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Introduction

> When we find ourselves on shipboard, among hundreds of strangers, we very soon recognize those who are sympathetic to us. We find our own books in much the same way. We like a writer much as we like individuals; for what he is, simply, underneath all his accomplishments.
>
> Willa Cather, "Miss Jewett" (1936)

I

Willa Cather had little use for critics, preferring to have ordinary readers find and encounter her books without the mediating lens of the professional interpreter. Critics have, from time to time, returned the favor, consigning her to near-oblivion in the 1930s when they judged her to be out of touch with the painful social and economic realities of Depression-era America.[1] Today, fortunately, her reputation with both lay and professional readers is secure, for she is widely read (the prestigious Library of America has two Cather volumes in its series, and *My Ántonia* has been reprinted in the Penguin Great Books of the 20th Century series), regularly taught (in a range of undergraduate and graduate courses in American literature, women's literature, and lesbian/gay/queer studies), and the subject of intense critical scrutiny and controversy. Those controversies have in recent years landed Cather on the cover of such influential middle-brow publications as *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, where tabloid-style headlines demand to know "What have the academics done to Willa Cather?" or proclaim "Justice for Willa Cather," as if the long-dead writer has been a hostage or a political prisoner who has finally gained her freedom. Her status in contemporary popular culture is evident in the fact that three of her early novels – *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia* – have been made into movies for television since the early 1990s, featuring such high-powered stars as Jessica Lange and Jason Robards. In 1999, *My Ántonia* was even caught up in the rage for mass-media book clubs, as National Public Radio talk-show maven Diane Rehm selected Cather's 1918 story of life on the Nebraska frontier for an on-air discussion of what one guest described as "one of *the* great American novels."[2]

But the most fascinating evidence of Cather's place in contemporary cultural politics may well be that the First Lady of the United States, Laura Bush, featured her work as part of a White House symposium on the literary legacy of women in the American West in September, 2002. Many of the contributors to this volume as well as its editor attended, and one, Cather biographer Sharon O'Brien, was one of the keynote speakers. The event, which was billed as a celebration of the works of three writers (Edna Ferber and Laura Ingalls Wilder as well as Cather) "who happen to have been women," was the third in a series of such symposia hosted by Mrs. Bush. When the *New York Times* reported on the symposia, noting that the First Lady was quietly building "a literary room of her own" within the White House and wondering what her motives might be in doing so, Mrs. Bush disavowed any political intention and declared that "there is nothing political about American literature."[3] The "women of the West" event, however, was attended by Second Lady Lynne V. Cheney, a well-known conservative culture warrior whose tenure as chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1986–93) was marked by hostility towards the scholarly projects of multiculturalism and postmodernism.[4] Her mere presence served as a reminder that literature and literary criticism – and the arts and humanities generally – are deeply political, if only because speech, representation, and interpretation always involve human beings in contests for power and authority. Were that not the case, Mrs. Cheney would never have bothered to attack the politics of those scholars in the humanities with whom she disagreed, as she did, for example, in her 1995 book, *Telling the Truth*, which sought to discredit postmodernism by associating it with moral relativism. A few months after the "women of the West" symposium, Mrs. Bush hastily postponed the next symposium, "Poetry and the American Voice," after the event became tangled up in the politics of her husband's plans to invade Iraq (which he did in March, 2003). A number of poets who had been invited planned to present the First Lady with poems protesting against the imminent war. Again, the White House refused to see anything political in its silencing of "the American Voice," steadfastly maintaining that the event was canceled to keep a "literary event" from being turned into a "political forum." It's hard work, apparently, making sure "there's nothing political about American literature."

Willa Cather might well have agreed with Laura Bush's assertion about American literature being apolitical, and she probably would have been delighted to have been read and celebrated in a White House occupied by conservative Texans. She was a lifelong Republican whose fiction avoided overt political crusading and can be construed to uphold a traditional American value system of hard work and rugged individualism. Her novels and short

