent and the sense that her chief personal attribute is her realization of her own mediocrity.

As her teacher's informed opinion indicates, Kathleen may be a more skilled artist than she or her father realizes. Clues at other points in the novel show that the gulf between Lillian's physical appearance and her daughter's portrayal is perhaps less broad than it is made out to be. In the novel's initial description we learn that because of the softness of Lillian's "pink and blonde" coloring "one did not realize, on first meeting her, how very definitely and decidedly her features were cut under that smiling infusion of colour. When she was annoyed or tired, the lines became severe" (36). Later, when St. Peter expresses his fear that Scott, their other son-in-law, will blackball Louis if he attempts to join a local club, he watches his wife's face transform at the unwelcome news: "It had become, he thought, too hard for the orchid velvet in her hair. Her upper lip had grown longer, and stiffened as it always did when she encountered opposition" (81). These additional glimpses of Lillian make clear that Kathleen's portraits capture the way her mother looks in certain moods and under certain circumstances, and, in fact, illustrate Kathleen's gift for depicting the fleeting expressions of her subject and not her dearth of talent. Her protestation, "No, I don't see Mamma like that . . . Of course I don't! It just *comes* like that" (65), indicates that she is unconsciously replicating the bifurcation of the roles of daughter and artist that Thea Kronborg enacts with such self-reflection and pain in *The Song of the Lark*. Kathleen's dilemma reflects Cather's perennial motif of double lives, as well as her persistent exploration of the conflicts between artistic integrity and loyalty to family and community. Kathleen the daughter sees her mother one way; Kathleen the artist sees her quite another.

The “sentimental and curiously false” portraits Kathleen paints of Rosamond stem from her childhood idealization of her older sister, eroded by recent events: Again, Kathleen’s portraits may hold more truth than their casually-dismissive description indicates: Louie Marsellus, Rosamond’s husband, “professes to like them” (65). The implication is that Louie is either being polite or exhibiting a total lack of aesthetic judgment; however, it is possible that Louis, who knows Rosamond fully and accepts her unconditionally, really does see his wife’s likeness in Kathleen’s painting. We know from the rest of the novel that Louie has a great deal of taste; indeed, he has a genius for selecting items that are beautiful and work harmoniously with the existing environment.

In *The Professor’s House* the complexity of pictures negates their use as an uncomplicated means of augmenting initial descriptions of female characters’ appearances. This is in contrast to *One of Ours*, where women’s appearances are more stable, and portraiture is used as a convenient shortcut for descriptions of both Gladys Farmer, who “had the settled composure, the full red lips, brown eyes, and dimpled white hands which occur so often in Flemish portraits of young women” (95) and Augusta Erlich, described as wearing her hair like “ladies in old daguerreotypes” and whose “face, too, suggested a daguerreotype; there was something old-fashioned and picturesque about it” (37). Both Gladys and Mrs. Erlich are equated with older, more stable cultures. In contrast Kathleen, Rosamond and Lillian are all modern women, and the difficulties with their accurate portrayal represent modernity’s flux and uncertainty. It is significant that Enid, the character in *One of Ours* most linked to changing modern America, like the women in *The Professor’s House*, defies a static representation. After their marriage Claude still finds her physically attractive but laments her unyielding demeanor: “He wondered why she had no shades of feeling to correspond to her natural grace and lightness

of movement, to the gentle, almost wistful attitudes of body in which he sometimes surprised her. When he came in from work and found her sitting on the porch, leaning against a pillar, her hands clasped about her knees, her head drooping a little, he could scarcely believe the rigidity that met him at every turn” (181). Claude’s wonder at Enid’s failure to exhibit behavior that mirrors the pretty tableaux she unconsciously creates shows his attempt to aestheticize her and recalls the desire he expresses during their courtship to turn her into an art object and “love her while she was still and unconscious like a statue” (126).

The consistently accurate and well-received portraits Kathleen paints of her father—“one, at least, was the man himself” (64)—reflect the dominance of St. Peter’s narrative perspective and the static nature of his physical appearance, which counters the fluctuations the appearances of other characters undergo. As the earlier examination of the changes in Lillian’s face indicates, in the course of *The Professor’s House*, St. Peter continually calls the physical appearances of his wife and daughters into question. The novel’s initial depiction of Rosamond gives some idea of the specificity of his scrutiny:

Rosamond, the elder daughter, resembled her mother in feature, though her face was heavier. Her colouring was altogether different; dusky black hair, deep dark eyes, a soft white skin with rich brunette red in her cheeks and lips. Nearly everyone considered Rosamond brilliantly beautiful. Her father, although he was very proud of her, demurred from the general opinion. He thought her too tall, with a rather awkward carriage. She stooped a trifle, and was wide in the hips and shoulders. She had, he sometimes remarked to her mother, exactly the wide femur and flat shoulder-blade of his old slab-sided Kanuck grandfather. For a tree-hewer they were an asset. But St. Peter was very critical. Most people saw only Rosamond’s smooth black head and white throat, and the red of her curved lips that was like the duskiness of heavy-scented roses. (37)

St. Peter here exemplifies his status as detached observer and critic, dispassionately cataloguing his daughter’s physical flaws. While he is proud of Rosamond’s status within the community as a beautiful woman, he characteristically does not think much of the community’s discernment. For

St. Peter, Rosamond's ungainly body precludes any great beauty. He thinks she has bad posture and that her movements lack grace. Breaking her body down into its anatomical parts he notes the width and shape of her "shoulder blade" and "femur." In contrast to *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* where a strong body and slightly masculine appearance are considered good things, in *The Professor's House*, Rosamond's powerful body is denigrated for its similarity to that of St. Peter's woodsman grandfather. One wonders what St. Peter would think of Jim's description of Ántonia: "Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draft-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries" (76).

St. Peter's lack of regard for robust female bodies also reveals much about the novel's treatment of social class. Despite her portrayal of stratified communities, Cather rarely deals overtly with social class. It enters *The Professor's House* most concretely through the presence of Augusta, the German Catholic seamstress who shares the Professor's attic study for several weeks each season. It is Augusta who, at the end of the novel, finds St. Peter nearly-asphyxiated in the gas-filled study and drags him to safety. Despite her narrative importance, Augusta, unlike the novel's other characters, is never given a surname. Like so many domestic employees of the early twentieth century, she is known only by her first name. Even St. Peter's daughters, who have undoubtedly known her since they were small children, refer to her as Augusta. In the "little anxious social world of Hamilton" (79), social class means a great deal. Characteristically, St. Peter notices Augusta's physical appearance, which is gone into in some detail: "She was tall, large-boned, flat and stiff, with a plain, solid face and brown eyes not destitute of fun" (23). Augusta possesses the exact same bodily characteristics that the Professor construes as "figure flaws" in Rosamond. Augusta's answer to a remark of St. Peter's about the passage of time that she never expected to "go grey" sewing for Lillian, surprises him: "What other future could

Augusta possibly have expected? This disclosure amazed him” (23). Registering the precise nature of the Professor’s shock, John Swift explains, “St. Peter is ‘amazed’ not so much at the enforced recollection that the colleague and co-worker in his study is actually his wife’s servant . . . but at her claim of expectations of her own: her barely articulated protest against the terms of her servitude” (“Fictions” 185). The worker briefly escapes her role and stands revealed as an individual with desires beyond the perimeters of her labor. St. Peter becomes immediately uncomfortable with this conception of Augusta and somewhat fatuously replies, “Well, well, we mustn’t think mournfully of it, Augusta. Life doesn’t turn out for any of us as we plan” (23). In this scene, St. Peter’s discomfiture is rooted in class anxiety. The upending of his idea of Augusta causes St. Peter to compliment her “fine lot of hair” and continue, “You know, I think it’s rather nice, that grey wave on each side. Gives it character” (23). St. Peter briefly focuses on Augusta as a woman and, as he does with all women, evaluates her in terms of her appearance. On the other hand, St. Peter defines himself by his academic labor, the multi-volume work *The Spanish Adventurers in North America*, and, to a lesser extent, his identity as a teacher. The novel repeatedly equates his work with Augusta’s: they labor in the same space, and in the chest where St. Peter and Augusta keep their respective belongings, “patterns and manuscripts interpenetrated,” causing St. Peter to comment, “I see we shall have some difficulty in separating our life work, Augusta. We’ve kept our papers together a long while now” (22-23). Caught up as he is in his own absorbing intellectual labor, its difference from the work Augusta performs never occurs to him.

Because of her identity as a worker, Augusta fits in St. Peter’s study, in a way Rosamond as a woman of leisure never will. When Rosamond visits her father in his old study, St. Peter again takes critical notice of her appearance:

Rosamond entered, very handsome in a silk suit of a vivid shade of lilac admirably suited to her complexion and showing that in the colour of her cheeks there was actually a tone of warm lavender. In that low room she seemed very tall indeed, a little out of drawing, as, to her father's eye, she so often did. Usually, however, people were aware only of her rich complexion, her curving, unresisting mouth, and mysterious eyes. Tom Outland had seen nothing else and he was a young man who saw a great deal. (58-9)

Again, the acuteness of St. Peter's critical faculty is on display: other, less perceptive people might be convinced of Rosamond's beauty by superficial physical markers, but he is more discerning. As in the previous description, St. Peter concedes Rosamond her lovely coloring but finds fault with her height. The exceedingly feminine and even sensual description of her face jars oddly with the continual rendering of her body as disproportionate. St. Peter's repeated condemnation of Rosamond's large body and its discordance in his study is surprising, since Augusta, who in body resembles Rosamond so exactly, seems to belong within the "low room" the Professor occupies. Rosamond, with her beautiful clothing and the superabundance of expensive objects that surround her, seems like the embodiment of the mercantile, possession-strewn world of the novel, but her large body is portrayed as distinctly out-of-place in that social environment. A large, strong body may be an asset in the wilderness (or, in the cases of Alexandra and Antonia, on a farm), but in the position Rosamond occupies, the physical strength implied by her broad shoulders and sturdy thighs becomes a liability.

St. Peter's final reference to Rosamond's figure occurs when he encounters her leaving Kathleen's house: "he observed something he had not seen before—a coat of some purple-grey fur, that quite disguised the wide, slightly stooping shoulders he regretted in his truly beautiful daughter" (82). Like Paul in "Paul's Case" whose bodily deficiencies disappear once he can "dress the part," when Rosamond wears the right item of clothing the problem of her shoulders is remedied. The intense focus on women's bodies and material goods in the first part of the novel,

“The Family,” indicates the importance of fashion as a signifier of change. Women’s clothing underwent a revolution during the interwar years: Hemlines went up and skirts were cut closer to the body as women dispensed with the layers of petticoats they had worn previously. Corsets were similarly jettisoned and the uncompressed lines of middle and upper class young women’s torsos were visible for the first time. Clothing styles of the early 1920s would thus have revealed details of Rosamond’s physique that older fashions kept hidden. According to historian of girlhood Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “By the 1920s, both fashion and film had encouraged a massive ‘unveiling’ of the female body, which meant that certain body parts—such as arms and legs—were bared and displayed in ways they never were before” (98). The “flat shoulder-blade” and “wide femur” that St. Peter disdains would not have been so visible in the clothes worn by middle and upper class young women before World War I. In *One of Ours*, modern Enid’s trousseau includes a number of “lace corset covers” (158). *One of Ours* is set less than a decade before *The Professor’s House*, indicating the rapidity with which women’s clothing changed.

Despite his apparent dislike of contemporary America, St. Peter’s feelings about the aesthetics of women’s bodies appear very much in sync with the prevailing fashions of the 1920s. Rosamond’s large, unfashionable body comes into relief against her younger sister Kathleen, who “looked even younger than she was” and possesses “the slender, undeveloped figure then very much in vogue” (37). Brumberg explains, “The new, fashionable figure was slender, long-limbed, and relatively flat-chested. American women of all ages donned the short, popular chemise dress that was the uniform of the ‘flapper’ in the 1920s. As they did so, they bade farewell to corsets, stays, and petticoats, and they began to diet, or internalize control of the body. This set the stage for what one writer called ‘the century of svelte’” (Brumberg 99-100).

Strikingly, however, Kathleen's "modern" body also becomes a target for the Professor's criticism. St. Peter, while finding "something very charming in the curious shadows her wide cheekbones cast over her cheeks, and in the spirited tilt of her head" (27), nevertheless, dislikes his younger daughter's independent attitude: "When she was a student at the university, he sometimes used to see her crossing the campus alone . . . her narrow skirt clinging close. There was something too plucky, too 'I-can-go-it-alone' about her quick step and jaunty little head; he didn't like it, it gave him a sudden pang. He would always call to her and catch up to her and make her take his arm and be docile" (52). The "spirited tilt" of Kathleen's head that St. Peter professes to admire in one context seems identical to the "jaunty little head" that in another setting perturbs him. The campus setting partially explains St. Peter's concern: As a female student at a coeducational state university Kathleen bears a disturbing resemblance to the fashionable, proto-feminist New Woman. Her closely-fitting "narrow skirt," which exposes the contours of her legs, aligns her with new codes of female behavior and sexuality. A "spirited" daughter might be desirable, but a "jaunty" co-ed threatens the prevailing social order. The "pang" St. Peter feels when he glimpses his independent daughter results both from the dissolution of his own household and his sense of the disintegration of an older version of America. St. Peter's most pointed complaints about the eroding of older values and standards occur in the context of his criticism of the college where he teaches. It therefore makes sense that when framed on a college campus, his daughter would inspire a similar train of thought.

Kathleen's swift transformation from plucky little girl to threatening, independent woman mirrors the duality embodied by Rosamond and Lillian, whose appearances can also alter swiftly. St. Peter's appreciation of Kathleen's "undeveloped body" indicates his desire to keep his daughters young and within his household: "When he was writing his best he was conscious

of pretty little girls in fresh dresses” (101). Despite (or perhaps because of) the resolutely male, imperial nature of his research, quotidian domesticity is very important to St. Peter. He needs the presence of his wife and daughters beneath him in the house in order to work at his best. He is also unusually appreciative of domestic comforts and the refinements of housekeeping. With the absence of his wife and daughters, Augusta’s dress forms must serve as female substitutes. The voluptuous figure known as “the bust” projects a warmth and femininity that belies its “dead, opaque, lumpy solidity” (18), much as Rosamond’s beautiful coloring draws attention away from her awkward body. The wire dress form, with its “trim metal waist line” and “sprightly, tricky air” (18), resemble the fashionably thin Kathleen. St. Peter has always valued female domesticity and family life at a remove. He cannot work effectively without their presence, but he cannot concentrate in the midst of the distractions of the “human house” (14). The presence of the dress forms in his office replaces that of his daughters, those “pretty little girls in fresh dresses” (101), whose growth to adulthood he laments, and forms another one of the familial substitutions that happen so frequently in this novel. Recall Tom Outland’s comment about his friend Roddy Blake nursing him through pneumonia: “He ought to have had boys of his own to look after. Nature’s full of such substitutions, but they always seem to me sad, even in botany” (185-6).

Perhaps the stable domesticity of his daughters’ childhoods is so important to St. Peter because as a child he was forced to leave his home. St. Peter’s childhood move west into Kansas away from Lake Michigan, “the inland sea of his childhood” (29), is a traumatic dislocation, the painful memory of which persists into adulthood: “St. Peter nearly died of it. Never could he forget the few moments on the train when that sudden, innocent blue across the sand dunes was dying for ever from his sight. It was like sinking for the third time. No later anguish, and he had had his share, went so deep or seemed so final” (31). Such an extravagance of feeling, while

natural in a child, seems strange in the retrospective view of the adult St. Peter. There is something a bit strange about St. Peter's insistence that a childhood move, dislocating though it might be, is the defining experience of anguish in his life, outstripping even the death in World War of his beloved protégée Tom Outland. Jim Burden, in *My Ántonia*, must leave Virginia and move to Nebraska after the death of both his parents, and should by rights be much more grief-stricken than the young St. Peter, yet his western journey appears much less upsetting.

Artistic misrepresentation in *The Professor's House* is not confined to the novel's female characters. Cather's depiction of the difficulties of accurate depiction extends to a *tableau vivant* St. Peter creates. As pictures composed of costumed and arranged human figures, *tableaux vivants* combine bodily instability and subjective portraiture, the two issues dealt with above. St. Peter's tableau is of Saladin negotiating with Richard Plantagenet, and he stages it with his sons-in-law as figures. The son-in-law cast as the Saracen is Louie Marsellus, who is Jewish; while the English King is blonde Scott McGregor, a literal Scot. St. Peter's idea, lightly conceived, nevertheless indicates a great deal about his attitudes toward both Louie and Scott. *Tableaux vivants* were a turn of the century fad in fashionable homes. Initially considered somewhat risqué, by the time Cather wrote *The Professor's House* they had become a middle-class commonplace.⁴⁵ Indeed, in *One of Ours*, published in 1921, Enid Royce's Sunday school stages a series of *tableaux* in pre-World War I Nebraska, emphasizing how thoroughly respectable the events had become. The most famous American literary example of *tableaux vivants* is Lily Bart's portrayal of the Joshua Reynolds portrait "Mrs. Lloyd" in *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton's 1905 novel of manners. Jennie Kassanoff reads Wharton's tableau as an example of the fixity of racial categories in early twentieth-century America: "Wharton's socialite performers, accommodating themselves to the limits of theatrical form, effectively become

⁴⁵ For a consideration of suspicions regarding *tableaux vivants*, see Mary Chapman.

‘types’” (66-7). Kassanoff’s analysis of the racial typing present in Wharton’s tableau is apt, and it is tempting to extend the argument to Cather’s visual displays. This comparison, however, cannot be made, in part because the circumstances of the respective performances are markedly different. The *tableaux* in *The House of Mirth* are specifically visual displays, enactments of famous paintings, not dramatizations of literary scenes as in *The Professor’s House* and *One of Ours*. In Wharton’s novel:

The scenes were taken from old pictures, and the participators had been cleverly fitted with characters suited to their types. No one, for instance, could have made a more typical Goya than Carry Fisher, with her short dark-skinned face, the exaggerated glow of her eyes, the provocation of her frankly-painted smile . . . and a young Mrs. Van Alstyne, who showed the frailer Dutch type, with high blue-veined forehead and pale eyes and lashes, made a characteristic Vandyck, in black satin, against a curtained archway. (Wharton 133-4)

Each tableau has a fixed visual correlative—the painting itself—underlying it. The audience would have been familiar with these Old Masters (disingenuously referred to as “old paintings”), and the success of each tableau depended on the physical resemblance of performer to painting. Cather’s tableaux, in contrast, do not have specific visual antecedents; instead, the scenes portrayed are taken from literature, and the imaginations of those who stage the tableaux, the performers of the scenes, and the audience all contribute to their meaning. Such a shift is emblematic of Cather’s Modernism and the innovative uses she makes of the *tableau*. The proliferation of *tableaux vivants* in nineteenth-century America reflected the period’s delight in precise replication and miniaturization. Miles Orvell writes of this phenomenon:

One dominant mode in the late nineteenth century was thus the tendency to enclose reality in manageable forms, to contain it within a theatrical space, an enclosed exposition or recreational space, or within the space of the picture frame. If the world outside the frame was beyond control, the world inside of it could at least offer the illusion of mastery and comprehension. And on a more elementary aesthetic level, the replica, with its pleasure of matching real thing and facsimile, simply fascinated the age (35-36).