stories are replete with characters such as *My Ántonia*'s Lena Lingard, an immigrant who, through skill, determination, and enterprise, realizes the American dreams of material success and social mobility. In recent years, however, many readers of Cather have sought to situate her work not in the realm of dreams but amid the messier realities she often claimed to be trying to avoid. ("What has art ever been but escape?" Cather mused in a 1936 essay. She goes on to express contempt for the idea that art might help to solve the problems of "industrial life," insisting that "economics and art are strangers."[5]) The essays gathered here tend to read against the grain of Cather's escapism, for they view her not as a crusader but as an acute observer of American life whose deeply felt responses to changing social and demographic conditions are illuminating both for what they celebrate and for what they evade or repress. Thus, we see, for example, in John Swift's essay on *The Professor's House* (1925) an examination of how changing legal theories about property and contract in the early twentieth century feed into the anxieties fueling that fractured, contradictory text. Similarly, Lisa Marcus's discussion of two neglected Cather short stories from the 1910s focuses on how their "geography of Jewishness" fits in with contemporary ambivalence about the waves of so-called New Immigrants – mostly from southern and eastern Europe and often Jewish – that arrived in the United States in the decades before World War I. Taken together, then, the essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather* tap into an ongoing fascination with a major American novelist who can be easy to read but surprisingly difficult to understand. The goal of the anthology is to help readers to plumb some of Cather's depths, to get at "what [she] is, simply," and at times not so simply, "underneath all [her] accomplishments."

Cather studies has been revitalized and almost wholly transformed in the last thirty years. She is no longer merely Nebraska's first lady of letters, whose well-wrought paeans to "the American Dream" earned the modestly respectful attention of myth-and-symbol critics and new critics throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[6] In the 1970s, feminist criticism began to create new contexts for reading Cather that made her seem less quaint and more engaged in the rough-and-tumble of the times in which she lived and wrote (1873–1947). The focus on gender and on her place in female literary traditions revealed a feistier Cather whose pioneer heroines defied convention by dressing in men's clothes and performing physical and intellectual work usually considered "masculine." In 1987, with the publication of Sharon O'Brien's psychobiography *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, the lesbian Cather was brought out of the closet after decades of diffident silence, and critics began combing the novels and short stories for evidence of how sexuality is translated into textuality, of how lesbianism is masked or disguised to evade

detection and censure. By the late 1990s, the possibilities of the masquerade model were more or less exhausted, but cultural studies and queer studies kept Cather in the eye of several contemporary critical storms. Cather's status in the academy is evident in the attention she has garnered recently from theorists and New Americanists who are not Cather specialists, including Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Walter Benn Michaels.[7] With studies such as Julie Abraham's *Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (1996), Guy Reynolds's *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (1996), and my own *Willa Cather: Queering America* (1999), Cather's relationships to modernism, progressivism, and turn-of-the- century discourses of sex and nation were brought into sharper focus. Also, thanks largely to the University of Nebraska Press's scholarly edition project, which in 1992 began producing meticulous editions of Cather's works, textual and manuscript issues have emerged as a new area of inquiry and debate. With so much going on and so many perspectives in play, it is safe to say that Cather studies has moved into the twenty-first century with the writer hotly but healthily contested and at or near the center of crucial conversations about the politics and the aesthetics of modern American fiction.

Though she is most often associated with the prairie landscapes immortalized in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather was actually born in Back Creek, Virginia just eight years after the end of the Civil War, which had divided her family and alienated neighbors from one another throughout the struggle over slavery and secession. (Her father's family were mostly Unionists, except for great-grandfather James, who opposed both slavery and secession but sided with the South over his belief in states' rights; her mother's family were mostly Confederates, though her grandmother Rachel Boak strongly opposed slavery and helped a slave named Nancy escape to Canada on the underground railway.) That Cather was influenced by her childhood in the Reconstruction South is evident in her identification with a maternal uncle, William Seibert Boak, who served in the Confederate army and died at nineteen from wounds received at Manassas. Cather liked to pretend that she was named after this uncle, writing a 1902 poem, "The Namesake," dedicated to his memory and adopting Sibert as a middle name in the early years of her professional career. It was only in her last completed novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, published in 1940, that Cather drew significantly upon the experiences of those early years in Virginia, but scholars have recently begun to grapple with the importance of her southern origins to Cather's sensibility and her sense of history. While acknowledging that the Great Plains and the Southwest drew the bulk of Cather's imaginative attention, Janis Stout declares in *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (2002) that "the fact remains that she was southern first – and in a very

real way, last." Ann Romines's essay, "Willa Cather and 'The Old Story': *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," offers readers of this volume a sense of how criticism is reckoning with that crucial but under-examined fact.

In 1883, when Cather was not yet ten years old, her family left the comfort and familiarity of Virginia for the open and still largely unsettled spaces of Webster County in south-eastern Nebraska. After just eighteen months on a farm, the family moved into the frontier town of Red Cloud, where Cather's father opened an insurance office. Initially, Cather experienced the vastness of the prairie as inhuman and overwhelming, a feeling eloquently described by the narrator of *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden. Recalling his first ride over the prairie (after a journey, like Cather's, from Virginia to Nebraska), Jim remarks:

> There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction . . . Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.[8]

Cather would soon come to love her adopted home with a passion, however, and would remain in Nebraska until 1896, when, a year after graduating from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, she would move to Pittsburgh to pursue a career in magazine journalism. She had begun writing in college and by the time she left Lincoln had acquired a reputation throughout the Midwest as a lively writer and a tough, audacious critic, particularly of drama. (Janis Stout's essay on Cather and the performing arts explores the lasting importance of this early professional experience, which instilled in the young writer a life-long devotion to theatre and music and influenced the development of her own artistic principles and goals.) Except for a brief stint of high-school teaching in Pittsburgh, she worked in journalism until 1912, ending up in New York City as managing editor of *McClure's*, one of the most influential magazines of the "muckraking" era. *McClure's* was renowned for the quality of its investigative reporting on the kinds of social and economic changes (such as the rise of the city and the emergence of monopoly capitalism) that accompanied America's transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. During her years as a reporter and editor, Cather's progress as a creative writer was hampered, though her talent was surely nurtured through the discipline of journalism and the range of experiences her profession made available to her. She managed to publish a volume of poetry and one collection of short stories, but with the publication of a novella, *Alexander's Bridge*, in 1912, her lengthy apprenticeship was over and Cather turned full-time to the writing of fiction. By 1918, she would

produce three more novels, including the one for which she is best known, *My Ántonia*.

Cather was thirty-eight years old when *Alexander's Bridge* was published. Her forties would be a decade of critical and popular success, capped off in 1923 with a Pulitzer Prize for her novel of World War I, *One of Ours*. Her fifties showed even greater artistic confidence and ambition, resulting in works that many readers consider to be her finest: *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). Even a thumbnail sketch of her biography, I hope, elucidates the concatenation of influences and experiences that prepared Cather for this extraordinary period of productivity and achievement. First, she shared with her narrator Jim Burden a sense of having grown up "outside man's jurisdiction" and reveled in the westerner's expansive sense of self and possibility. She took advantage of the comparative freedom of the frontier to experiment with sex- and gender-nonconformity in her adolescence, going through an extended period of cross-dressing when she called herself (and was called by others) William, Willie, or Billy. It should also be noted that Cather could be sharply critical of the provincial character of small prairie towns and of the stifling pressure to conform, yet she herself abandoned the overt gender radicalism of her youth and adopted a more conventional style of dress and appearance as she reached adulthood. The tension between conformity and nonconformity that is evident in her life story and in her contradictory sense of the West is played out over and over again in Cather's fiction as characters struggle to create a sense of self as well as relationships to family, community, and region. Thus, Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* leaves her hometown of Moonstone, Colorado, bitterly vowing that she "was going away to fight, and she was going away forever" (p. 310), but later, having achieved success as an opera singer in New York, she credits Moonstone for giving her a sense of standards and a "rich, romantic past" (p. 552).[9]

A second salient aspect of Cather's formative experiences is that she was a member of the first generation of college-educated women in the United States to attend public, co-educational institutions such as the University of Nebraska, which was founded in 1869. By inclination and training, Cather was one of the turn-of-the-century's "New Women," fitting to a tee the description offered by historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg: "single, highly educated, economically autonomous," eager for professional visibility, willing to challenge existing gender relations, yet confident of her "rightful place within the genteel world."[10] Her early fiction in particular contains numerous examples of female characters who are prepared to make their own way and deft at taking advantage of economic opportunities. In addition to the aforementioned Thea Kronborg, the best example of such characters

is perhaps Alexandra Bergson from *O Pioneers!* (1913). She succeeds as a farmer and a landowner by embracing new technologies and taking the risk of buying up land when others are losing their nerve. Crucially, however, Cather was also a New Woman whose primary emotional and probably erotic attachments were to other women, from her college crush on Louise Pound to her life-long passion for the socialite Isabelle McClung Hambourg and her forty-year domestic partnership with Edith Lewis. Cather came of age when the new science of sexology was pathologizing such attachments as unnatural and as signs of "inversion." (Earlier in the nineteenth century, female same-sex attachment had generally been understood within the less threatening [because presumed to be non-sexual] model of "romantic friendship.") That process of stigmatization may help to explain why Cather so zealously guarded her privacy (by destroying letters and putting restrictions on how surviving letters might be used) and why her fiction is generally reticent on the subject of same-sex intimacy. Only *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, with its lavish attention to the loving comradeship of two missionary priests, comes very close to the subject, but the characters' clear commitment to their vows of celibacy helps to ensure that their devotion to one another is viewed as merely platonic.