Cather's subjective *tableau* signals a departure from the pleasures of verisimilitude and an embrace of multiple meanings and perspectives.

The *tableau* from *The Professor's House* intentionally mocks a reader's preconceptions and expectations regarding ethnicity and history. Although it is easy, given the oriental meets occidental subject of the *tableau*, to assume that Scott and Louie are chosen for their roles because of their respective cultural backgrounds, there is no underlying pattern of racial typology. Cather deliberately emphasizes the subjectivity of the *tableau*, noting its genesis as a personal whim of St. Peter's:

Not long ago when the students were giving an historical pageant to commemorate the deeds of an early French explorer among the Great Lakes, they asked St. Peter to do a picture for them, and he had arranged one which amused him very much, though it had nothing to do with the subject . . . The *tableau* had received no special notice, as Mrs. St. Peter had said dryly that she was afraid nobody saw his little joke. But the Professor liked his picture, and he thought it quite fair to both the young men. (73)

St. Peter's "picture" is meaningless within the scope of the pageant his students have planned. Rather than constructing a scene representing an actual historical event germane to this particular region, he creates an intentionally ahistorical *tableau* from the material of literary romance and popular ideas of the Crusades. The Professor, via this idiosyncratic spectacle, implicitly questions the truth that a static, one-dimensional depiction of history contains. St. Peter is a historian who writes about the conquest of the North American continent; his masterpiece is the multi-volume work *The Spanish Adventurers in North America*. This particular unhistorical *tableau* refuses to acknowledge the settlement of the United States, moving territorial expansion to the age of chivalry and out of any mercantile desire for land or resources.

Mrs. St. Peter, well-acquainted with her husband's feelings toward their sons-in-law, understands the *tableau's* implications. To the larger audience, unfamiliar with the dynamics of the family, St. Peter's meaning would be opaque. St. Peter does not cast Louie as the Muslim Saladin because he in anyway looks Middle Eastern: "Louie's eyes were vividly blue, like hot sapphires, but the rest of his face had little color—he was rather a mackerel tinted man . . . There was nothing Semitic about his countenance except his nose—that took the lead" (43). Klaus Stich asserts that Cather is influenced by Sir Walter Scott's romance *The Talisman*, which portrays Richard I in a "most unflattering" manner (203). Indeed the Professor's *tableau* does show the English King with "his square, yellow head haughtily erect, his unthoughtful brows fiercely frowning, his lips curled, and his fresh face full of arrogance" while Saladin stretches out his hands in "reasonable, patient argument" (73-4). Scott's and Louie's behavior in the novel parallels their attitudes in the *tableau*: Louie is generous and large-minded, whereas Scott is sensitive and petty. That Louie is cast as Saladin indicates more about the intangible qualities the Professor attributes to him than it does about his appearance or ethnicity.

Difficulties with accurate representation in *The Professor's House* extend beyond the physical bodies of the characters and their social and ethnic markers. The photographs Tom Outland brings to try to interest the Smithsonian in the Blue Mesa fail to depict the grandeur and significance of the site: "We had only a small Kodak, and these pictures didn't make much show,—looked, indeed, like grubby little 'dobe ruins such as one can find almost anywhere. They gave no idea of the beauty and vastness of the setting" (204). In this instance Cather shows the failure of photography, ostensibly a more reliable medium than painting or staging tableaux vivants, to convey reality, seemingly again illustrating the total insufficiency of pictorial representation—regardless of medium. Like Kathleen's condemned paintings, though, Tom's

misleading photographs hint at deeper truths. The similarity of these ruins to other prehistoric ruins in the Southwest indicates that they belong within the larger context of pre-contact Native America. The poor photograph separates them from Outland's idealized conception of them as uniquely "his," returning them to the indigenous past of America.

Intent on raising government interest in excavating the Blue Mesa and eager to illustrate the grandeur and uniqueness of the site, Tom takes some examples of pottery from the site with him to show government officials. He makes it clear that the pieces he selects while "not the best" were "good" and, more important, "representative" (203). Despite his efforts, the clay specimens are not recognized as "representative" of the uniqueness of the Blue Mesa or the artifacts it contains; on the contrary, Tom is told dismissively that "there were cases of them in the cellar at the Smithsonian that they'd never taken the trouble to unpack" (204). Tom is unable to convey what he understands as essential about the ruins via representative means. In some ways this functions as a denial of the representative force of the objects. Despite the narrative focus that is placed on particular items, things in the novel frequently lack clear meaning and often buckle under the weight of the significance ascribed to them.

Cather's repeated depiction of the failure of objects to convey meaning also contradicts her own description of *My Ántonia* as a vase of flowers to be viewed from many angles. The perspective might shift to show different aspects of the object but the subject itself, the arrangement of flowers in a vase, stays the same. Her assertion that she used the framing devices from Dutch paintings for *The Professor's House* indicates a different aesthetic consciousness—one concerned with settings, frames, and contexts—within which objects can shift around—rather than representative individual items or even people. After all, in *My Ántonia*, it is not the

frame of the orchard that fires Jim's imagination at the novel's end but the presence of *Ántonia* herself.

Through Tom Outland's visit, America's capital city is depicted by Cather as a place where people are largely concerned with consumption of goods and keeping up appearances. Viewed in the mercantile world of Washington D.C., the clay artifacts Tom brings take on the status of mass-produced objects that are indistinguishable from one another. The photographs similarly do not "make much show" and cause the Blue Mesa ruins to appear similarly mass produced. This reduction of art and artifacts to mere commodities in urbane American culture prompts an examination of the values and economic priorities of the characters themselves in the wake of Outland's death and the fortune his discoveries create.

Rosamond's "out of drawing figure" reflects the excessive lifestyle she and her husband Louie lead, the extravagance of which is out-of-place in the small college town of Hamilton. When Louie proudly shows Mrs. St. Peter a necklace he plans to have set with emeralds for Rosamond, his mother-in-law remarks, "Of course emeralds would be lovely, Louie, but they seem a little out of scale—to belong to a different scheme of life than any you and Rosamond can live here". Louie replies significantly, "I like the idea of their being out of scale" (76) reinforcing the connection between Rosamond's appearance and her lifestyle. The necklace also represents the tension between monetary appraisals and beauty that crops up throughout the novel. When Rosamond wears her necklace for a family dinner and Kathleen reluctantly admires it, Louie expounds, "She doesn't like anything showy, you know, and she doesn't care about intrinsic values. It must be beautiful first of all" (107).

Throughout the novel Rosamond's extravagance incites criticism and is depicted as showing a lack of proportion and scale. Louie's comment that his wife dislikes things that are

“showy” is true: Rosamond’s things are exquisitely simple and always right for her. When St. Peter compliments her on the furs she wears when he unexpectedly runs into her on his way to Kathleen’s house, Rosamond tells him that Louie chose them: “He selects all my things for me” (83). Kathleen is less complimentary of Rosamond’s new wrap, since it makes any furs she and Scott can afford seem cheap by comparison. When Kathleen complains to her father that Rosamond “comes in here with her magnificence and takes the life out of our little things” (85), she provides a further illustration of the importance of scale and context in *The Professor’s House*. Her criticism of Rosamond for wearing an expensive dress to a sewing circle runs along similar lines: “While she is here among her old friends, she ought to dress like the rest of us” (86). As the emerald necklace illustrates, Rosamond’s immense wealth and the possessions it buys creates problems of scale that reflect her body’s lack of proportion.

Kathleen and Scott’s more conventional lives reflect Kathleen’s fashionably-proportioned body. Rather than an expensive “Pierce Arrow” with a chauffeur, Scott drives a Ford, and in contrast to the opulence of the “Norwegian manor house” (28) Rosamond and Louie are building as a country home, Kathleen and Scott inhabit a “spick and span bungalow” (67). Affordable and easy to maintain, by the 1920s bungalows had become popular homes for middle class Americans. The design of these modest dwellings echoed the organic aesthetic of Arts and Crafts style, while their efficiency and reasonable cost conformed to the Movement’s egalitarian ideals. A product of a democratic design movement with distinct Socialist overtones, Scott and Kathleen’s bungalow is the antithesis of Louie and Rosamond’s new home, which is designed by a Paris-trained Norwegian architect. The Marselluses’ lake house is portrayed as ostentatious and discordant, and their plan to name it “Outland” and make it, among other things, a shrine to St. Peter’s late protégée, increases the building’s anachronistic status. Cather, however, does not let

the McGregors off the hook. We learn that Scott and Kathleen have recently fitted their home with Colonial glass knobs. The impulse toward Coloniana in American design signaled a movement away from both the idealism and the transatlantic origins of the Arts and Crafts Movement. By equipping their bungalow with glass knobs the McGregors are unwittingly combining two fashionable but discordant aesthetics. Although *The Professor's House* does not overtly criticize Scott and Kathleen's lives the way it does Rosamond and Louie's, subtle clues offer a muted critique.

In contrast to Kathleen and Scott's "colonial glass knobs," Louie and Rosamond, having found "just the right sort of hinge and latch" recently had a custom array of "wrought iron door fittings" forged to their own specifications (38). The derided "Norwegian manor house" itself is being designed by a Paris-trained Norwegian architect. Rosamond and Louie represent a world of one-of-a-kind handmade objects. Critics have been scathing about the aesthetic and cultural implications of transposing an alien architectural style, and initially the Marselluses' construction project seems the antithesis of Frank Lloyd Wright's ideal of an organic American architecture whose buildings are carefully integrated into the natural world. Louis and Rosamond, however, have chosen their structure with regards to the aesthetics of the specific site they are going to build on. Louis says it will form a perfect counterpoint to the pine woods and blue water of their chosen site. It probably represents a more harmonious embodiment of design principles than does the MacGregors' mass-produced little bungalow. The building of a Norwegian manor house by Lake Michigan is no more ridiculous or anachronistic than Bishop Latour's construction of a Midi-Romanesque cathedral in the Southwestern United States. Kathleen is critical of Rosamond's expensive "handmade French frock" (86); however, Rosamond's dress is the individual product of skilled seamstresses with generations of knowledge and represents the

antithesis of mass production. The same desire for the unique applies to the “out-of-scale” necklace Louis plans to surprise Rosamond with. By taking an antique setting and combining it with specifically chosen gemstones, Louis is creating a custom piece of jewelry. Yet Cather narratively disparages the Marselluses’ aesthetic judgment. In *The Professor’s House* criteria other than beauty, uniqueness, and individual creation are needed in order to render an object authentic.

The novel’s relationship to genre is similarly fraught. Much of the novel concerns itself with the history of the American West, yet *The Professor’s House* is not in any sense a western novel. The novel’s action occurs entirely after the closing of the frontier, and the western United States appears through carefully-constructed frames controlled by St. Peter. As a historian St. Peter’s official area of specialization is European history, and he has spent extended periods of time in both France and Spain. The multi-volume scholarly work that he has devoted his professional life to is *The Spanish Adventurers in North America*. St. Peter’s real historical interest is the settlement of North America, specifically the Southwestern United States and Mexico, by Europeans. St. Peter’s official academic research is one way the West is framed. The western United States penetrates the novel in a second and far more significant way through Tom Outland, St. Peter’s student and the one-time fiancée of his daughter Rosamond.

“Tom Outland’s Story” connects the reader as well as St. Peter to the Southwestern United States. Suggestions of various western narratives trace across Outland’s background. The circumstances of his early childhood link him to the pioneer chronicles of the settlement of the West. While crossing Kansas in a prairie schooner (in approximately 1887), Tom’s father drowns while taking a swim as his mother watches from the shore. The shock of her husband’s death worsens her already poor health, and she also dies leaving behind Tom, a toddler at the

time (104). Tom's early life is thus connected to the archetypal images of the wagon trails and the lonely graves that line them. In addition to the sober pioneer narrative, the dime novel also lurks at the periphery of Tom's story. In the scene that is most typical of a formulaic western, Tom accompanies an inebriated Roddy Blake back to his room after a saloon poker game and mounts a watch to circumvent anyone who might try to steal Blake's winnings. Tom's language in this scene could have been lifted straight out of a pulp western: "I trusted all the boys who were at the Ruby Light that night, except Barney Shea. He might try to pull something off on a stranger, down in Mexican town" (183). After that terse and suspenseful phrase, the reader anticipates a knife fight or some similarly violent altercation, but Tom's worries are unfounded and his vigil unnecessary. No bandits appear, and he spends a quiet, if chilly and uncomfortable, night.⁴⁶ Cather's negation of the potential for stereotypical violence here is much like Jim Burden's perusal of *The Life of Jesse James* as he crosses the Nebraska prairie by train in *My Ántonia*. In both cases sensational western violence is relegated to the province of pulp and the workings of an overactive imagination.

The last and most crucial western narrative role Tom appropriates is that of explorer and self-taught archaeologist, discovering significant Cliff Dweller ruins and cataloguing the artifacts he finds. Critics and historians, most definitively and comprehensively David Harrell, have located the prototype for Outland in the Colorado rancher and amateur explorer Richard Wetherill.⁴⁷ Harrell points out that although Wetherill is certainly an important source for Cather, her fascination with exploring Pueblo ruins appears before her encounters with the Wetherill

⁴⁶ Janis Stout affirms the lurking presence of pulp violence in *The Professor's House*, but denies its centrality to the novel's plot "In the sequence on Blue Mesa, much as in *The Song of the Lark*, the point is Tom's intellectual and moral maturation, which comes not from engaging in Wild West violence, but from gaining self-awareness" ("Touching" 91).

⁴⁷ David Harrell's book *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House* meticulously elucidates the connections between Cather and Wetherill, shedding important light on the documentary underpinnings of *The Professor's House*.

family, or indeed her first trip to the Southwest in 1912: “What Willa Cather found in Richard Wetherill's story was a historical frame for another story that she had been trying to write for years, the dramatization of a private myth that had haunted her since childhood” (138). An obvious precursor to “Tom Outland’s Story” is the 1909 short story, “The Enchanted Bluff,” where a group of boys fantasize about exploring a cliff village very similar to Tom Outland’s own deserted town. The short story is framed as a retrospective narrative told twenty years later by one of the now-adult boys. Within the embedded narrative of the story itself, the tale about the enchanted bluff is also framed: During a campout the boys are telling in turn the place each would most like to visit, and Tip Smith recounts the story of the Indian ruin. The boys are captivated by his story and make a pact that the first to reach the bluff must tell the others exactly what he finds. As the boys grow up, they become absorbed in the cares of adulthood and never go on their imagined journey. In contrast to other stories of this type, however, the onset of adult responsibilities does not cause the vision of the enchanted bluff to recede in the consciousness of either the story’s narrator or his friend Tip. When the narrator sees Tip after many years, “between us we quite revived the experience of the lone red rock and the extinct people” (76). Tip still claims he will someday find the ruin but tells the narrator that he is waiting until his son is old enough to accompany him. Bert, the son, “has been let into the story and thinks of nothing but the Enchanted Bluff” (77). Tip himself initially heard the story of the bluff from his uncle; that he has now passed the legend on to his son indicates a pattern of male narrative transmission. Begun as a boyish blend of history and myth, “The Enchanted Bluff” ends as an escapist male fantasy. For Tip, who “married a slatternly, unthrifty, country girl, has been much tied to a perambulator, and has grown stooped and gray from inadequate meals and irregular sleep” (76), the idea of the enchanted bluff now functions less as a proactive vision of

exploration and discovery and more as a flight from domestic responsibility, portrayed by Cather as not just emotionally and aesthetically unappealing but physically damaging. Tip is in many ways a lower-class version of St. Peter himself, still longing to make a last trip to France with Tom Outland.

In “The Enchanted Bluff” the boundaries of the story-within-a-story are clearly delineated. The enchanted bluff itself is a childish, imaginative space that does not impinge upon the real lives of the story’s characters. In *The Professor’s House* Cather clothes this “private myth” with the academic materials of archaeological documentation and historical speculation. Despite its purported realism, “Tom Outland’s Story” creates for adult men the kind of male fantasy the boys and men in “The Enchanted Bluff” dream about. The trip St. Peter was to take with Tom Outland, curtailed by Outland’s enlistment and death, bears more than a little resemblance to the plans Tip makes with his son. Looking at *The Professor’s House* alongside “The Enchanted Bluff” underscores the longing for a masculine paradise that runs through the novel. St. Peter repeatedly fantasizes about retreating to a place without women. Critics have read St. Peter’s escapism as regressive and emblematic of his desire to return to adolescence, with Outland, who fulfills the role of the naïf, as his companion.

Although St. Peter would like to use his idea of Tom Outland as a means of retreating from contemporary America, Tom Outland himself represents sweeping changes in American mobility and transportation. As an infant he is trundled across the country in a prairie schooner; after his parents’ deaths he is adopted by the family of a western railroad employee, and as a young man his first job is as a railroad call boy. By Tom’s death in 1915, the railroad is being supplanted by aviation technology, the development of which he assists materially through the “Outland engine.” Outland’s contributions to aviation make him a particular signifier of future

development, as evidenced by Cather's depiction of the progression from covered wagon to train to airplane that occurs within his thirty-year lifespan. Matthias Schubnell deviates from St. Peter's vision of Outland as an antidote to modernity, a heroic figure who is somehow held aloof from the vicissitudes of American culture, claiming that Tom is "the product of his time and culture, destined to make decisions and to take actions that can only be explained by the historical matrix into which he was born" (105). For St. Peter, Outland, despite his brilliance and adaptability, only belongs in one historical and geographical context—the ruins he excavates, and the Professor admires him for not seeking to exploit these ruins for personal economic gain.

Distaste for mercenary economic practices resonates throughout *The Professor's House*. Acquisition of wealth is something St. Peter shrinks from and finds his friendship with Tom Outland an antidote to. Although St. Peter refuses to allow Tom to be "translated into the vulgar tongue" (62) of capital, he has little choice in the matter. In addition to the Outland gas and engine that are so lucrative, the very profitability of St. Peter's history, *The Spanish Adventurers in North America* (suffused as it is with Tom's influence), indicates the transformation of Tom and those intangible qualities he represents into monetary resources. Outland himself intimately connected with St. Peter's research project, arriving in Hamilton before St. Peter begins the fourth volume of the eight volume series (258). Early in the novel we learn about the project's reception, "For all the interest his first three volumes awoke in the world, he might as well have dropped them into Lake Michigan . . . With the fourth volume he began to be aware that a few young men scattered about the United States and England were intensely interested in his experiment. With the fifth and sixth, they began to express their interest in lectures and in print. The last two volumes brought him a certain international reputation" (32). The implication is that St. Peter's work is so original that its significance at first eludes the conservative historical

community, and the establishment must catch up to the Professor and his innovative historiography. Later in the novel, however, it seems evident that a difference in quality between the first and last half of *The Spanish Adventurers* might indicate the increased popularity of the latter volumes. St. Peter admits, “If the last four volumes of ‘The Spanish Adventurers’ were more simple and inevitable than those that went before, it was largely because of Outland” (258). St. Peter’s relationship with Outland begins before the publication of the third volume. During the masculine summer he and Outland share in Hamilton when Tom recounts his story, he is “writing on volumes three and four of his history” (176). Outland provides a living link with the Southwestern United States. Outland’s influence is thus essential to St. Peter’s academic success. St. Peter’s academic success equals financial success, and Outland is responsible for that too.

Scott McGregor, St. Peter’s son-in-law, perhaps expresses it best when he tells the Professor, “You know, Tom isn’t very real to me any more. Sometimes I think he was just a—a glittering idea” (111). At least two interpretations of the phrase “a glittering idea” are possible: the first suggests that Tom and the values he represents have become intangible in the smallish context of the Marselluses’ excess and the larger context of modernity, whereas the second indicates that Tom has been translated into the all too substantial glitter of money. This dichotomy becomes the central dilemma surrounding Tom in the novel: he has too much substance and is too linked to the unsatisfying contemporary world, yet he is also wraith-like and insubstantial, a creation of St. Peter’s need and imagination. Lisa Lucenti, addressing this lack of fixity, claims the reader is “faced with a multitude of shifting, alterable images of Tom Outland and of what he represents to the present, to the past, and to each character’s nostalgic longings” (242).

One reason for the mutability of Tom's persona is his lack of corporeality. Throughout *The Professor's House*, Tom lacks bodily detail. When St. Peter first meets Outland he notices the visitor's "manly, mature voice" before registering "the strong line of contrast below the young man's sandy hair—the very fair forehead which had been protected by the hat, and the reddish brown of the face, which had evidently been exposed to a stronger sun than the spring sun of Hamilton" (112). It is significant that Tom Outland's voice first compels St. Peter, a voice so important that it becomes Part II of the novel. Lucenti writing at length about the use of prosopopoeia in *The Professor's House*, claims, "This impossible—and highly destructive-ventriloquism is the impulse behind all of the novel's characters and events" (240). Tom, although a casualty of World War I, speaks with remarkable clarity through the Professor's memories in "Tom Outland's Story." St. Peter's appropriation of Tom's voice further indicates the Professor's centrality to the narrative.

In contrast to Tom's resonant, important voice, his face is curiously blank. Rather than having innate physical characteristics, it is a representation of where he has been, that is, a place "with a stronger sun than the spring sun of Hamilton." Tom's body is similarly mysterious: "The boy was fine-looking he saw—tall and presumably well built, though the shoulders of his stiff, heavy coat were so preposterously padded that the upper part of him seemed shut up in a case" (113). Tom's bulky coat functions as a type of disguise, obscuring the lineaments of his body. He is "presumably well built" but St. Peter cannot initially verify this. The reader's inability to visualize Tom heightens his physical absence in the text. Other characters, even relatively minor ones, are described in fairly minute detail. The ill-favored Professor Crane's mouth is described with painful precision: "His pale eyes and fawn-coloured eyebrows were outbalanced by his mouth, his most conspicuous feature. One always remembered about Crane that unexpected,

startling red mouth in a setting of kinky beard. The lips had no modeling, they were as thick at the corners as in the middle and he spoke through them rather than with them” (144). Although Tom’s voice resonates throughout the novel, his mouth is never described.

Tom’s hand is his only physical feature that is described in any detail. As Tom offers two turquoises to St. Peter’s young daughters, the Professor studies Outland’s outstretched hand, seeing: “the muscular, many-lined palm, the long, strong fingers with soft ends, the flexible, beautifully shaped thumb that curved back from the rest of the hand as if it were its own master. What a hand! He could see it yet, with the blue stones lying in it” (121). For St. Peter, Outland’s hand functions as a kind of synecdochal referent for Outland himself. Jonathan Goldberg recognizes the evident eroticism of Cather’s description of Tom’s hand but also notes the genderless nature of the description—this beautiful disembodied hand could be attached to either a man or a woman. At the few other points in the text when Tom’s body is evoked, it is always by way of his hand: Twice in the text St. Peter remembers his younger daughter Kathleen as a child squeezing Tom’s hand and demanding him to tell her stories. And when he meditates on Outland’s death, it is Tom’s hand St. Peter thinks of: “a hand like that, had he lived, must have been put to other uses . . . it would have to write thousands of meaningless letters and frame thousands of false excuses. He had escaped all that” (235). St. Peter’s fixation on Tom’s hand is not surprising; the hand is the part of the body most readily associated with the act of writing, with producing a narrative.

After Tom departs, Mrs. St. Peter muses, “We ask a poor, perspiring tramp boy to lunch, to save his pennies, and he departs leaving princely gifts” (121). Lillian St. Peter’s comment has a fairy tale quality: the frog transforming into a prince; the old woman metamorphosing into a fairy. The implication is that things are not always what they seem; that Tom in particular is not

what he seems. Jean Schwind, in an excellent article “This is a Frame-up: Mother Eve in *The Professor’s House*” lays out the specific ways in which the novel unfairly “frames” women. Schwind discusses the fundamental unreliability of St. Peter’s perspective, particularly his view of Tom Outland. Claiming that “Outland is a stereotyped hero from St. Peter’s point of view,” (84) Schwind establishes evidence for a past romantic relationship between Kathleen and Tom, revealing Outland was involved with both sisters, betraying the Professor’s trust in the process. Lillian St. Peter’s reservations regarding Tom are not, as the Professor (and at times the reader) believes, the groundless whims of a mercurial and jealous woman. Her comment about the “chivalry of the cinema” (151) becomes very real, since Tom is proved to be something of an actor. Mrs. St. Peter’s scathing remark comes into relief when placed against the Professor’s veneration of the “Age of Chivalry” early in the novel. St. Peter romantically views Tom’s reticence as a matter of personal reserve and delicacy, while Lillian sees it as duplicity.

Tom’s lack of physical presence is reinforced by the dearth of information surrounding his origins. The child of pioneers who died while crossing the prairie, Tom has only the faintest idea of his parents and does not know his birthday or his exact age. Although he is raised by a kind railroad man and his wife, Tom does not seem to have any permanent connection to his foster parents, who are mentioned only in passing, and his life after childhood is one of labor and itinerancy. Tom’s status as an orphan who is working out his own destiny highlights an optimistic view of America as a place of limitless potential and mobility. Although Tom’s nebulous origins and ability to recreate himself form part of his romantic appeal, in the context of early-twentieth-century America’s anxiety over ethnicity, Tom’s lack of a concrete familial background is also subtly threatening. Gina M. Rossetti recognizes Tom’s potential to be a threatening figure but negates it: “In the novel, Tom Outland represents a primitive figure, but

his characterization differs from earlier, naturalist texts that would have posited him as a threat. Rather, Tom's embodiment of an innocent, primeval West stirs St. Peter's imagination and serves as the latter's escape from the modern constraints of family and professional life" (129). As Schwind's analysis indicates, this characterization of Outland is entirely dependent on St. Peter's biased point of view.

Due to a constellation of factors including increasing urban populations, the post-bellum migrations of African Americans, the influx of immigrants, and the greater mobility of all Americans resulting from transportation advances, in the late-nineteenth century specific familial knowledge became more important. Ordinary Americans began to use mechanisms such as family trees to document their backgrounds, in effect "proving" their ethnicity and social status. Even the family photograph album was pressed into service, in certain cases becoming, according to Shawn Michelle Smith, a "eugenicist album, the record of ancestral physical features and their supposed analogues, namely, racialized character traits" (125). Literature of the period, both literary and popular, is rife with characters whose ethnicity and social class are thrown into question. Kate Chopin's 1893 short story "Desiree's Baby" and the 1929 novel *Passing* by Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen are two canonical texts that hinge on mistaken ethnic identity. Indeed, in "Desiree's Baby" the circumstances of Desiree's adoption—according to Chopin, "The prevailing belief was that she had been purposefully left by a party of Texans, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry . . . just below the plantation" (200)—greatly resemble those of Tom Outland, who is orphaned in a similar group of travelers.

In terms of popular literature, Gene Stratton Porter's 1904 bestseller *Freckles* depicts the main character, a painfully virtuous and noble young man who should make any prospective

father-in-law weep with joy, agonizing that he is not worthy of his beloved because he is an orphan who does not know his name or relatives. In a narrative trick notable more for its utility than its originality, Porter has Freckles discover both his name, which, perhaps not surprisingly, is “old and full of honor” (331) and his relatives who (also not surprisingly) are rich. Freckles is privileged, in Porter’s words, “to know his name at last, and that he was of honorable birth—knowledge without which life was an eternal disgrace and burden” (333). Tom, of course, does not know whether or not he was of “honorable birth,” and the characters in *The Professor’s House* know only what Tom tells them.

To the credulous St. Peter, Tom paradoxically combines a “many-sided mind” with a “simple and straightforward personality” (172); however, the Professor’s wife is not so sanguine about her husband’s star pupil. St. Peter attributes Lillian’s suspicions of Tom to her own jealousy but allows that Outland “was not altogether consistent” (172). Mrs. St. Peter’s suspicions are aroused by the gaps and omissions in Tom’s history. The inconsistencies in the story he gives of his past mimic Tom’s physical instability. Fixated though they are on Tom, none of the novel’s other characters can really see him clearly, St. Peter least of all. For Loretta Wasserman, “the central cause of the growing trouble in St. Peter’s family, explored in “The Family,” is how to memorialize Tom correctly” (234). Because Tom dies in France, there is no body to bury and no gravesite to visit, short-circuiting the usual rituals of American mourning. Unlike that of Cather’s cousin G.P. Cather, the inspiration for Claude in *One of Ours*, Tom’s body is not returned to the United States, nor is there any evidence that when the Marselluses and Lillian travel to France they will search for Tom’s grave. According to Steven Trout, “Outland’s obscure demise in 1915, two years before the American declaration of war, remains detached

from the culture of American military commemoration” (149). Trout identifies the “one enduring memorial to Outland” as being “the Marselluses’ bizarre residential museum” (149).

The novel’s preoccupation with the body extends to the dead body with the figure of Mother Eve, the preserved woman Tom finds on the Blue Mesa. Both Mother Eve’s violent death and the disappearance of her corpse presage Tom’s fate. Her supposed betrayal of her husband, posited by Father Duchene as the reason for her murder, prefigures Tom’s own betrayal of his companion on the Mesa, Roddy Blake. Mother Eve is killed for her transgression, having violated the laws of her society (as they are perceived by Father Duchene) by entering into an adulterous relationship. Tom, having violated both the laws of his particular working class society, represented as that “dream of self-sacrificing friendship and disinterested love . . . among the day labourers” (172), and his bond with Roddy, must make recompense by exiling himself and dying in a foreign country. His death as a war casualty is particularly appropriate since he and Roddy in their relationship exhibit a version of *comitatus*, the bond between a warrior and his leader. When Tom, a figurative lord, spurns Roddy, his vassal, death in warfare becomes the only fitting restitution. The real “Tom Outland’s Story” involves not the loss of a cache of artifacts but a betrayal of trust and loyalty. While Tom is in Washington, Roddy, who has misunderstood the nature of Tom’s interest in the site, sells the Mesa’s relics and the body of Mother Eve to Fechtig, a German collector. When Tom returns to find the artifacts gone, he excoriates Roddy, who leaves and is never seen again.

As Wasserman points out, St. Peter exhibits a total misunderstanding of Tom’s diary and the larger story to which it bears witness: “What St. Peter sees as the crux of the story is Tom’s failure to interest the Smithsonian in his artifacts, a failure of historic preservation. But what Tom had intended (as we see, reading his words) was to confess his treachery against his friend

Roddy Blake, and his regret, ‘Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it’” (235). Long before his precipitous entry into the French Foreign Legion and World War I, Tom sees death as a possibility: “I’m not very sanguine about good fortune for myself. I’ll be called to account when I least expect it” (253). The “princely gifts” (121) Tom brings the St. Peters at their first meeting reinforce his status as a liege lord. The feudal motif fits in well with the Grail imagery Klaus Stich has revealed and the medieval references (such as the presence of Joan of Arc in *One of Ours*) that crop up periodically in Cather’s post-1920 novels. Much has been written about parental relations in the novel, but fraternity is also a significant concern. The idea of brotherhood comes up again and again in *The Professor’s House*, expressed in both significant relationships and slight narrative details. In terms of relationships, there are the uncomfortable brothers-in-law, Louie and Scott; St. Peter’s close relationship with his French foster brothers; and the fraternal relationship Tom and Roddy share. Incidental references to brotherhood include Louie’s remark about Tom’s “brother scientists” (42), the British scholar Edgar Spilling’s brother, and Louie’s brother in China. Louie himself tells St. Peter that he thinks of Tom “as a brother, an adored and gifted brother” (166).

Remembering Outland, the Professor tells his younger daughter, Kathleen, that Tom “Always had something in his voice, in his eyes . . . One seemed to catch a glimpses of an unusual background behind his shoulders when he came into the room” (112). The phrase “unusual background” reads as distinctly visual and even pictorial. St. Peter’s intent gaze casts Tom as a two-dimensional figure in the foreground of a painting; behind him is the “unusual background” that St. Peter would like to study further. The “unusual background” that St. Peter finds so fascinating is Tom’s time in the Southwestern United States. During the composition of *The Spanish Adventurers in North America*, St. Peter’s major hindrance has been “the fact that

he had not spent his youth in the great dazzling Southwest country which was the scene of his explorers' adventures" (258). Outland's presence remedies this problem, vicariously giving St. Peter the experience of the Southwest he needs: "Into his house walked a boy who had grown up there, a boy with imagination, with the training and insight resulting from a very curious experience; who had in his pocket the secrets which old trails and stones and water-courses tell only to adolescence" (259). This view of Outland as "background" reinforces his lack of physical presence, and the confusion of meanings surrounding him. It also represents his absorption into the backdrop of St. Peter's own great work.

The end of *The Professor's House* finds St. Peter attempting to edit and annotate Tom's diary for publication, but there is no indication that he ever succeeds in doing so. One of the chief problems he faces is writing an introduction to the material: "To mean anything, it must be prefaced by a sketch of Outland, and some account of his later life and achievements" (171). Writing such a sketch would mean describing and defining Outland, a task which, as the dearth of physical descriptions throughout the novel illustrates, the Professor finds it impossible to do. The diary is a record of the time Tom spent with Roddy on the Mesa before Tom's disheartening trip to Washington. When he leaves the Blue Mesa, Tom secrets the diary in a niche, near the place where he found Mother Eve. He and St. Peter unearth the manuscript on the trip to the Southwest they take together, the diary itself becoming an artifact that must be excavated and recovered, increasing its aura of authenticity and significance. Its accuracy is questionable, however. Ending as it does before Roddy's sale of the artifacts and Tom's subsequent abandonment of his friend, it stands as an incomplete record, one that leaves out the heart of the story—Tom's betrayal of Roddy. St. Peter's conviction of the importance of this particular version of Outland's life shows how little he understands the true significance of "Tom

Outland's Story," the version that Outland recounts in his voice rather than writing with his hand. By making "Tom Outland's Story," rather than Outland's diary, the true repository for meaning in the novel, *The Professor's House* privileges oral over written transmission, the voice over the hand, and the intangible over the concrete. Through undercutting both St. Peter's perspective and the accuracy of static representation in general, Cather returns an enormous amount of interpretive power to the reader, signaling that the mystery at the core of the novel, the phenomenon of interpretation itself, is perfectly embodied in Outland.

EMBODIMENTS OF SLAVERY IN *MY ÁNTONIA* AND *SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL*

Of Willa Cather's dozen novels, her last, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, published in 1940, is the only one that has a significant number of African American characters. Apart from *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*'s African American inhabitants, *My Ántonia*'s Blind d'Arnault is the only named African American character in Cather's extensive corpus.⁴⁸ Cather sets *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in antebellum Virginia, and the novel shapes itself into a sustained meditation on the nature and consequences of slavery. *My Ántonia*, coming out in 1918, twenty-two years before *Sapphira*, takes place in turn-of-the-century Nebraska, distanced from the slave-owning South both chronologically and spatially, yet slavery surfaces as a concern in that novel as well. In both novels, Cather illustrates the ways in which slavery defined both nineteenth and twentieth-century Eurocentric attitudes toward the Africanist body, situating specific black characters' bodies in such a way that they are proxies for her white characters' fears and desires.⁴⁹

Slavery's theoretical presence in *My Ántonia* should not perhaps be surprising. Willa Cather was born in Virginia in 1873, a scant eight years after the end of the Civil War. Like many Southerners, particularly those from the hills of Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina,

⁴⁸ Unnamed black characters in Cather's fiction include a Pullman porter in *One of Ours*; an opera singer in *The Song of the Lark*; a cab driver, described as "nice darkey man," who transports *My Mortal Enemy*'s Myra Henshaw; and "Black Tom" (no surname is ever given), the Forresters' factotum, from *A Lost Lady*.