Some readers over the years have criticized Cather for seeming to avoid sexuality or for depicting marriage and heterosexuality as institutions that are invariably corrosive and disappointing. It is true that Godfrey St. Peters's sardonic assessment of marriage and adulthood in *The Professor's House* ("His career, his wife, his family, were not his life at all, but a chain of events which had happened to him. All these things had nothing to do with the person he was in the beginning"[11]) is by no means an isolated instance of domestic disillusionment. One can cite numerous other examples, including the tragicomic marital discord of Wick Cutter and his wife in *My Ántonia*. Black Hawk's dissolute money-lender is so determined that his wife's family will not inherit his money that he murders his wife and then kills himself in order to circumvent the marriage property laws. But, as Jonathan Goldberg's essay, "Willa Cather and Sexuality," demonstrates, reading sexuality in Cather requires attention to much more than the question of whether the lesbian writer writes from the closet or shows hostility to heterosexuality. Goldberg is drawn to the problematics of identity (and thus of identity terms such as "the lesbian writer") in Cather's work and its links to ambivalence and alterity, or otherness. His concern is not to find the lesbian in the text but, building particularly on the work of Judith Butler, to examine the puzzling cross-identifications that result from the push and pull of desires that may be socially or legally prohibited yet proliferate and subvert those very prohibitions.

When asked about her success, Cather was fond of quoting the French historian Michelet: "Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout." ("The end is nothing; the road is all.") For all her emphasis on place, which implies rootedness and permanence, Willa Cather was a writer of the road. She was, in other words, as drawn to and defined by themes of mobility and transition as any American writer has ever been, as Joseph Urgo has argued in his book *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995) and in his essay for this volume, "The Cather Thesis: The American Empire of Migration." Those themes, as we have seen, arose out of the facts of her life and of the time in which she lived. Born in the South in the nineteenth century, she would grow up in the Midwest but spend most of her adult life in New York City, the cultural capital of the United States in the twentieth century, which many called in its early years "the American century." The road for Cather is thus a way of linking radically disjunctive geographic and cultural locations: South and North; West and East; rural and urban; Victorian and modern; European and American; romantic friendship and lesbianism. The road may well seem to be "all" to someone who was on it as frequently as Cather was, whether because she was relocating or merely traveling, which she did often and with a sense of adventure. (Cather took long summer trips back to Nebraska, traveled extensively in the Southwest and Northeast, built a summer cottage in Canada, and made several trips to Europe.)

The paradigmatic Cather character is also frequently on the road, which is variously imaged in her fiction as a space of challenge, flux, danger, possibility, and liminality. A conversation on board a train is the narrative set up for *My Ántonia*, for example, as a journey across Iowa prompts Jim and an unnamed narrator to recall their childhoods in Nebraska. Jim Burden, it turns out, has a professional investment in being on the road, for he is a lawyer for "one of the great Western railways" (p. 3). (Jim is not the only Cather character with such an investment. Captain Daniel Forrester of *A Lost Lady* is identified in the opening of that book as "a railroad man, a contractor for the Burlington who had built hundreds of miles of road for the Burlington, – over the sage brush and cattle country, and on up into the Black Hills."[12]) The first book of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* opens with the main character, Jean Marie Latour, wandering on horseback "through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico." He must find his way in a region that he experiences as a "geometrical nightmare" because of the oppressive repetition of the "conical red hills" that dominate the landscape.[13] Latour's initial disorientation is important, for it suggests that one of his tasks in the novel is to learn to read the landscape more effectively, to come to see the differences within the apparent sameness of the desert, which he clearly does by the end of the book. Sometimes being