⁴⁹ My use of the term "Africanist" derives from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In Morrison's usage, "Africanism" functions "as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (7).

her family contained both Confederate and Union sympathizers. During her childhood, the ordeal of the war was still felt keenly in her community, embodied equally by the Confederate veterans who still wore their Confederate Army tunics (sometimes with a pinned-up sleeve), and by Cather's pro-Union grandfather, whose Northern sympathies enabled him to garner the position of county sheriff after the South's defeat. Save for the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather never wrote autobiographically about the Virginia of her youth, yet details that must be from that period persistently crop up in her fiction. One of Cather's fleeting references to the post-bellum South occurs in *My Ántonia* when after Mr. Shimerda's death the coroner, "a mild, flurried old man, a Civil War veteran with one sleeve hanging empty," makes his report (112). In *One of Ours* the mother of music teacher Gladys Farmer is a native of Kentucky who is depicted as a daughter of the South fallen upon hard times: "There weren't four steady legs on any of the stuffed chairs or little folding tables she had brought up from the South, and the heavy gold molding was half broken away from the oil portrait of her father the Judge, but she carried her poverty lightly, as Southern people did after the Civil War" (95). Also in *One of Ours*, the minister who marries Claude and Enid has similar connection to the South: "He had been a drummer boy in the Civil War, on the losing side, and he was a simple courageous man" (165). Mahailey in the same novel is also a Southerner who remembers the Civil War; although she had five brothers fighting for the Confederacy, she does not appear to be partisan, remembering sympathetically the Union soldiers who passed through her family's farm.

Tellingly, but not surprisingly, none of these Civil War allusions deal with the issue of slavery: Southerners did and do attempt to divorce the Civil War and the Lost Cause from the enslavement of African Americans. It is not accidental that Cather waited until near the end of her life to revisit her family's slaveholding past in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. By the time her

last novel was published, all of her older relatives were long dead. There was no one for Cather to offend, and also no one to correct her version of family history. But it is surely significant that two decades earlier, in *My Ántonia*, Cather also deals with the issue of slavery, however indirectly. By initially making d'Arnault an exotic figure and attempting to isolate him from the novel's significant action, Cather makes her references to slavery appear similarly inconsequential.

Blind d'Arnault finds a somewhat unlikely parallel in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl's* Jezebel. Both characters are similarly narratively situated. In each novel the character first appears in the context of present action and is viewed through a white gaze. Sapphira Dodderige Colbert visits the dying Jezebel in her cabin on the Colbert plantation, and it is Sapphira's perspective, that of the white, privileged slave owner that first informs our view of Jezebel. In *My Ántonia*, Blind d'Arnault plays the piano for a white audience at Mrs. Gardener's hotel in Black Hawk, Nebraska. After the initial contemporary view we are given of Jezebel and d'Arnault, both narratives suddenly plunge away from the present to provide a glimpse of the characters' early lives. Both of these inset narratives occur in times and places that are radically different from the novels' settings: we see Jezebel's capture in Africa and the horrors of the Middle Passage, and witness Blind d'Arnault's childhood on a Southern plantation.

Anyone who has read much Cather will notice the large number of embedded narratives—flashbacks that abruptly remove the reader from the novel's contemporary action. All but two of these narratives possess a clearly defined narrator: someone who exists in the present but is connected with the past of the inset narrative tells the story. A representative example would be Pavel and Peter and their tale of the Russian wedding party in *My Ántonia*. The story, fantastic though it might seem, is told by Pavel himself about his life and is entirely

plausible within the context of the novel. In contrast to Cather's other narrative digressions, the stories regarding Jezebel and d'Arnault are not so neatly framed. The only person in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* who knows anything about Jezebel's early antecedents is Jezebel herself, yet it is not Jezebel who is telling this story; there are details which she could not have known, due in part to her inability to understand English. The perspective of the narrative is that of the whites who deported and sold her, whites whom the Dodderidge family would have never come into contact with, since we know from the novel that Jezebel went through several owners before she came to Chestnut Hill. In the same way, the provenance of the narrative describing d'Arnault's plantation childhood remains unclear: no person in *Black Hawk* would possess specific knowledge regarding his early life. In both Jezebel's and Blind d'Arnault's narratives, the lack of a narrator is not artistic carelessness on Cather's part. Rather, she is consciously providing stories without internal textual authentication in order to move beyond the specific boundaries of the novels' action into a vaguer, more speculative space. That these two de-contextualized embedded narratives both deal with African American characters suggests the difficulties Cather faced when writing about slavery.

Cather uses both Jezebel and d'Arnault as ostensibly realistic embodiments of their particular time periods, yet each character also has a fantastically primitive dimension that sends him or her beyond the boundaries of strict realism. In their normative states, Jezebel and d'Arnault are locatable in the culture and geography of the novels' respective time periods; however, through the atavistic primitivism they at times embody, and the strangely isolated embedded narratives that depict their respective pasts, they briefly escape the bonds of realism and become embodiments of other concerns: Blind d'Arnault's story abruptly thrusts the southern plantation into a novel of the Nebraska Plains set in the 1890s, whereas Jezebel's

experience of the Middle Passage brutally disrupts the harmonious picture of an antebellum plantation. Textually speaking, both Blind d'Arnault and Sapphira also foreground sexuality in the minds of the novels' white characters.

My Ántonia, Cather's best known novel, establishes itself as the story of Ántonia Shimerda, a Bohemian immigrant growing up in late nineteenth-century Nebraska. Jim Burden, the novel's third-person witness narrator, tells us Ántonia's history. *My Ántonia* is in reality far more about Jim than it is about Ántonia, who is shown only in her relation to Jim, and who disappears entirely from the novel's action for long stretches. At the point when Blind d'Arnault enters the story, both Jim and Ántonia reside in the town of Black Hawk, the fictional counterpart to Cather's hometown of Red Cloud. Jim lives with his grandparents and attends high school; Ántonia works as a maid in the home of the Harlings, Jim's grandparents' neighbors.

For the enlightened twenty-first century reader, Blind d'Arnault, a touring pianist, is one of the most troubling characters in Cather's fiction. As a performer d'Arnault fits neatly into the Cather canon. Cather was deeply interested in music and theater throughout her life, and many of her novels and stories have performers in both central and peripheral positions. Unlike Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* or the titular Lucy Gayheart, d'Arnault resides at the borders of the text: we see him perform once and never hear of him again. Janis Stout, in an essay on Cather and performance, writes, "Though unfortunately marred by a racist caricature, the vignette of Blind d'Arnault's performance conveys much the same idea as the other performance episodes we have noted: the artist's enormous personal vigor, his intense involvement in his art, and the power of his performance to lift the moment out of the ordinary for the listeners or viewers" (113). Tom Fahy discusses the "racist caricature" of Blind d'Arnault directly: "His

exaggerated smiles and physical deformities make him a kind of freak exhibit, emphasizing his role as spectacle . . . the audience for Cather's d'Arnault seems more interested in his extraordinary body and mulatto background than his performance" (43). Stout focuses on the power of the music itself rather than "racist caricature" that mars this particular performative instance. Fahy, in contrast, negates the performance, and focuses only on the figure of the performer. A balanced reading, however, must acknowledge both d'Arnault's music and his body as essential to the development of the narrative.

Cather's initial description of Blind d'Arnault bears out Fahy's term "freak exhibit." Cather writes, "He had the Negro head, too, almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool" (184). This statement is problematic on two of levels. Culturally speaking, Cather's description of a non-European's head conjures up disturbingly eugenic visions of calipers and charts. We shift uncomfortably and think of purportedly microcephalic African Americans exhibited by P.T. Barnum. The description of d'Arnault's hair as "wool" is equally disturbing, if not particularly surprising. Should we ignore whatever unpleasant cultural connotations it may possess, the description is still unsettling: Cather's phrase "nothing behind the ears" virtually replicates the casually dismissive insult "nothing between the ears," indicating a lack of intellectual ability. Blind d'Arnault has "almost no head at all," making the metonymic hop from no head to no brain is not a major feat. A bit later in the scene Cather refers to the pianist's "dark mind" (189). Of course, d'Arnault has been blind since he was a small child, which no doubt provides one (equally problematic from a disability studies point of view) explanation for Cather's choice of descriptor. A dark mind, however, aligns closely with a dark body, and perhaps by a not-too-radical extension, a dark continent.

This tenuous reference to Africa is shored up by later description of the pianist as he performs: “He looked like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong savage blood” (191). Marianna Torgovnick in *Gone Primitive* discusses the common turn-of-the-century equation of African Americans with Africans (32). With the character of Blind d’Arnault, Cather freely indulges in this interchangeability. Before his performance Cather describes d’Arnault’s “soft amiable Negro voice” with its note of “docile subservience” and his “kindly and happy” face with its “show of white teeth.” Jim says of d’Arnault’s countenance, “It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia” (183-84). All of these descriptors are stock characteristics of the stereotypical contented Southern antebellum black person. Thus far d’Arnault could have marched straight from the pages of a Thomas Dixon novel or hopped off the minstrel show stage. We are also told that d’Arnault is a “mulatto”; Cather repeatedly emphasizes this racially-mixed lineage, mentioning the pianist’s “yellow face,” “yellow hands,” and “yellow fingers.” Her continued use of the color yellow to describe d’Arnault’s skin prefigures another mixed-race Cather character, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*’s enslaved “yellow girl” Nancy. Nancy has cheeks that are “pale gold” and hands that Rachel Blake, Sapphira’s daughter, describes as ““old gold”” (18). The novel also repeatedly emphasizes her uncertain paternity. In *My Ántonia* d’Arnault’s father is similarly absent; his mother is referred to as “yellow Martha,” indicating that she herself is of mixed racial background. Cather in *My Ántonia* casually refers to the historical phenomenon she focuses on in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: enslaved black women’s vulnerability to sexual assault by white men.⁵⁰ Following this line of reasoning, d’Arnault, if not

⁵⁰ For a nuanced discussion of the range of sexual relations possible between black women and white men in antebellum America see Annette Gordon-Reed 312-25. Marilee Lindemann asserts that “In *My Antonia* miscegenation, far from being criminal, produces the mulatto pianist Blind d’Arnault” (68). The outcome of this instance of racial mixing might not be “criminal” in the context of the novel, but we as readers cannot know the circumstances of d’Arnault’s conception and the feelings of his mother.

a slave, is here shown as African American product of slavery, securely ensconced in the United States' immovable racial hierarchy.

Depicted as an African, d'Arnault is not so innocuous: he is savage and sweating and possesses a godlike power at odds with his former quiescent demeanor. Cather's depiction of him as a "god of pleasure" also indicates a degree of hedonistic abandon hitherto unseen in the novel. Those sensory pleasures afforded thus far have been somewhat homely: the lighted Christmas tree at the Burdens, the chirping insect Ántonia ties up in her hair, a chocolate cake Jim's grandmother makes. Blind d'Arnault's "barbarous" playing ushers a markedly sensual element into Cather's narrative. Of course, with Cather's propensity for depicting the power of performance, we could assume that it is merely d'Arnault's music itself that is provoking certain responses, and his performance does as Stout claims, "lift the moment out of the ordinary" (113). As will be discussed later, d'Arnault's performance and the narrative action it elicits are indeed essential to the plot of *My Ántonia*. Yet the figure and personal history of the performer cannot be separated from the performance; Cather illustrates this correlation most clearly in her 1915 *küntslerroman*, *The Song of the Lark*, which describes Midwesterner Thea Kronborg's development into a famous opera singer. Although Cather does not provide a full description of d'Arnault's growth as a performer, his background and physical development are as essential to his career as Thea Kronborg's history and physicality are to hers.

When *My Ántonia* gives us d'Arnault's history, we are specifically told, "He was born in the Far South on the d'Arnault plantation" (185). Cather's use of the phrase "Far South," and her capitalization of the words imply a specific region as opposed to a simple indicator of distance and direction. The use of "Old South" or "Deep South" would be a more expected choice. "Far South" can perhaps be taken as synonymous with Deep South; however, as used in *My Ántonia* it

highlights the South's geographical and cultural distance from Nebraska. Cather's nebulous descriptor is all the more remarkable because the inescapably French name "d'Arnault" suggests a Louisiana location. This intentional lack of specificity seems designed to foreground the South in its diverse entirety as a historical and cultural entity.

Jim Burden, like Cather herself, is a displaced Southerner; at the novel's beginning he mentions the "interminable journey" from Virginia to Nebraska (3). The spatial and spiritual dislocation Jim feels on the last leg of his trip have been frequently commented on, but the image Cather renders of the Nebraska prairie as a land without barriers or boundaries is generally perceived as positive, the landscape's loneliness offset by its limitless potential. The text does not overtly mention the cultural disaffection the recently-orphaned Jim must have experienced. In fact, Jim states, "I was not homesick. If we never arrived anywhere it did not matter" (8). Jim's strong reaction to the Southernness of Blind d'Arnault occurs several years after his arrival in Nebraska and provides one of the few hints we have that Jim might miss his Virginia birthplace.

The novel's evocation of the South continues when d'Arnault says, "Seems like we might have some good old plantation songs tonight" and launches into "My Old Kentucky Home" (184). "My Old Kentucky Home" is only an "old plantation song" in the minds of its white listeners; it certainly is not a "Negro melody," as Cather later categorizes it (185). Rather, it is a commercial tune written by the white songwriter Stephen Foster in 1852 specifically for performance on the minstrel show stage.⁵¹ Minstrelsy to the twenty-first century mind conjures up distasteful images of ribald songs about corn liquor and possum hunts sung by grinning and

⁵¹ Stephen Foster surfaces again in Cather's 1927 novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which mentions the Foster tune, "My Nelly Was a Lady," and continues, "The Negro melodies of Stephen Foster had already travelled to the frontier, going along the river highways, not in print, but passed on from one humble singer to another" (103). We again observe a white-authored song being termed a "Negro Melody."

stomping performers in blackface. Yet minstrelsy was far more nuanced and diverse and included affective notes of nostalgia as well as coarse jocularity. In his study of minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott discusses the sentimentality that pervaded many of the minstrel shows' set pieces, explaining, "The early work of Stephen Foster alone contained the main elements of sentimentalized plantation distress on which most minstrel companies capitalized forthwith" (187). Foster had a deal with E.P. Christy whereby Christy's Minstrels would perform certain songs (among them "My Old Kentucky Home") before the tunes were released to the public (Milligan 68). The initial context of "My Old Kentucky Home" was, therefore, that of the minstrel show.

The sentiment of "My Old Kentucky Home" along with its conspicuous lack of dialect catapulted it from the blackface minstrel stage to the white singing school, and by the late nineteenth-century it had become a popular parlor tune. The great Metropolitan Opera soprano Alma Gluck recorded a version in 1914 that sold widely. A contemporary of Olive Fremsted and Louise Homer, Gluck's name would have been familiar to Cather, and it is possible that she was aware of the recording.⁵² We also know from the text of *My Ántonia* itself that both Cather and the fictional residents of Black Hawk were acquainted with minstrelsy. As part of her description of the Harling family's love of music, Cather describes how "When Sally got back from school, she sat down in her hat and coat and drummed the plantation melodies that Negro minstrel troops brought to town" (158).⁵³

⁵² Olive Fremsted is the famous soprano upon whom Cather based her 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*. The preceding year Fremsted, Louise Homer, and Geraldine Farrar were profiled by Cather in a piece for *McClure's* entitled "Three American Singers" (Woodress 252).

⁵³ A note appended to the University of Nebraska Press's 1995 scholarly edition of *My Ántonia* reads: "After the Red Cloud Opera House was finished in 1845, minstrel shows by black and blackface white entertainers such as the Georgia Minstrels were popular" (453). Cather may be referring to blackface minstrelsy, but her use of the word *Negro* makes it more likely that she means an African American minstrel troupe, such as the aforementioned Georgia Minstrels.

Cather portrays d'Arnault's performance as thoroughly respectable; it is from the well-connected and highly moral Mrs. Harling, who "had known d'Arnault for years," that Jim hears about the somewhat informal performance at "The Boys' Home," the town of Black Hawk's hotel, and an irreproachably reputable establishment (181). d'Arnault is thus not quite so much of an outsider as he perhaps could be, and the entertainment he provides is not furtive or risqué, even by Black Hawk's fairly prim standards. Furthermore, d'Arnault performs in the hotel parlor, itself a socially and musically significant space in nineteenth-century America.

The scene in *My Ántonia* featuring "My Old Kentucky Home" is a peculiar blend of the minstrel stage and the genteel parlor. The setting is of course a literal parlor: the parlor of the Boys' Home, Black Hawk's hotel, but the performer is an African American man who was at that time not likely to be welcomed socially into any white person's private living space. Cather, with her *mise en scene* of largely itinerant westerners gathering around a blind Southern pianist to sing a song about leaving home, cashes in hugely on the sentiment Lott mentions as being a cornerstone of minstrelsy and of Foster's tunes in particular. The multiple levels of ventriloquism here are difficult to separate: we essentially have a black performer performing a blackface tune—something like a female impersonating a female impersonator, as portrayed in the popular Broadway musical *Victor/Victoria*. And perhaps more important, we have white listeners identifying with a purportedly black sensibility, albeit one dreamed up by a white man. Widening the frame leads us to additional auditors: Cather's readers, most of whom, in 1918 when *My Ántonia* was published, would have been white, experiencing a black male character created by a white female author.

The note of nostalgia in "My Old Kentucky Home" is also significant; in the bleak prairie winter, the South is specifically evoked. Jim's earlier comment regarding d'Arnault's appearance

becomes particularly significant: “It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia” (184). This remark transforms the generalized nostalgia in the song into a catalyst for personal memories: Jim’s memories, and by extension, Cather’s. Jim has been away from Virginia for several years at least and has seen a great many faces. It would be possible to speculate that Blind d’Arnault’s face is the first African American face he has seen since leaving Virginia were it not for the aforementioned “Negro minstrel troops.” d’Arnault’s smiling face has a specific and personal meaning for Jim, reminding him of his early childhood in Virginia with his parents; however, on a broader cultural level, the association of d’Arnault with happiness indicates the persistent characterization of black people as perpetual children, caught outside of the flux and hardship of adult life.

The oft-played initial verse of “My Old Kentucky Home” evokes paternalistic plantation mythology, soothing the listener with its suspended historical present of bright sunlight and “gay darkies,” but this picture changes in subsequent verses, as we see cabins bereft of their owners and learn that “the head will bow/and the back will have to bend . . . in the field where the sugar canes grow.” Ultimately, the song ends in suffering and death: “Just a few more days for to tote the weary load/No matter, t’will never be light/Just a few more days for to stumble on the road/ Then My Old Kentucky Home good night.”⁵⁴ The narrative is obviously that of slaves being sold away from their families and the relative stability of a Kentucky farm to the back-breaking cane plantations of the Deep South. The song’s original chorus was “Den poor uncle Tom good night,” which along with the storyline and its 1852 composition date makes it almost certain that

⁵⁴ The lyrics to “My Old Kentucky Home” are from *A Library of Poetry and Song*. Ed. William Cullen Bryant. New York: J.B. Ford, 1873.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* inspired Foster.⁵⁵ "My Old Kentucky Home" has drawn sharp criticism for its romanticization of slavery, and indeed plantation life in Kentucky as portrayed in the song does seem suspiciously pleasant; nevertheless, Foster in the last two verses of the song shows a much different view of slavery, and the narrative changes from ease and plenty to removal, hard labor, and finally the release of death. Ultimately, Blind d'Arnault and his performance may be viewed in the same manner as "My Old Kentucky Home." Behind the smiling and docile performer another form can be glimpsed, one less amenable to the United States' racial stratification and his own exploitation, and one who ultimately is a disturbing and disruptive catalyst in the novel.

d'Arnault's performance also provides a different racial tableau than we are used to seeing in Cather's fiction. Instead of variations of white ethnicity, we have an African American and a group of white people. Even though Blind d'Arnault was born in the United States, his partially non-European background renders him more irretrievably "other" than the town of Black Hawk's immigrant residents. Another facet of the scene that seems significant is that two members of the audience are Irish. Anson Kirkpatrick, a salesman for Marshall Field, is described as "a dapper little Irishman, very vain, homely as a monkey, with a sweetheart in every port like a sailor" (183). The only other member of the audience to be mentioned by name is Willy O'Reilly, another Irish salesman. Many actors in nineteenth-century minstrel shows were in fact Irish, and the minstrel show itself, as Eric Lott points out, was a space of cultural mixing, as purported black musical traditions blended with Irish jigs and Americanized versions of English ballads (94). In a novel where immigrants feature so prominently, Cather's mention of

⁵⁵ Ken Jennings in *Doo-dah!*, his 1997 study of Foster's life and music, indicates that a number of Foster's songs, including "My Old Kentucky Home," were used to score the numerous traveling stage productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (199-200).

the Irish should not go unremarked upon. Recent historians, most notably Noel Ignatiev, have determined that the assimilation of Irish Americans and their rise to positions of relative respectability in American society was directly connected to the marginalization and subjugation of African Americans. Obviously in this scene there is no tension between the Irish audience members and d'Arnault. Still, it is worth noting that Cather portrays these Irish American characters as, if not well-to-do, at least comfortably situated in Black Hawk society. Significantly, the chummy little group of listeners at the Boys' Home does not appear to include any Bohemians or Scandinavians. The itinerancy of these Irish salesmen does indicate a certain social marginalization, but the class mobility of these men in Black Hawk society encourages us to examine relations among the various groups of ethnic whites.

In terms of narrative structure, Cather moves directly from the group of men singing "one Negro melody after another" to the embedded narrative that describes d'Arnault's southern upbringing. This is the point where the narrative voice becomes unclear: Jim Burden cannot have the minute knowledge of d'Arnault's early life the passage contains. It is as if the nostalgic musical evocation of the South generates a vision of that very place as Cather drops a microcosmic southern plantation right in the middle of the text. All of the essential lineaments are present: the Big House, the master and mistress, d'Arnault's mother Martha spiriting food away from the kitchen. This picture of the bustling plantation is later expanded and refined in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Cather takes pains to point out that this plantation exists in the post-bellum South "where the spirit if not the fact of slavery persisted" (185). Giving d'Arnault a pre-Civil War childhood would not have stretched the novel's chronology unduly. In fact, Thomas Wiggins Greene, one of the pianists upon whom Cather purportedly based d'Arnault, was born into slavery. Could Cather be saying something about the persistence of slavery as an institution

and the way its effects matriculate into the twentieth century? In 1918 when *My Ántonia* was published, the phrase “the spirit of slavery” did not necessarily possess the noxious odor it does today. To many white people it hinted at fidelity on the part of the slave and Christian care on the part of the owner—the security of a fixed social order, mutually beneficial to both parties. Cather’s use of the phrase is intentionally opaque. It is in the figure of Blind d’Arnault himself that she posits resistance to the lure of this idyllic view of slavery.

Despite his status as a performing attraction, Blind d’Arnault maintains such dignity as he can, refusing to be led to the piano. In doing this he resists the appearance of being “handled” by a promoter and undercuts what Fahy terms “his role as spectacle” (43). The topaz ring from the Russian nobleman he proudly exhibits provides another means of separating himself from the gaze of normative America because outside of the United States’ racial hierarchy, the Russian’s appreciation of “Negro Melodies” must be purely aesthetic, and thus objective (192). Additionally, the embedded narrative detailing his birth and childhood seems rhetorically to liberate him from the normative gaze. The inset narrative begins, “He was born” and continues to refer to him anonymously, either with third person masculine pronouns or as a “blind baby” and “blind child,” until we are told, “She named him Samson because he was blind, but on the plantation he was known as ‘yellow Martha’s simple child’” (185). Cather both makes it clear that d’Arnault exists before he is named, either by his mother or by society and acknowledges the specific and obviously loving relationship he has with his mother, a connection undefined by the rest of the plantation’s attitudes. Cather in this sequence is also tampering with the idea of language itself. We already know from Jim’s experience trundling across the prairie as a child that a landscape without limits or borders is possible for Cather, so it makes sense that the boundaries of language are similarly mutable. In Blind d’Arnault’s narrative, this arbitrariness of

language, the inherent instability between the name and the named is reinforced by the child Samson referring to the piano as “the Thing” as he feels out first the instrument itself and then his first melody. d’Arnault’s blindness means that as a child he is forced to construct meaning in a way different from his sighted peers. With no training, he understands what is essential about the piano, but he cannot yet name it.

It is productive to compare d’Arnault to another African American pianist: James Weldon Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man, the protagonist of the 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Both Cather and Johnson emphasize the difficulty of formally instructing a musical prodigy, but the Ex-Colored Man learns formal technique easily and can correctly render classical pieces; whereas Blind d’Arnault is defined as “merely” a black prodigy who can never learn to play properly. Though d’Arnault is immensely talented, his talents are genetic, racial even, in Cather’s depiction—there is no idea of acquired skills or cultural background. Cather does not credit his playing as being a nuanced outgrowth of cultural amalgamation. In contrast, Johnson explicitly describes the self-conscious development of African American folk culture into high culture. Indeed, the Ex-Colored Man states, “I had the name at that time of being the best ragtime piano player in New York. I brought all my knowledge of classical music to bear and in so doing, achieved some novelties which pleased and even astonished my listeners. It was I who first made transcriptions of familiar classical selections” (84). In James Weldon Johnson’s novel, the development of ragtime is specifically addressed and placed in the context of American music. In *My Ántonia*, Cather treats Blind d’Arnault as an isolated example of talent and not a contributor to the musical landscape of the United States: “He was always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully” (189). This static and dismissive description

of d'Arnault is at odds both with the extraordinary blind plantation child and the adult performer we see move among categories.

After the “negro melodies” (and textually speaking after the interruption of his inset narrative), d'Arnault begins to play dance music: the narrative mentions a “crashing waltz” (189). d'Arnault's shift into dance music signals his textual transformation into a primitive African. This metamorphosis from white music (Stephen Foster) to black music (d'Arnault's own dance music) includes a corresponding alteration in the audience's behavior. It is d'Arnault who hears the footfalls of girls dancing in the next room and tells the men as much. This awareness is perhaps another aspect of his depiction as a savant: the idea that people who were visually impaired developed preternaturally good hearing persists as a common misconception. After the pianist's comment the men roll back the partition that separates the parlor from the dining room and find the hired girls, who give this section of *My Ántonia* its title, dancing with each other. The men immediately insist that the girls dance with them. The young women, all of whom are Scandinavian or Bohemian, are initially frightened and demur. Tiny Sodderball, employed as a maid in the Boys' Home, claims that Mrs. Gardener, the hotel's absent proprietress, would certainly disapprove. Despite her protests, the men persist, and eventually the girls begin waltzing with them.

Critics have repeatedly noted this scene as the point in the novel where Ántonia's sexuality becomes apparent to Jim. Until this scene, Jim has never viewed Ántonia as a sexual being, an object of desire for other men. Blind d'Arnault's exoticism foregrounds the attractive, sexually-appealing bodies of the hired girls. Although *My Ántonia* portrays his “bulky” disabled body as devoid of attractiveness, when Blind d'Arnault performs, his metamorphosis into an “African god of pleasure, full of strong savage blood” holds distinctly sensual connotations. His

transformation mimics the subtler alteration of *Ántonia* from child to woman. The sexualization of *Ántonia* that d'Arnault's playing begins leads to her attempted rape by Wick Cutter and her out-of-wedlock pregnancy with Larry Donovan, both examples of transgressive and non-societally sanctioned sexual behavior. In the next chapter, however, Cather, quietly undercuts the power and significance of this scene, describing *Ántonia*'s and Jim's maturation in an almost clichéd manner: "When boys and girls are growing up, life can't stand still, not even in the quietest of country towns; and they have to grow up, whether they will or no. That is what their elders are always forgetting" (193). The sexual elements of the scene at the Boys' Home are so intense they must be negated and the story rerouted along safer lines. Cather in her fiction continually veers off into treacherous territory and then abruptly changes focus, pulling the reader into relative normalcy again. Her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, moves into such unstable territory that the hazardous journey is not a digression, but the inevitable course of the novel.

The only novel of Willa Cather's that takes the Southeastern United States as its setting, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was written near the end of her life and deals extensively with her Virginia ancestors. The novel originates in family stories. It principally concerns Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, the fictional counterpart of Cather's great grandmother. The slave girl of the story is the enslaved black woman Nancy, whose family has been owned by the Dodderidges for four generations. Sapphira believes that Nancy is having an affair with her husband, Henry, and forms the brutal plan of engineering Nancy's rape. The perpetrator of this crime is to be Henry's scapegrace nephew, Martin Colbert, whom Sapphira invites for an extended visit. Although the bulk of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*'s action occurs in the mid-1850s, through those changes of narration and embedded narratives that Cather is so fond of, the scope extends from roughly

1780 to 1880. The earliest portion of the novel, chronologically, is the embedded narrative detailing the life of Jezebel, an enslaved woman on Sapphira Colbert's plantation and Nancy's great-grandmother. Jezebel, when we meet her in 1856, is the oldest person on the plantation and is near death; she is also the only occupant of the plantation not born in America—she was captured in Africa when she was eighteen. In her non-southern novels Cather deals significantly with immigrants, often using them to critique American social and cultural mores. Jezebel as an unwilling immigrant offers perhaps the ultimate critique of the most shameful of American social systems.

The section of the novel entitled "Old Jezebel" runs around thirty pages, but its significance extends beyond the relatively brief part of the narrative it occupies. Jezebel, when we first encounter her is around ninety-five (she doesn't know exactly how many years passed between her capture at eighteen and when she began keeping track of time numerically). At the beginning of this part of the novel, Sapphira visits Jezebel in the slave quarters, and they reminisce about the early days of the plantation, particularly the shrubs and flowers they set out together. Jezebel, despite her frailty, has the confidence and self-possession to match wits with Sapphira, leading Ann Romines to remark, "Throughout their encounter, slave and mistress vie for control" ("Losing" 404). Jezebel says that she has known Sapphira since the former's birth. Sapphira in the same vein equates herself with Jezebel: "I've been house-bound for a long while like you, Auntie" (87), before telling Jezebel that she will read "a Psalm that will hearten us both" (88), indicating her own need for comfort. According to Robin Hackett, "Sapphira's visit to Jezebel suggests that despite the master-slave relationship between them, Jezebel is Sapphira's peer in a way that none of the other characters are" (141). Hackett has written at length about the doubling between Sapphira and Jezebel, claiming that these two characters are profoundly

connected, not only by the social bonds of slavery but by explicit, textual linkages. Fully comprehending Sapphira and her complex motivations proves a difficult task. She stands with *My Mortal Enemy*'s Myra Henshawe as one of Cather's most difficult, enigmatic major characters. In *Jezebel*, Cather has created a similarly ambiguous figure.

Jezebel is as much an embodiment of history as she is an actual character. Richard Brodhead, writing about nineteenth-century American regional fiction, argues that local color authors often emphasize the "memorial function" of works by beginning their titles with the descriptor "old," indicating the recreation of a vanishing or vanished time (121-22). "Old Jezebel," this particular section of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, fits Brodhead's rubric nicely. Unlike George Washington Cable's *Old Creole Days* or Mark Twain's *Old Times on the Mississippi*; however, Cather's chapter title does not recall a specific time or region, but rather a single person who encloses regional memory within her body. She uses this naming device again in the short stories "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932) and "The Old Beauty" (1948) (the "Old Beauty" is a woman named Gabrielle d'Courcy). All three of these women are meant to be direct symbols of extinct cultures and codes of behavior. Significantly, these titles occur at the end of Cather's career, well after the heyday of women's regional writing. In all of these texts Cather's nostalgia is palpable, and two of them, "Old Mrs. Harris" and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, deal the most completely of any of her works with the Virginia hills where she was born. That all of the titular female characters ultimately die in the course of their narratives further emphasizes cultural loss. Examining the character of Jezebel in this context means that her death signals the beginning of the end of the way-of-life depicted in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

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set out together. Jezebel, despite her frailty, has the confidence and self-possession to match wits with Sapphira, leading Robin Hackett to claim that “Jezebel is Sapphira’s peer in a way that none of the other characters are” (141) and Ann Romines to comment, “Throughout their encounter, slave and mistress vie for control” (“Losing” 404). Jezebel subtly invokes her great age to establish her authority, saying to Sapphira, “Ain’t I knowed you since de day you was bawn”? (86), whereas Sapphira minimizes the potential status conveyed by Jezebel’s age and infirmity, blandly remarking, “I’ve been house-bound for a long while like you, Auntie” (87), before telling Jezebel that she will read “a Psalm that will hearten us both” (88).

Sapphira’s equation of herself with Jezebel is at first perfunctory, emblematic of her role as the gracious slave mistress tending to the needs of her charges. The nature of her identification with the enslaved woman shifts abruptly when she asks at the close of her visit if there is anything that would taste good to Jezebel, who laughs and says, “No’m, I cain’t think of nothin’ I would relish, lessen maybe it was a li’l pickaninny’s hand” (89). Nancy, the great-grandchild, is mortified and says her grandmother is “a-wanderin’” again, and that the elderly woman is “out of her haid!” (89). Critics have found Cather’s reference to a “pickaninny’s hand” consistently puzzling. Romines reads it as an elision of Jezebel’s cannibal background and the institution of slavery, and a covert warning to Nancy from her great-grandmother—“The actual and metaphoric devouring of black children, by both Africans and Americans, is a part of Nancy’s history” (“Willa” 214). From a rhetorical perspective, Jezebel’s provocative comment also coincides with one of the methods listed by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* that enable white authors “to engage the serious consequences of blacks” (67). That strategy, the last on Morrison’s list, is “Patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language. These indicate a loss of control in the text that is attributed to the objects of its attention rather than to the text’s own

dynamics” (69). Jezebel’s comment might not represent a pattern but certainly proves both “explosive” and “disjointed.”

Nancy herself apparently takes this outburst as a sign of the elderly Jezebel’s senility and is embarrassed by it. Sapphira refuses this easy explanation of Jezebel’s statement when she tells Nancy, “I know your granny through and through; she is no more out of her head than I am” (89). Sapphira’s validation of Jezebel’s comment opens up fascinating possibilities because it seems to weave the bizarreness of Jezebel’s statement back into the fabric of the narrative. There are two obvious, fairly tidy, interpretations of this exchange: we can trust Sapphira, who dominates the perspective of the novel in the same way she manages the plantation, and read Jezebel’s comment as representative of some private but innocuous bit of knowledge the two women share, perhaps a joke or allusion only they understand; alternatively, we can trust Nancy’s explanation that her grandmother is “wandering” and cast Sapphira’s purported understanding of Jezebel’s statement as nothing more than an attempt to chide Nancy (who has spoken out of turn) and regain control of the situation. Embracing the ambiguities and oddities of this strange text, however, means that this comment defies any neat interpretation. It is intentionally destabilizing and disruptive, and Sapphira’s understanding of it is emblematic of a profound kinship between the two women that stretches beyond the coincidences of chronology and the typical relations between plantation mistress and enslaved woman. The loss of control the phrase indicates lies not with the character of Jezebel, but, to use Morrison’s phrase “with the text’s own dynamics.” Sapphira identifies herself with a need of Jezebel’s, aligning herself with a black woman who is also her slave.

Jezebel’s expressed desire for young flesh may be read as an affirmation of sexual desire. As aged and frail as she is, Jezebel’s desire seems unlikely, and “the flash of grim humor” from

her eyes implies that she is jesting. Yet that knowing, wry comment is also a profound truth. Jezebel is kept clean and warm; food is no longer appealing to her—and yet she is still not beyond desire—or perhaps the desire to desire. Considering Sapphira’s strange understanding of Jezebel’s comment brings up Sapphira’s own sexuality. Despite her disability and the restrictions it places on her activities, her forceful and vital personality is unimpaired. Sapphira’s identification with Jezebel’s statement may well be emblematic of her own romantic and sexual desire, since in *Sapphira*, as Christopher Nealon establishes, “race shifts from its usual role in Cather, as a retreat from pressures on sexuality, to an analogy for them” (87).

Later in the novel, however, after Jezebel’s death and burial, Sapphira’s identification with the enslaved woman intensifies. Lying in bed after Jezebel’s funeral, Sapphira jarringly confronts the realities of aging, incapacitation, and eventual death. Her thoughts turn to her father, and she realizes that as an invalid he wanted “tenderness” even more than cleanliness or the efficient cheer of the professional caregiver: “To be crippled and incapacitated, not to come and go at will, to be left out of things as if one were in one’s dotage—she had no realization of what that felt like, none at all. Invalids were to be kept clean and comfortable, greeted cheerily; that was their life” (105). Sapphira’s guilt-laden memories of her father represent a type of emotional displacement, since, in reality, it is Jezebel’s own long dying and the shock of her eventual death that allow Sapphira to understand incapacitation and isolation. Even in the midst of her sympathetic identification with her father, however, Sapphira casts his desire for love and understanding as evidence of frailty and vulnerability—“weakness” that she in her youth and strength “never humored” (105)—rather than a legitimate and very natural human need. Though the novel does not say so, it seems likely that Sapphira at this point might also remember her earlier identification with Jezebel and her bland injunction that “We must take what comes to us

and be resigned” (86). In fact, Sapphira has never resigned herself to anything, and the thought of facing her own eventual invalidism must be daunting. The lifestyle modifications meant to lessen the effects of her disability—the dining room chair cleverly turned into a wheelchair by the local carpenter, Till’s solicitous attentions—cannot entirely protect her from the inconveniences and indignities of her illness, which, as she knows, is progressive. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Death confronted mistresses with the humanity of their slaves and with the ties—often reaching back to previous generations—that bound them to those they held in bondage” (130). It is perhaps, then, not surprising that Jezebel’s death enables Sapphira both to recall the past and the loss of her father and to glimpse some intimation of her own future illness and death.