on the road is a sign of a character's ambitions, as when Alexandra Bergson spends five days riding in a buckboard to explore farms in the river country to see how prospects there compared to hers on higher land, or when the peripatetic Thea Kronborg goes from Moonstone to Chicago to (after brief stops in Arizona and New York) Germany and finally back to New York in pursuit of opportunities to train and perform. Sometimes being on the road (or on board ship) is a sign of a character's instability or ambivalence, as when Bartley Alexander, the protagonist of *Alexander's Bridge*, moves restlessly back and forth between his wife in Boston and his mistress in London. Even Cather's late, neglected novel, *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), a grim, postmortem narrative about a young woman with artistic ambition who drowns while ice skating, has recurring images of mobility and travel. Lucy is initially described as "a slight figure always in motion; dancing or skating or walking swiftly with intense direction, like a bird flying home."[14] Neighbors, according to the narrator, "always knew her by the way she moved" (p. 4). Twenty-five years after her death, Lucy's erstwhile suitor Harry Gordon, stuck in a loveless marriage and still haunted by his harsh treatment of her, takes refuge in an automobile: "His farms were scattered far and wide, and he lived on the road. He often went to Denver for the week-end, 'driving like the devil'" (p. 221). In this instance, the tropes of motion are deployed ironically, emblems of romantic aspirations relentlessly thwarted in a novel as cold and bleak as Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. In the end, Lucy is dead, and Harry's life "on the road" is anything but a joyride.

II

Happily for those who undertake the journey, the "road" through Cather's fiction is circuitous but well marked by generations of readers who, like her Professor St. Peter, delight in "the fun" (p. 23) of scholarly work and critical exchange. Thus, in response to the *New Yorker*'s overwrought question, "What have the academics done to Willa Cather?" I am pleased to offer this volume as a way of saying that the patient is doing very well, thank you, and the doctors are justifiably proud of their efforts. Like other *Cambridge Companions*, this one aims to be not an end but a beginning. It is an invitation and a guide to readers interested in exploring the range of critical debates and interpretive possibilities opened up by the kinds of tools scholars and teachers of Cather bring to their work today. It has been a long time since Cather studies had a collection of essays with the breadth of this one. James Schroeter's *Willa Cather and Her Critics* was published in 1967, and John Murphy's *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* came out in 1984. More recent collections have focused more narrowly on particular texts (e.g., O'Brien's

New Essays on My Ántonia [1999]) or on particular themes or issues (e.g., Romines's *Willa Cather's Southern Connections* [2000] and John N. Swift and Joseph R. Urgo's *Willa Cather and the American Southwest* [2002]). Regrettably, constraints of space limited the number of critics whose work could be presented here, but the bibliography at the end of the volume will point readers in the direction of other fine scholarship. In organizing and assembling the book, I have tried to provide both full coverage of Cather's career and detailed analyses of particular texts to help meet a range of readerly needs and interests. Thus, the first section of the *Companion*, "Contexts and Critical Issues," is composed of nine essays that address points of contention or new areas of interest that have emerged in recent criticism. The second section, "Studies of Major Works," has essays focused specifically on the novels that have been most widely read, taught, and argued about in the last several years – *My Ántonia*, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. I recognize that my selections here may cause some controversy or disappointment, as every novel has its partisans and none seems merely "minor." Another editor might have applied the label of "major works" to a different set of texts. Indeed, I myself might have applied it differently at a different time. It is unlikely, for example, that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* would have made anyone's list of "major works" before Toni Morrison wrote about it in her slim but provocative *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). For decades, Cather's last book was largely ignored, written off as a flawed product of the writer's old age, but Morrison's discussion of it suddenly put *Sapphira* on the critical radar screen, provoking broad attention to its troubling racial and gender dynamics. *Sapphira*'s movement from the margin to the center is a useful reminder that designations such as "major" and "minor" are always to some extent arbitrary and subject to change, embedded as they are in the shifting sands of taste and critical trends. Nevertheless, I apply the label of "major works" to four texts in order to create a space for sustained attention to the books that have mattered most in recent years – and invite readers to make their own interventions into the mattering process by endeavoring to do for *Lucy Gayheart* or *Shadows on the Rock* what Toni Morrison did for *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

One of the pleasures of preparing a volume like this one is having the opportunity to listen in on the serendipitous conversations that arise between and among the essays as contributors develop their ideas. I might have constructed an entirely different table of contents that foregrounded those conversations by grouping the essays according to the approaches, assumptions, or issues they had in common, which would have resulted in a tripartite organizational structure along the following lines: Part I. Politics