Far from bringing Sapphira greater self-awareness and acceptance, the recognition of her own parallel “weakness” further undermines her sense of order and control, as her usual “fortitude” deserts her. It is immediately after this realization, and hours after Jezebel’s burial that Sapphira suffers a complete breakdown. Ranging into the past and understanding what she withheld from her father makes her realize the genuine human connections that she herself lacks. She becomes more and more distraught and fixates on a conversation she saw her husband having with Nancy after Jezebel’s funeral. Sapphira lies awake and imagines that Nancy is in the mill room having sex with Henry instead of outside Sapphira’s door where she is supposed to sleep:

The mistress sat still, scarcely breathing, overcome by dread. The thought of being befooled, hoodwinked in any way, was unendurable to her. There were candles on her dressing-table, but she had no way to light them. Her throat was dry and seemed closed up. She felt afraid to call aloud, afraid to take a full breath. A faintness was coming over her. She put out her hand and resolutely rang her little clapper bell. (106)

The language and images of this passage indicate uncontrolled hysteria, uncharacteristic for the usually self-possessed Sapphira. In contemporary idiom, Romines rightly terms Sapphira's episode a "panic attack" claiming that it is "no coincidence" that this "major breakdown in confidence" occurs immediately after Jezebel's funeral ("Willa" 215).

Sapphira sits in her dark bedroom, unable even to light a candle without the assistance of her servants. Her designation in this passage as "the mistress" emphasizes her placement in the plantation hierarchy and her easy inhabitation of that role. Although she controls the lives of all the slaves on her plantation, she lacks the physical ability to perform the simplest tasks for herself. She rings her bell to assure herself that Nancy is indeed sleeping in the hall outside her door, and as a pretext for ringing, tells the girl that she is in the midst of a dropsical spell. In this scene, Sapphira's need for the presence and solicitousness of Nancy, and a few minutes later Till, is complex. Most immediately, Nancy's prompt and sleepy answer tells Sapphira that she has not been "befooled." By the time Nancy appears, Sapphira has worked herself into such a state of turmoil that she really does need the ministrations of Nancy and Till. More than any physical ease they can give her, Sapphira longs for the psychic reassurance that she is still at the center of her house, that the old order is still intact. Mother and daughter soothe her, and she is "comforted by the promptness and efficiency of her servants" (107). The ease with which Nancy and Till, distinct personalities to the novel's narrator and to Sapphira, slip into the stock characters of prompt and efficient servants parallels Sapphira's earlier narrative designation as "the mistress" and underlines how disposable the individual lives of slaves are and how quickly they can be blended into the background, fading out of the novel's significant drama when they are not needed. Additionally, the euphemistic designation of Nancy and Till as "servants" (rather than

slaves) represents another evasive strategy white Southerners used to mask the ugly realities of the slave system.

Cather undercuts the disruptive possibilities of this scene in much the same way that in *My Ántonia* she negates the significance of Blind d'Arnault's performance. After Sapphira has recovered from her episode of hysteria, she returns to the window, this time thinking calmly about the burning light in her husband's room:

Was the man worrying about some lawsuit he had never told her about, she wondered? Or was he perhaps reading his religious books? She knew that he pondered at times about how we are saved or lost. That was the disadvantage of having been raised a Lutheran. In her church all those things had all been decided long ago by heads much wiser than Henry's. She had married the only Colbert with a conscience, and she sometimes wished he hadn't quite so much. (107-8)

Some self-reflection on Sapphira's part might be expected at this juncture, but Cather offers none. Shrewd as she is with regards to others, Sapphira cannot analyze her own behavior. She moves seamlessly from imagining her husband in bed with another woman, an offence against conscience, to wishing that "he hadn't quite so much" conscience. As it happens, Sapphira this time is correct—her husband is down at the mill room where he often sleeps, puzzling over his Bible, the events of Jezebel's funeral having affected him as well.

Jezebel as a symbol of the old order is as important to Henry as she is to Sapphira, becoming to him emblematic of the very condition of slavery. If Henry can figure out the cipher that is Jezebel, the truth about slavery itself will be revealed. At her funeral the local minister and school master (and closeted abolitionist) David Fairhead eulogizes that perhaps Jezebel lived to such a great age in order to fulfill the measure of a Christian life.⁵⁶ After her funeral Henry

⁵⁶ In his homily Fairhead "recalled Jezebel's long wanderings; how she had come from a heathen land where people worshipped idols and lived in bloody warfare, to become a devout Christian and a heir to all the Promises" (102). Cather's depiction of one man's fervent abolitionism coinciding with his apparent belief that the abduction, deportation, and enslavement of African Americans could be construed as positive illustrates the limited perspective regarding African Americans of even the most liberal nineteenth-century whites.

spends hours poring futilely over all the passages in the Bible that deal with slavery, passages that he has marked with a large “S,” but as usual can find no “clear condemnation of slavery,” and considers David Fairhead’s opinion: “Jezebel’s life, as Mr. Fairhead had summed it up, seemed a strange incidence of predestination. For her, certainly, her capture had been a deliverance. Yet he hated the whole system of slavery” (108-10). Henry Colbert, working within a nineteenth-century dissenting Protestant framework, must consider whether Jezebel’s enslavement was a fortuitous occurrence, since it exposed her to the tenets of Christianity and ultimately, he believes, enabled her eternal salvation.

Abandoning his perusal of scripture, Henry looks out the window to determine the time: “At this season of the year, if the Big Dipper had set under the dark spruce-clad hills behind Rachel’s house, it would be midnight” (110-11). If Henry could read the meaning behind it, the Big Dipper could provide him with a clear answer to his questions regarding the rightness of slavery. Although both he and the African Americans on the plantation can determine the time by the stars’ positions, the Big Dipper possesses additional significance for the Miller’s black neighbors. Enslaved people referred to this particular cluster of stars as the “drinking gourd” and used it to determine the location of the North Star, and thus the path to freedom. Two stars in the “cup” of the Big Dipper point directly at the North Star and freedom. The straight, illuminated line formed by these stars provides a clear counterpoint to the serpentine red “S’s” of Henry’s Bible that double evasively back on themselves.⁵⁷ Henry sees that the Dipper has set and realizes that it must be past midnight. Thinking of the designs of nature moves him to wonder if human events also possess a divine plan and pattern: “Design was clear enough in the stars, the seasons, in the woods and fields. But in human affairs—? Perhaps our bewilderment came from a fault in

⁵⁷ Naomi Morgenstern opens her article “‘Love is Homesickness’: Nostalgia and Lesbian Desire in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*” with a beautifully-articulated comparison between the “double S” of the road leading to Back Creek and the Ss Henry pens in his Bible.

our perceptions; we could never see what was behind the next turn of the road” (111). Curiously, this passage closely resembles the moment in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* when Father Latour describes a miracle as a matter of “our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always” (50). While *Death Comes for the Archbishop* depicts a continual process of unification between the quotidian and the spiritual, the relationship between the two in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is continually fractured. Ultimately, Henry recalls a friend of his, a “wise old Quaker” who “though now past seventy, firmly believed that in his own lifetime he would see one of those great designs accomplished; that the Lord had already chosen His heralds and his captains, and a morning would break when all the black slaves would be free” (111-12). For Henry the issue of slavery is woven so intricately into the pattern of his life that it seems to defy any action on his part, and he can find comfort only in trusting the design of a harmonious universe and the wisdom of a just God. Unfortunately, as Robert Frost illustrates with such chilling beauty in the sonnet “Design,” the designs of nature, like the plans of humans, can be terrible and grotesque as well as beautiful and generative. While Henry looks at the sky and ponders the great designs of nature, Sapphira has already set in motion her own “design” to harm Nancy and dispatched her letter of invitation to Martin Colbert.

Jezebel’s death has become a mechanism for both the Miller’s prolonged meditation on the nature of slavery and the crystallization of Sapphira’s inchoate suspicions regarding Nancy’s relationship with her husband. The temporal juxtaposition of Henry Colbert poring over scripture, while his wife imagines him having sex with one of her slaves, strikes a bizarre chord, but the coincidence of illicit sex and religious fervor was not unimaginable, or even unusual within the peculiar institution of slavery. Henry, as “the only Colbert with a conscience,” tries

mightily to differentiate himself from his less moral male relatives, including his brothers and his nephew Martin Colbert, all of whom are notoriously dissolute where women are concerned. A rumor even circulates around the plantation that Nancy's father might be one of the Colbert brothers, a fact that would make Henry Nancy's uncle and Martin her cousin, adding a grotesque element of incest to a novel that is already unsettling enough.⁵⁸

The nature of Henry's interest in Nancy is debatable. Morrison finds the idea preposterous, observing, "Nancy is pure to the point of vapidty; Master Colbert is a man of modest habits, ambition, and imagination" (19). But according to Cather, Henry still possesses his male relatives' notorious weaknesses; he simply controls them. Henry's lustful nature is mentioned twice in the novel: "Although Henry was a true Colbert in nature, he had not behaved like one, and he had never been charged with a bastard" (66) and later "He knew the family inheritance well enough. He had his share of it. But since his marriage he had never let it get the better of him. He had kept his marriage vows as he would keep any other contract" (192). The text, while clarifying the absence of an affair between Nancy and Henry, indicates equally that Henry possesses the potential for sexual misconduct. As a nineteenth-century man married to an aging, partially-incapacitated woman, Henry is very probably celibate. Circumstances force him, as well as Sapphira, to repress any feelings of sexual desire.

The punctilious correctness of Henry's behavior toward Nancy indicates that he probably feels some romantic if not sexual interest in her and is under compunction to restrain it. Although he loves seeing Nancy when she comes to attend to his room at the mill, he is careful not to alter his schedule in order to encounter her (66). If his interest in her is avuncular, why must he observe these small proprieties so rigidly? He rationalizes his feelings for Nancy by identifying her with the character Mercy from *Pilgrim's Progress*: "When he read in the second part of his

⁵⁸ For a discussion of possible incest in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* see Mako Yoshikawa.

book, he saw Nancy's face and figure plain in Mercy" (67). Henry equates Nancy with Mercy in terms of her "face and figure," indicating he has noticed them both. Seeing Nancy's *nature* in Mercy would make more sense. But it is not Nancy's nature that is important; indeed, numerous critics have commented on her lack of distinct personality—what Morrison terms her "vapidity." As Mako Yoshikawa establishes, "Nancy's character is not of interest because it has been upstaged by her body, which rivets the white characters' attention and consumes their thoughts" (79). Henry attempts to subdue the attractiveness of Nancy's youthful, mixed-race body by forcing it into Bunyan's allegorical novel, a space where neither her sexuality nor race is relevant.

The repeated offhand references to the dissoluteness of Henry's male relatives represent Cather's attempt to make the aim of Sapphira's plan clear from the beginning. Once her nephew-in-law, the debauched son of her husband's degenerate brother, arrives to pay an extended visit, Nancy's fate is apparently sealed; since this nephew, Martin Colbert, possesses a good measure of the troublesome "Colbert blood" Henry so despises. A dissipated gambler and womanizer, he has already "fooled" a poor white, mountain woman and had one of his teeth knocked out by her brothers as punishment. The missing tooth has been replaced by a wooden replica on a pivot that does not fit the gum properly and has a slight bluish cast. This "blue tooth" is an "ignominious brand" that indicates Martin has taken advantage of a young girl and paid with one of his front teeth (173). Nancy, as an enslaved woman, has even less protection than a mountain woman. Martin Colbert does not need to "fool" her with talk of marriage or romance in order to have sexual relations with her.⁵⁹ Furthermore, no male relative or friend of Nancy's could take any

⁵⁹ Morrison takes pains to emphasize the essential role Nancy's race plays in Martin's predation and the reader's response to it: "What becomes titillating in this wicked pursuit of innocence—what makes it something other than an American variant of *Clarissa*—is the racial component. The nephew is not even required to court and flatter Nancy" (24).

action against Martin, a white man. When Sampson, Henry's foreman at the mill, broaches the subject of Nancy's harassment to the Miller, he is visibly uncomfortable: "Master Henry, I'd like to speak to you about something I got on my mind, but I don't rightly know if it's my place to" (189-90). Sampson's willingness to put his own relatively comfortable situation at risk by speaking out on behalf of Nancy shows real courage and indicates the networks of friendship and support among enslaved African Americans. Additionally, Sampson's forthrightness and bravery within the boundaries of a harsh and degrading system highlight the Miller's own cowardice and acquiescence to the demands of the same system.

Once Henry is forced to acknowledge Nancy as a fully-developed, sexual adult, his attitude toward her changes. After Sampson confronts the Miller with his nephew Martin's harassment of Nancy, Henry becomes uncomfortable in Nancy's presence and begins to avoid her: "Now that he must see her as a woman, enticing to men, he shrank from seeing her at all" (193). After Henry's close observation of Martin forces him to admit that Sampson's fears are valid, he becomes even more ill-at-ease with Nancy, since periodically "the actual realization of Martin's designs would flash into his mind. The poison in the young scamp's blood seemed to stir something in his own. The Colbert in him threatened to raise its head after long hibernation" (209). It is not too much to infer from this passage that Henry actually begins having unintentional fantasies about his nephew's planned rape of Nancy. Against his will, he has become enmeshed in Martin's and Sapphira's "designs." Although he fights this unwelcome knowledge, he finds himself drawn in as a vicarious participant: "He told himself that in trying to keep a close watch on Martin, he had begun to see through Martin's eyes. Sometimes in his sleep that preoccupation with Martin, the sense of almost being Martin, came over him like a black

spell” (209). Henry unwillingly joins Sapphira in Nancy’s rape by proxy, imagining himself in the role of sexual violator, even dreaming about molesting Nancy.

Nancy’s increasing vulnerability recalls Jezebel’s earlier cryptic comment about her desire for a “li’l pickaninny’s hand” and Romines’s reading of the remark as the old woman’s veiled warning to her great-granddaughter. The linkage between Jezebel’s body and that of Nancy runs throughout the novel, most obviously via white characters’ preoccupations, but more meaningfully, through the matrilineal ties of relation and affection. These specific familial connections, however, are left to the reader to piece together. During Sapphira’s last visit to Jezebel when the elderly woman makes her loaded statement, Nancy, Jezebel’s great-granddaughter, is “waiting in the cabin kitchen” until summoned by Sapphira. It is significant, but not perhaps surprising, that Nancy is as subordinate to Sapphira in her great-grandmother’s cabin as she is in the big house. When Sapphira speaks to Nancy about Jezebel, she refers to her as “your granny” (89). Jezebel is Till’s grandmother and Nancy’s great-grandmother; however, we are missing a generation: where is Jezebel’s daughter, Till’s mother, Nancy’s grandmother? Previously, when the narrator tells us Till’s history, we learn that her mother’s clothing catches fire and she burns to death in front of little Till. This was in Chestnut Hill, long before the move to Back Creek. The woman who dies engulfed in flames is not only Till’s mother, but Jezebel’s daughter. That the novel does not mention Jezebel in connection with her daughter’s death might seem like a simple narrative exclusion, since an author cannot include every detail in a novel. Yet when we remember that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is a novel about familial relationships and is based on the history of Cather’s own family, the author’s lack of specificity regarding certain relationships among black women becomes more telling. And when we read the section of the novel where little Betty, Rachel’s daughter and Sapphira’s granddaughter, dies from

diphtheria and is mourned, the silence surrounding the novel's African American women becomes a denial of the rights of kinship rather than mere narrative omission.

Morrison has remarked that within the dynamics of a slaveholding society, Till's primary expressed and enacted loyalty must be to her owner Sapphira rather than to her daughter Nancy, regardless of her own feelings (21).⁶⁰ The gaps in the genealogy of the novel's black characters mirror slavery's disordering and warping of family relationships and responsibilities. The broken chronology also indicates the imperfect transcriptions of African American familial connections, the absence of marriage licenses, baptismal certificates, voting records, and all the other ephemera of documentation through which family background may be established. Ultimately for African Americans of this period, memory became the most reliable history, more telling than the merchandise records of buying and selling that often formed their only official documentation. Memory functions oddly in the novel; what we are told about the black characters is filtered through the novel's white characters, and the whiteness of Cather as author. Yet at the end of the story when little Willa Cather herself is revealed as narrator, we find that much of what she knows about her own forbears is gleaned from Till. In this novel, as in *Blind d'Arnault's* performance, we have a strange mixture of black and white ventriloquism that further bears out the doubling between Sapphira and Jezebel.

Despite all we are not told about Jezebel and her family, the novel, intriguingly, does tell us how Jezebel arrived in Virginia. Her capture in West Africa and subsequent sojourn on a slave ship are described in detail. Cather gets many of the bare historical details of the Middle Passage right. She notes that Jezebel was transported "in the 1780s—about twenty years before the

⁶⁰ Both Ann Romines and Nghana Tamu Lewis have questioned Morrison's designation of Till as "natally dead" (Morrison 21). In her essay "'The Old Story': *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," Romines challenges Morrison's reading of the character of Till, discussing her attempts to shield her daughter from slavery's indignities and give Nancy the means to be self-sufficient. Lewis asserts that the reader's view of Till's loyalty to Sapphira occurs via Rachel Blake and contradicts many other details that affirm the close relationship between Nancy and her mother (150).

importation of slaves became illegal” (90), indicating her awareness of the de jure abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808. The slave ship is captained by a British man who has “a third interest in the cargo” (93) and docks in Baltimore, in the late eighteenth century a thriving port that processed enslaved Africans along with tea and sugar. The space between decks on the *Albert Horn* is three feet ten inches—standard for the slave ships of the period.⁶¹ To Joseph Urgo, “Cather is, as always, coldly assessing in her conception of Jezebel and the slave trade” (93). Examining the historicity of Cather’s description of Jezebel’s own “great migration” (93), Urgo notes the way in which “details are selected to emphasize both the horror and the prurience of the middle passage” (93). These details include not only description of the miserably cramped space between decks—barely large enough for a tall adult to sit fully upright—but also the separation of men and women, the fortnightly shaving of heads and bodies, and the daily hosing off with sea water (Cather 92). Cather is indeed at her most “coldly assessing” when she remarks, “As there was no drainage of any sort, the slaves’ quarters, and the creatures in them, got very foul overnight. Every morning the ‘tween decks’ and its inmates were cleaned off with streams of sea water from the hose” (92). Surely, however, Cather’s irony is intentional when immediately after this clinical description she deadpans to the reader that “The Captain of the *Albert Horn* was not a brutal man and his vessel was a model slaver” (92). The juxtaposition of an explicit description of the horrors human beings were subjected to on these voyages with a bland remark about the humanity of the captain and his exacting standards proves far more devastating than any rhetorical commentary on the evils of the slave trade. Clearly the implication is that Jezebel’s situation is about as good as the Middle Passage gets. If this level of

⁶¹ Cather in naming the slave ship the *Albert Horn* may have been alluding to Albert Horn, owner of the slave ship the *City of Norfolk*. Horn was convicted of participating in the slave trade in 1862 in New York, but was pardoned that same year by Abraham Lincoln.

horror is present under the best circumstances, readers are encouraged to imagine what the ship would be like if the captain happened to be a “brutal” man.

As with the embedded narrative explaining Blind d’Arnault’s childhood, this description of Jezebel’s West African origins lacks any clear provenance. Like Urgo, Deborah Carlin focuses on the factual nature of Cather’s description, stating that it functions as a necessary historical digression that briefly moves the narrative away from the Cather family lore that defines the rest of the novel: “Relying solely on description and allowing the ‘facts’ to speak for themselves, these first few paragraphs of Jezebel’s history are markedly different from the tale that follows, in which Jezebel’s essential character is defined and explained according to the narrative expectations established when the reader initially encounters her as an old woman” (159). There is still, though, the lack of narrative context to grapple with. Despite Cather’s oblique and sophisticated treatment of plot and character, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is essentially a work of historical fiction with a coherent, sequential narrative. The book’s other digressive sections have a clear provenance. Although Cather’s insertion of this piece of Jezebel’s past, as Carlin indicates, adds greatly to the historicity of the novel, it also fairly radically (and intentionally on Cather’s part) destabilizes *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*’s plot and point-of-view. Jezebel is a reminder of the Middle Passage, living proof that black people once occupied another continent and lived and functioned in a world that was once without white incursion. For a Southern slave owner like Sapphira whose faith in the rightness of her lifestyle likely rested heavily on convincing herself that her slaves needed her care to survive, this must have been an incredible idea. In fact for many white American readers at the time *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was published, the concept that African Americans existed and thrived outside the

demands and desires of white people was probably not something they thought a great deal about, if they recognized the fact at all.

Cather succinctly describes the violence of Jezebel's abduction from her West African Village: "That night of fire and slaughter, when she saw her father brained and her four brothers cut down as they fought, old Jezebel now remembered but dimly. It was all over in a few hours; of the village nothing was left but smoking ashes and mutilated bodies. By morning she and her fellow captives were in leg chains and on their march to the sea" (90-1). Jezebel is eighteen when she endures these terrible events; hers are not the confused, impressionistic memories of a child. She remembers planting flowers with Sapphira in the early days on Back Creek, so why does the novel tell us that her memory of a trauma that would haunt most people their entire lives is softened and dimmed? Alex Haley, in his 1976 novel *Roots*, another twentieth-century novel based on the author's family history, depicts elderly Nyo Boto as able to recount in great detail how her village was sacked, and all who could not travel including her mother and her two small children were murdered, while she and the rest of the captives were sent on a brutal forced march that cost many more lives (71-2). So painful are these memories that, as she tells them to Kunta Kinte, "Nyo Boto began to sob" (72).

The improbable muting of Jezebel's memories reflects the ostensible softening and sentimentalizing of Jezebel herself. Jezebel gets her name as a result of an incident on the slave ship that brings her to America: a crew member accuses her of initiating a fight with other female slaves on board, and when reprimanded, she bites the first mate's thumb. The crew names her Jezebel after the brutal queen in the Hebrew Bible. Although the injured and humiliated first mate advocates throwing her overboard, the captain is impressed by both Jezebel's spirit and her physique: "Anatomically she was remarkable, for an African negress: tall, straight, muscular,

long in the legs” (93-4).⁶² In addition to her noteworthy (in the Captain’s eyes) physical characteristics, Jezebel distinguishes herself through her self-possession and interest in her surroundings: When the slave ship finally pulls into harbor at Baltimore, Jezebel “regarded the waterline of the city with lively curiosity, quite different from the hopeless indifference on the faces of her fellow captives” (95).

Amid the grim and intentionally depersonalizing realities of the Middle Passage, Jezebel manages to separate herself from her companions, briefly becoming another version of Cather’s extraordinary female characters. The singularly terrible circumstances surrounding the focus on Jezebel’s individuality make any extended comparison between her and remarkable Cather heroines such as Thea Kronborg or *Ántonia* Shimerda at best facile and at worst painfully offensive. Additionally, the constant comparison of Jezebel with the other Africans onboard the ship turns any affirmation of her own exceptionality into a confirmation of the perceived inferiority of other enslaved people, just as the captain’s favorable description of her body dismisses the bodies of other African women. On a personal level, reading and analyzing this section for me proves troubling. If I follow the direction of the narrative and view Jezebel as exceptional, my perspective merges disturbingly with the dehumanizing gaze of the Captain. The relation Jezebel’s exceptional status bears to the price she will fetch at auction further compromises any celebration of her uniqueness, turning into a monetary valuation.

Jezebel’s initial identity as a strong and resilient African woman forms an apparent contrast to the woman we find on Sapphira’s plantation seventy-odd years later, who has

⁶² The captain’s scrutiny of Jezebel’s naked body and appreciation of the enslaved woman’s “anatomical” attributes provides another disturbing historical detail. Identifying Jezebel’s body as “remarkable, for an African negress” suggests that there is but one typical African female body type which must be squat, crooked, fat, and short in the legs. There is an implicit contrast between Jezebel and the early-nineteenth-century attraction the “Hottentot Venus,” really a Khoi-San woman from South Africa named Saartjie Baartman, whose perceived anatomical differences made her an object of curiosity and exploitation.

“wasted” and “looked like a lean, old gray monkey” (86).⁶³ So small is the elderly Jezebel that Sapphira directs Till to bury her in one of the nightgowns Sapphira herself wore as a child, reinforcing the doubling between them and further diminishing Jezebel. It is Sapphira the mistress, and not Till the granddaughter, who ultimately has control over Jezebel’s body in death. Sapphira determines the way Jezebel will be laid out and the time and nature of her funeral in the same way she controlled the daily aspects of the enslaved woman’s life.

Physical infirmity is not the only way that Jezebel has changed. When Jezebel gets too old for heavy work, she sews pants for the boys on the place. Cather narrates that Jezebel “meted out justice by giving a slack boy a rough seat and a likely boy a smooth seat” (96). When one of the “slack” boys complains that his pants are uncomfortable, Jezebel retorts, “You ain’t got no call to be comf’able, you settin’ down de minute a body’s back turned. I wish I could put dock burs in yo’ pants” (97). Although this anecdote is probably intended as humorous, it initially seems on Jezebel’s part to be a validation of the slave system. Taken that way it represents a stunning departure from the resistance to domination we see in the narrative of her capture. To Carlin “what Jezebel speaks in this short passage is the language of the master” (163). Indeed, it appears that Jezebel, in the most domestic and innocuous way imaginable, is trying to subdue the bodies of these boys into the pattern of docile labor that is expected of them; and in the context of the novel, this is perhaps how Cather intends the scene to be read. Shifting from the white perspective of Cather and the concerns of her antebellum family, however, and trying to imagine Jezebel’s own Africanist point-of-view offers other, more radical interpretations of Jezebel’s behavior.

⁶³ This likening of an African-American woman to a monkey jars discordantly on twenty-first century ears; however, Cather uses the exact same simile to describe *Death Comes for the Archbishop*’s French missionary and priest Joseph Vaillant as he lies in his coffin (288).

Rather than an endorsement of slavery, Jezebel's discipline might be intended to protect the boys by letting them know how, as enslaved African American men, they *must* behave (or appear to behave) in order to survive the slave system. Interpreted in this way, her poorly-constructed pants represent both an agonizing capitulation to the bleak realities of plantation life and the loving concern she feels for these young men. Although *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* focuses on Nancy's vulnerability to predation, stories of the difficult lives of young, enslaved men are quietly woven throughout the narrative. Tansy Dave falls in love, and after his beloved rejects him, loses his grip on reality. Post-slavery, handsome Tap gets drunk in a saloon, kills a man, and is hanged. Even level-headed Sampson places himself at risk of physical harm simply by the act of "looking at Martin Colbert—which was not his place to do" (181). Most haunting of all, there is Manuel, the boy whose complaint to Jezebel inspired her provocative comment. In this exchange, Manuel is casually described as "since dead" (97), but due to what Carlin describes as the alternation between "external and internal focalization" (153) in the novel, we do not initially know when he died. Two pages later, however, when Sapphira instructs Lizzie regarding the cooking for Jezebel's service, it becomes apparent that Manuel died relatively recently, since the memory of Lizzie's "skimping for the watchers" (99) is still fresh in Sapphira's mind. The last allusion to Manuel in the text is the slate headstone in the plantation cemetery. His full story is not told, or treated as narratively important. Each time he is mentioned it is to advance a seemingly unrelated plot point; even the image of his gravestone is couched in a general description of the cemetery. It must be significant, though, that Manuel's shadowy figure appears three times in the space of several pages. Both Jezebel and Lizzie deem him a "slack" (97) and "no'count" (99) boy. Then almost immediately after, there is a quiet depiction of his grave. The reader has no way of learning how Manuel died, but considering his death in

the context of the fates of Tap and Tansy Dave illustrates his vulnerability as a young black man in the antebellum South and perhaps provides one explanation for the discipline imposed by Jezebel's ill-fitting pants.

In a different and even more subversive interpretation of this scene, Jezebel's tailoring, far from affirming Sapphira's dominance, could be a means of enforcing her own control over the boys' labor. Since Jezebel's great-grandsons came from Winchester to be pallbearers at her funeral, it seems fairly clear that she has no male descendants on the Back Creek plantation. She could well be assuming the role of surrogate grandmother for these young men and exercising a matriarchal prerogative over them, just as Sampson, when he voices his concerns to Henry, acts in the role of Nancy's father or brother. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs recounts her brother's experience of receiving simultaneous summonses from both his father and his mistress and his uncertainty about which to obey. Jacobs's father, a skilled carpenter who "had more of the feelings of a freeman that is common among slaves" tells his son "You are my child . . . and when I call you, you should come immediately if you have to pass through fire and water" (11). Through her chastisement of these boys, Jezebel may be establishing their loyalty to her as their great-grandmother. Her use of the colloquial phrase "a body's back's turned" indicates that she is talking about herself, her own back, her own supervision, and not the control of the plantation master or mistress. In her position as gardener Jezebel was responsible for supervising the boys who cared for the numerous plants she once tended so painstakingly. The beauty and abundance of the flora surrounding the plantation is repeatedly emphasized by both its black and white inhabitants. The disjunction between the pastoral beauty of the plantation and the gothic terrors of slavery gives the novel much of its dramatic tension. Jezebel may well feel a proprietary interest in the plants that were for so long the object of her labor and care.

Just as the lack of legal marriage did not preclude love and commitment among enslaved couples, the fact that slaves were incapable of legally owning property, and in most cases were not allowed to keep either the wages or tangible products their labor produced, did not mean that they never felt a sense of pride in their own skilled labor or a feeling of ownership regarding its results. Jean Fagan Yellin speculates in her biography of Harriet Jacobs that during her childhood in Edenton, North Carolina, “Hatty was proud of her father’s carpentry skills, and as she grew old enough to explore the neighborhood, she perhaps recognized Elijah’s expert workmanship in the federal portico at elegant Beverly Hall, or in the unusual drilled spiral molding on James Iredell’s double porch” (8). Annette Gordon-Reed writes about the pride of another enslaved carpenter: John Hemings, the brother of Sally Hemings, and the uncle of Hemings’s three children with Thomas Jefferson.⁶⁴ Gordon-Reed recounts how when an intricately-constructed desk John Hemings built for Jefferson’s granddaughter was lost in a shipwreck, the artisan, who “had apparently seen the desk as his masterpiece,” “wept” at the destruction of his creation (610). Gordon-Reed further documents how when his eyesight began to diminish and “he could no longer perform at the level of perfection to which he aspired” John Hemings fell into a prolonged depression (661). Romines has written persuasively about Till’s pride in her professional housekeeping (“Willa” 216-17). It is not too much to speculate that Jezebel might take a similar pride in the flowers and bushes that represent her aesthetic judgment as well as her work as a skilled gardener. As this scene illustrates, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* cannot solely be interpreted through the lens of the dominant white perspective. Since Cather family history was remembered and recounted by African Americans connected to the family as

⁶⁴ DNA testing establishes the paternity of a Jefferson male for at least one of Hemings’s children. Annette Gordon-Reed’s meticulous historical research and persuasive argument leads me to believe that Thomas Jefferson’s status as the father of Hemings’s children is very likely.

well as white relatives, resistance to the white perspective may be built into the stories Willa Cather heard as a child and could thus form a quiet but intrinsic component of this novel.

The embedded narrative recounting Jezebel's abduction and transport to America, like the inset piece detailing Blind d'Arnault's childhood, wreaks havoc with the impulse to nostalgia that periodically animates both *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In the latter novel, the process of embracing and then undercutting nostalgia helps form the structure of the text itself. On the night of Sapphira's breakdown, after Nancy has come running into the bedroom (proving that she was not, as Sapphira suspected, at the mill with Henry), Sapphira feels a temporary relief from tension: "It was over. Her shattered treacherous house stood safe about her again. She was in her own room, wakened out of a dream of disaster" (106-7). *House* in this context means more than Sapphira's literal house, or even the land and buildings of the plantation as a whole. Sapphira's house is a fragile edifice made up not only of herself and her family members, but also the people she thinks of as her slaves, whose disloyalty could bring it crashing down around her. Sapphira's house may also be equated with her body, a "life-house," uncontrollable and troubling because of its disability. This equation of the body with slavery has surfaced before in the characters of d'Arnault and Jezebel, but this is the first time Cather made this connection with a white body. Sapphira's inability to govern her body widens into a failure of emotional control. Her increasing physical and mental instability reflect a parallel inability to superintend the numerous inhabitants of her plantation and portend the breakdown of her entire establishment. In her mood of paranoid self pity she ironically casts herself as a victim, imagining she has been, "deceived and mocked" (105) and "befooled, hoodwinked" (106) by her slaves. It is notable that Sapphira learns nothing from this experience. Her realization that Nancy

and her husband are not together that particular night does not lead to a reexamination of her suspicions regarding their relationship.

Sapphira's insistence on blaming Nancy, even after the enslaved woman has proved herself to be sleeping outside her door, indicates that Sapphira's dislike of Nancy has a motivation other than that of Nancy and Henry's purported adultery. Immediately after Jezebel's funeral Sapphira observes Henry and Nancy "in deep conversation" (103). To Sapphira, Henry, who talks to Nancy "very earnestly, with affectionate solicitude" (103), displays an inappropriate degree of familiarity: "Never had she seen him expose himself like that. Whatever he was pressing upon that girl, he was not speaking as master to servant; there was nothing to suggest that special sort of kindness permissible under such circumstances. He was not uttering condolences. It was personal. He had forgotten himself" (103-4). Henry's mistake, according to Demaree Peck, is that "he forgets his superiority and treats Nancy as an equal" (247). Peck notes that to Sapphira, Henry's behavior "threatens to break down the whole fragile structure of power on the estate" (247). In Sapphira's mind, Henry has committed a sin that may prove more destructive than any sexual indiscretion, since sex between enslaved women and their white masters typically reinforced rather than disrupted the unequal power dynamic between master and slave. Any mixed-race offspring resulting from such a relationship would function as both additional workers and a saleable commodity. Sapphira understands the dynamics of interracial plantation sex and is tolerant and even encouraging, as indicated by her complacent remark that Till's sexual encounter with the portrait painter gave the Colberts "a smart yellow gal into the bargain" (9). The personal affection Henry feels for Nancy to Sapphira represents a betrayal of the hierarchy that has helped define her own sense of worth and validity. A sexual relationship with Nancy on Henry's part would represent a violation of his marriage vows to Sapphira, but

Henry's recognition of Nancy's personhood threatens Sapphira's very identity, jeopardizing the assumptions of white supremacy that have defined her role as a woman in the nineteenth-century South. The pattern of suspicion, panic, and temporary relief Sapphira enacts on the night of her breakdown mimics the responses of white southerners to both perceived and real threats from black southerners. Historically as well as literarily, when the seemingly firm de jure and de facto boundaries separating blacks and whites waver, white Southerners have responded with violence.

Sapphira's panicky fear that both her slaves and her husband might betray her brings to mind another Southern woman, in many ways a real life counterpart to Sapphira: The South Carolinian Mary Chesnut, born in 1823 and famous for her diary, published as *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*.⁶⁵ In an entry dated September 24, 1861, Chesnut reacts to the alleged murder of her Cousin Betsey Witherspoon by her slaves. I quote the following long section because it so mirrors the action dealt with previously in Cather's novel:

Hitherto I have never thought of being afraid of negroes. I had never injured any of them. Why should they want to hurt me? Two-thirds of my religion consists in trying to be good to negroes because they are so in my power and it would be so easy to be the other thing. Somehow today I feel that the ground is cut away from under my feet. Why should they treat me any better than they have done Cousin Betsey Witherspoon? Kate [Mary Chesnut's sister] and I sat up late and talked it all over. Mrs. Witherspoon was a saint on this earth and this is her reward. Kate's maid came in—a strong-built mulatto woman. She was dragging in a mattress. “Missis, I have brought my bed to sleep in your room while Mars David is at Society Hill. you ought not to stay in a room by yourself *these times*.” And then she went off for more bed gear. “For the life of me,” said Kate gravely, “I cannot make up my mind. Does she mean to take care of me—or to murder me?” . . . That night Kate came into my room. She could not sleep. Those black hands strangling and smothering Mrs. Witherspoon's gray head under the counterpane haunted her. So we sat up and talked the whole night through. (227-8)

⁶⁵ *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* is not a diary in the traditional sense: Chesnut takes the journal she kept during the war years and heightens the political and social commentary. Despite the retrospective view, Chesnut does not soften or sentimentalize the original events.

Grasping and strangling “black hands” haunt both Mary Chesnut and her sister Kate, depriving them of sleep. There is a terrifyingly anonymous, inhuman aura surrounding these disembodied hands. Yet the hands that strangled Mrs. Witherspoon were hands that were known to her, hands that had performed dozens of small, and no doubt intimate, services at her behest. Their cousin, Betsey Witherspoon’s, experience causes both Chesnut and her sister to doubt the fidelity of Kate’s maid and turn their fear of traitorous “black hands” onto her. Significantly, the maid is described as “mulatto,” so her hands are in all probability relatively light in color—no matter, in the context of Chesnut’s fears they are the same terrible “black hands” that strangled Cousin Betsey. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Rachel Blake notices Nancy’s “old gold” hands and the dexterity with which they iron delicate Sapphira’s caps. An enslaved person’s importance to the plantation was embodied in his or her hands and the work they were capable of. In a common example of metonymy, plantation workers were frequently referred to as “hands.” Mary Chesnut and her sister Kate are shocked by what they perceive as familiar and trusted becoming dangerous. The shock is not so much the murder of their cousin, but that she was murdered by one of her slaves. Mary Chesnut’s feeling that “the ground is cut away from under my feet,” echoes Sapphira’s “dream of disaster.” Both women’s ostensible fears that their slaves are disloyal prove emblematic of larger insecurities regarding the hierarchical plantation system.

Even though these two women legally own and control the bodies of their slaves, as white women within the male-dominated institution of Southern slavery they themselves possess little influence beyond the domestic sphere. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira is unable to sell Nancy without Henry’s signature on the deed of sale; this despite the fact that the slaves belonged to her and not Henry before their marriage. In *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, Chesnut frequently lauds the virtue of her white Southern sisters while lamenting their lack of agency. C.

Vann Woodward connects Chesnut's "antislavery heresy" with another "closely associated" conviction: "the heresy of militant feminism and defense of oppressed womanhood," claiming the latter "was less paradoxical than the antislavery heresy, since she thought of herself as a victim rather than a beneficiary of the oppression" (Woodward xlvi).

Their own tenuous societal positions led white Southern women such as Chesnut and her fictional counterpart Sapphira to exercise an often sadistic degree of power over enslaved women. Jacqueline Jones explains both this behavior and the rationale behind it: "In their role as labor managers, mistresses lashed out at slave women not only to punish them, but also to vent their anger on victims even more wronged than themselves. We may speculate that, in the female slave, the white woman saw the source of her own misery, but she also saw herself—a woman without rights or recourse, subject to the whims of an egotistical man. These tensions frequently spilled over into acts of violence" (25). Cather's novel opens with one of these "acts of violence" when Sapphira deals Nancy three vicious blows with her hairbrush, ostensibly because Nancy has been clumsy in dressing her hair. Sapphira's "discipline" of Nancy runs true to historical form. According to Jones, "When punishing slave women for minor offenses, mistresses were likely to attack with any weapon available—knitting needles, tongs, a fork, butcher knife, ironing board, or a pan of boiling water" (25-6). Not coincidentally, Sapphira abuses Nancy immediately after Henry has refused to acquiesce to her wishes to sell the enslaved woman, asserting his legal power by telling his wife, "You can't sell her without my name to the deed of sale, and I will never put it there" (8). For Angela Salas, "This revealing gesture underscores for both Sapphira and the reader the fact that Sapphira's authority is based upon the force of her personality, not upon the dictates of law; she has only as much agency as Henry wants to permit her" (101). This bit of action presents a treacherous thicket of issues—obviously the sale of enslaved persons and

the resulting separation of families represented a particular refinement of cruelty in a system that was already evil enough; thus the reader breathes a sigh of relief at Henry's refusal to allow Sapphira's plan to proceed. Yet Henry's ability to prevent Nancy's sale also indicates his paternalistic economic control, highlighting Sapphira's own lack of legal personhood and relegation to the status of child or ward. The specific act of violence Sapphira plans for Nancy grows directly out of this sense of powerlessness.

Mary Chesnut also felt her lack of legal standing acutely, wryly remarking, "There is no slave, after all, like a wife" (59). Chesnut vents her anger and blame, not only toward the white Southern men who "Like the patriarchs of old . . . live all in one house with their wives and their concubines" (29), but against "another race who are the social evil" (31) particularly black women, whom she likens to "prostitutes" (29). Throughout her journal Chesnut bears out Jones's assertions regarding the white Southern woman who sees in the black enslaved woman's unwilling status as potential sexual rival "the source of her own misery" but also, and even more troublingly, glimpses in the black woman's lack of legal standing a version of "herself" (25).

Despite Chesnut's frequent praise of her white Southern sisters who she claims "are as pure as angels" and her own stunningly imperceptive assertion regarding her own slaves: "I had never injured any of them. Why should they want to hurt me?" (227), she does hint at the plantation mistress's potential for brutality. Chesnut alludes to the habitual cruelty that often accompanied interactions between plantation mistresses and enslaved women, when, after lauding her own goodness to the enslaved occupants of her household, she cryptically remarks that "it would be so easy to be the other thing" (227). Chesnut recognizes the potential for violent domination inherent in any system of unequal power relations and her own need to fight against the temptation to exercise such sadistic control. Her veiled recognition that the dynamics of the

slave system itself undergird this impulse to cruelty explodes the myth that the institutional powerlessness of enslaved people improved the characters of their white owners by spurring them to otherwise impossible feats of compassion and kindness.

Frederick Douglass's description of the transformation in character his mistress Sophia Auld underwent provides an unambiguous demonstration of the corrupting power of the slave system hinted at by Chesnut. Auld had never owned slaves until her marriage, and at first the young Douglass was "utterly astonished at her goodness" (36). That goodness would be short-lived; according to Douglass, "The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (37). As Chesnut obliquely indicates and Douglass explicitly describes, slavery itself could corrupt and maim the whites who participated in it. Mary Chesnut, unlike Sapphira, is able to say "God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an iniquity" (21). Despite this realization, she is unable to formulate an escape from such a system, and similarly incapable of seeing black women as fellow—and far more grievously disenfranchised—victims of what is ultimately a white patriarchal institution.

Examined within the context of American chattel slavery, Sapphira's cruelty begins to appear less anomalous, if no less shocking. As Douglass's account of Sophia Auld's metamorphosis illustrates, the slave system warped and deformed any number of Southern whites, no doubt creating many Sapphiras, whose behavior would today seem perverse and unimaginable. At this juncture, I should make clear that I am not trying to become an apologist for Sapphira's behavior and the historical realities it represents by attributing the inhumanity of

white Southerners solely to the mechanics of the slave system and negating any individual volition or responsibility.⁶⁶ I believe, however, that endorsing the opposite extreme and viewing Sapphira as a unique and historically-displaced example of cruelty and perversion risks diminishing the real and pervasive horrors of slavery by suggesting that such warped behavior was a rarity having more to do with Cather's own purported psycho-sexual preoccupations than the historical landscape in which she chose to locate her last novel.

With *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather was not simply producing a character study of one particularly monstrous person, she was writing about an entire way of life. The opposition between the recurring manifestations of Sapphira's plot to rape Nancy and the moments of wistful affection for the hierarchical way-of-life that enabled such a plan provides a level of narrative tension that becomes the story's animating force even as it threatens to rip the novel in two. The rivulets of nostalgia for the antebellum South and sympathy for Sapphira that trickle throughout the novel have appalled critics and readers, yet that strong impulse toward nostalgia and kinship proves a strength rather than a weakness. James Woodress finds Sapphira to be "a person without moral sense, a figure of ambiguity, someone no reader could love" (483). Certainly few, if any, readers will warm to Sapphira, but individual characters within the novel seem to feel affection and even love for her, including, most surprisingly, Till, whose sympathetic reminiscences end the novel. By declining to portray Sapphira as wholly unsympathetic and unlovable, Cather refuses to allow her to be read as an anomaly, isolated from the larger system of American chattel slavery and the numerous other white people who participated in it and whom it materially benefitted and continues to benefit. In the same way, she denies readers the solace of separating Sapphira's behavior from what we as twenty-first-

⁶⁶ Noted mid-twentieth-century historian Samuel Eliot Morison endorses such an evasion when he equivocates, "The presence of slavery subjected Southern white people to a constant emotional pressure which led them to do many wrong and foolish things" (266).

century citizens would also perhaps be capable of if exposed to a similar system and encourages a consideration of the established systems of inequality and oppression in which we participate every day. Sapphira is therefore not perhaps so enigmatic and strange a character as she at first appears.

Both *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* link mutable black bodies to the murky history of American slavery and the shadowy contours of sexual transgression. Cather cannot say certain things in her work, and she depends on these characters to express ideas she does not specifically articulate. Cather's unease regarding slavery and exploitation can be felt only faintly in *My Ántonia*. Two decades later, the issue that slides unremarked upon through the pages of *My Ántonia* becomes the looming narrative and moral issue that dominates *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

CONCLUSION: TROUBLING BODIES, TROUBLING STRUCTURES

In planning *Troubling Bodies* I had originally anticipated pairing novels representative of the diverse scope of Cather's fiction. The last chapter of *Troubling Bodies*, "Embodiments of Slavery in *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," was actually the first that I wrote and the only one retaining the original comparative structure. But just as the African American and Southern aspects of *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* had demanded that the two novels be paired, *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours*, and *The Professor's House* seemed to require attention as significantly. Some consideration of the body can be found in all of Cather's novels, but the five novels I consider seemed especially suitable for the project. *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* intrigued me because they are Cather's version of Henry James's "great, baggy, monsters," novels so long and dense that they are seldom attended to in any detail. In discussions of Cather's identity as a modernist innovator, which tends to be predicated on the spare lineaments of *A Lost Lady* or *The Professor's House*, these novels either go unmentioned or are touched on apologetically and dismissed as aberrations. In contrast to these three misfits of the Cather canon, *My Ántonia* still enjoys tremendous popularity with readers and is the novel most people most closely associate with Cather. *The Professor's House* possesses a similar caché with critics. In all of these novels, however, we see similar figurations of bodies and economic and cultural concerns and anxieties.

The continued focus and fixation on bodies in twenty-first-century American culture makes this topic a particularly timely one. Considering Cather's depiction of non-normative

bodies in both the critical arena of academic writing and the equally-important pedagogical space of the classroom allows readers to confront value-laden words such as *healthy* or *normal* and examine the variable meanings of these terms, recognizing that they do not represent eternal verities but are instead socially and culturally constructed. I have explored the significance of Cather's situation of bodies and what it meant in her time; at the same time, I have also tried to ask what relevance these depictions have for our time. The chapters are united, not only by a focus on the body, but by an exploration of how bodies are defined in terms of the triumvirate of race, class, and gender. The forum of the body allowed Cather the leeway to explore fraught ideas that might have appeared subversive in another context.

A significant portion of *Troubling Bodies* deals with race in Cather's fiction: the dissertation begins and ends with chapters that directly question the interactions between white and nonwhite bodies. I find the attitudes toward race and ethnicity expressed in these novels fascinating because they still bear so strongly on specific twenty-first century cultural paradigms, many of which we take for granted. It is a testament to Cather's ability as an author to look beyond the constraints of her own time and explore ideas that are still relevant. *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon, appeared in 1905, inspiring the infamous 1915 movie *Birth of a Nation*. Both of these texts are useful for critiquing and understanding the cultural climate that produced them, but they have little resonance today, and their blatant racism is easy for almost all Americans to condemn. *My Ántonia*, in contrast, raises important questions that are still worth discussing. The eager gaze the white audience turns on Blind d'Arnault and the way he is simultaneously embraced and excluded reflects current ambivalence toward African American performers and athletes. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*'s juxtaposition of the beautiful light-skinned Nancy with

the other, less attractive women on the Colbert plantation finds parallels today in the way women's bodies are gazed at and evaluated

Race makes a stealthier appearance in *The Song of the Lark*, leading many critics simply to ignore its presence. Consideration of Thea as a proto-feminist heroine has to some extent blocked examination of the cultural appropriations that partially support her heroic status. Difficulties in seeing the larger societal issues surrounding Thea's heroic embrace of her body and vocation stem in part from the limiting perspective of white feminism, which for too long has been predicated on the idea that the achievements of heterosexual white women signaled corresponding gains for all women. A further reason for the lack of attention paid to the racial dynamics that underpin Thea's quest for self-definition is the omnipresence of generic and inauthentic images of American Indians. Gerald Vizenor has referred to these stereotypes as "interimage simulations" (146) that often replace the bodies and lives of individual Indian people in the minds of many Americans. Through imbibing these images, many people unwittingly validate seemingly "positive" ideas of a monolithic, mythic version of Native culture, one that has no connection to living American Indians and is open to use and appropriation of non-Native Americans.

The varying and often overlapping identity markers exhibited by Cather's fictive bodies provide a solid forum for exploring identity politics: Characters' multivalent bodies perfectly reflect intersectionality, the idea that the social categories a person belongs to influence one another and cannot be considered in isolation. In *The Song of the Lark*, separating Thea's gender from her identity as a European American proves impossible. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Nancy's identity as a mixed-race person and her biologically female body are intertwined, just as Sapphira's aging body represents the confluence of gender, race, and disability. In *One of Ours*,

Claude Wheeler's status as a middle class Midwesterner affects the expression of his gender and sexuality. Cather uses both contemporary American culture and the United States' eventual entry into war as organic means of placing Claude's body in the novel's foreground. Although Cather does not formulate these connections as explicitly as Charlie Chaplin would fourteen years later in *Modern Times*, *One of Ours* nevertheless manifests an increasing awareness of the distinct relationship between the physical body of the individual and industrial capitalism. The addition of sexuality further complicates this picture.

In *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland seemingly represents the ultimate manifestation of these interlocking categories, since from St. Peter's perspective the "many-sided" Outland contains a plethora of harmonizing identities. From the vantage point of the reader, however, Outland appears to defy all attempts at categorization, becoming a cipher who means different things to different characters. Thus, Cather explores the fallacies of projecting a stable and conflict-free identity on another person, or making one person's body broadly representative. The underlying unreality of Outland, figured as his lack of physical body, uncovers the unsustainability of this perspective. Instead of embracing the glorification of the past as Granville Hicks and others claimed, *The Professor's House* becomes a work that exposes the perils of nostalgia. St. Peter's inability to live courageously in the present moment threatens everything from his familial relationships to his very life. St. Peter's untenable view of Outland merges with his static conception of the structure of his great academic project and becomes a metaphor for his limiting preconceptions.

Cather's description of the inevitability of St. Peter's narrative design may imply some ironic reflection on her own composition process. Writing about the tangled complexities of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Judith Fetterley perceptively remarks, "[W]hile writers may wish to

create aesthetic wholes, and while novels may be made to appear unified, they are in fact composed of irreconcilable stories, of points of view glued together to look compatible” (18). Although she wrote professionally from the time she was an undergraduate, Cather was nearly forty before her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, was published in 1912. By the time she achieved some measure of critical and popular attention with *My Ántonia*, she was forty-five, an age that appeared considerably more advanced in 1918 than today. Her success was as much the result of perseverance as innate talent, and archival work consistently reveals the numerous ways she attempted to anticipate and shape both popular and critical responses to her work. Her well-known attempts to manipulate her posthumous reputation, which include the destruction of manuscripts and correspondence; the prohibition of direct quoting from her own letters; and the refusal to authorize paperback editions and film adaptations, merely replicate the control she exerted throughout her writing life.

The act of writing itself was for Cather inextricably linked to the body; she wrote longhand, and from late middle age on worried constantly about the integrity of her right hand. According to John Swift, “Willa Cather worked on into the 1930s and 1940s as her personal organic body ran its course of dissolution. Frequently age incapacitated her arms and wrists, forcing her to wear what in her letters she called ‘splints.’ In the last six years of her life, suffering from painfully stretched and torn thumb tendons in her right hand (her writing hand), she intermittently wore a brace built for her by a Boston orthopedist” (“Kind” 186). As she composed *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather was particularly aware of the body’s vulnerability to age and disability, and the sympathy with which she represents the disabilities of Sapphira—otherwise a stunningly cruel and unsympathetic character—manifests that realization. The joyous embrace of the physical body and the boundless energy Thea Kronborg exhibits in *The*

Song of the Lark are nowhere to be found in Cather's last novel, which instead speaks of resignation and accommodation.

Just as Cather's injured hand affected both the way she wrote and the content of her writing, the imperfect and unstable bodies my dissertation examines have influenced the lineaments of the argument itself. As I neared completion of *Troubling Bodies in the Fiction of Willa Cather*, I became increasingly convinced of the fallacy of the unified aesthetic whole, as it pertains to my own work as well as Willa Cather's. Concluding my dissertation by heralding a lack of closure might seem apologetic or evasive, but that is not my intent. I want to convey, rather, the sense of possibility and excitement I find in the continuing conversation of academic research. Poring over *The Professor's House* as an undergraduate, I was impressed by how clearly St. Peter was able to envision the shape his massive historical project would take. The following lines are underscored in pen in my disintegrating copy of the novel: "And the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through" (106). This seemed both a beautiful and easy way to write. Oh, I thought, as I worked doggedly at my thesis, when I have more practice with academic writing this will be my experience. There will be no more plodding, no more false starts and dead ends, the structure of whatever I wish to write about will appear before me like a mirage, and I will simply add shading and texture to that existing picture. Of course, this miraculous event never happened, and I suspect that it does not really occur for anyone. I periodically have minor epiphanies when writing and these can be very exciting, but in general composition functions for me as a struggle to comprehend and clarify, not a transcription of foregone conclusions. Even when a piece of work (such as this dissertation) is finished, I am left with as many questions as answers. I find

this lack of closure tremendously exciting because it means there is always additional space for reconsideration and revision.

As I have written each chapter, I have been open to going where I think Cather's narratives are leading me, even if that turned out to be a direction that I had not considered. Over the twenty-eight years that separated the publication of her first novel and her last, Willa Cather underwent the exposure to new ideas and experiences and the resulting changes in perspective experienced by all thinking people. Any generalizations that encompass the range of her fiction must therefore be made cautiously. Representations of bodies in Cather's writing shift, evolve, and double back, resisting forming themselves into any clearly-defined pattern or trajectory. Despite the significant interpretive and rhetorical weight bodies in her fiction are made to bear, Cather never loses sight of the body's physical reality and the just demands it makes. Imperfect, yet marvelous, our bodies tether us securely to this world. Meeting the body's basic needs—for food, shelter, clothing, medical care—goes a long way toward satisfying the intangible longings—for autonomy, compassion, justice—that all human beings have.

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