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## The Politics of Cather's Regionalism: Margins, Centers and the Nebraskan Commonwealth

Guy Reynolds

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Yet, walking into the American Express Office one harshly bright, midsummer afternoon, I was forced to admit that this active, so disquietingly cheerful horde struck the eye, at once as a unit. At home, I could have distinguished patterns, habits, accents of speech—with no effort whatever; now everybody sounded, unless I listened hard, as though they had just arrived from Nebraska.(1)

It might seem rather strange to start a talk on regionalism and Willa Cather with this quotation from a novel written by another (and very different) author. This passage occurs in James Baldwin's novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Its protagonist, David, is a troubled American writer in Paris; the novel tells of his journey away from a certain kind of American puritanism and into a decadent European underworld where he will finally accept his own gay identity. How and why does Nebraska and its associated region (the Plains, the Midwest) feature in this expatriate fiction?

It features, of course, as this region often does in expatriate US writing: as everything you want to get away from. Here, the 'disquietingly cheerful horde' represent a hideous uniformity, a collectivised national identity which seems both coarse and bland. This is, sadly, one of the main themes in the literary representation of this particular region over the last century. In his useful study, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*, Kansas geographer James Shortridge follows the rise and fall of the area's status in the national imagination. 'The reign of the Middle West as the self-confident symbol of the United States was remarkably short-lived.' By the 1930s, negative images abounded. Shortridge cites a brutal quotation from John Abbot Clark, 'The Middle West—There it Lies' in 1937. The Middle West was 'a geographical blunder, an intellectual dead spot, a spiritual swamp.' Such commentators could point to the literary history that lies behind *Giovanni's Room*—the Midwest's own writers had moved out of the area, had indeed formed the bedrock of the literary expatriate movement centred in Paris.

This might seem a sobering introduction to a series of seminars on regionalism, held under the auspices of the Plains Humanities Alliance, but I do think we need to accept, from the start, that the study of literary regionalism will also be the study of cultural stereotypes: how they develop, how they condition readers' imaginations, how such stereotypes are resisted and transformed. As a Willa Cather specialist I want to focus this talk on region through the prism of Cather's *oeuvre*. But I also want to note that the reception of her work has been shaped by what we might call the declensionist narrative of Shortridge's story, the decline of the Middle West in the national imagination. Cather's reputation is often seen as being conditioned by her gender; she was pushed to the edge of the canon by male critics keen to promote a masculinist model of the national literature. This argument is not altogether

true, since Cather's regional identity was, perhaps, just as significant as her gender. Look at this quotation from one of the harshest accounts of her work, and note how it follows the logic of earlier quotations, in seeing Cather's chosen region as a place lacking contemporary significance. When Quentin Anderson came to review her career in 1965 he felt that the great age of Nebraska had long gone, and with its passing Cather's work was inevitably diminished. As late as Alfred Kazin's study, *On Native Grounds* (1942), Anderson argued, 'One can catch echoes of the fullness of this faith in the big country.' Now, however, twenty years late, 'The country has shrunk, and our sense of the weight and relevance of Willa Cather's observation of Nebraska has shrunk with it.' Anderson explicitly linked Cather's literary status to her region; as her home-territory had fallen from national significance, so Cather's importance was correspondingly diminished:

The country has shrunk, and our sense of the weight and relevance of Willa Cather's observation has shrunk with it. Nebraska is no doubt still there, but as a distinct imaginative possibility it has for the moment simply disappeared. As in so many other cases we are left confronting the artist who has been abandoned by his ostensible subject. The artist we now see is one whose energies are largely lavished on defensive maneuver, on masquerade.  
(2)

What is happening here (and this is typical of what has happened to the reputation of Midwestern writers over the past few decades) is that centers and margins have been reversed. What was once the heartland is now the margin. Anderson is surely right when he argues that 'the country has shrunk'; modern communications, the development of the interstate highway system

and the advent of air travel had all helped to create an altered sense of social space. We have to recognise, however uncomfortable the recognition might be for Cather enthusiasts, that the sheer 'otherness' of turn-of-the-century Nebraska was changed by these spatial re-configurations. Cather's early fiction still carries with it a strong sense of the sheer remoteness, inaccessibility and concomitant exoticism of the rural world she grew up in. Think of how Jim Burden re-visits Antonia by train, carriage and foot—his journey seeming to become steadily more primitive, more tricky, as the ways of getting around become steadily less accommodating. Then think of how the resonance of this last episode, with all its suggestions of a journey made with some difficulty, would be diminished if Jim had simply driven up to her farm in a hired Land Rover on modern roads. Anderson, I think, reflects these shifts when he notes of Nebraska that 'as a distinct imaginative possibility it has for the moment simply disappeared.' It has disappeared for the reason that 'The country has shrunk': in a shrunken country certain regions lose their distinctiveness. Cather scholars will immediately recognise the irony of this. Cather warned against the 'standardization' of American culture in the 1920s. Partly because of standardization, her own region has become, for Anderson, bleached of its uniqueness. If Cather's diagnosis of the direction of American culture was correct, then the unfolding process of standardization would also undermine the idiosyncratic uniqueness of her homeland, and in turn would jeopardise her early work's status.

How things have changed over the last hundred years! Looked at from the perspective of commentators from a century ago, this situation would seem remarkable. In 1896, as he responded enthusiastically to the historian's theories of the frontier, Theodore Roosevelt wrote in a letter to Frederick Jackson Turner: 'Personally, I think it will be a good thing for this country when the West, as it

used to be called, the Centre as it really is, grows so big that it can no more be jealous of the East than New York is now jealous of Boston.(3) But, of course, this very interesting phrase, 'the Centre', never became common currency. Instead, Roosevelt's Centre became a margin—the only place we now see such a use of the 'Centre' is in time-keeping—Central Time. The Standard Time Act of 1918 reduced Roosevelt's heroic notion of 'the Centre' to a mere form of administrative book-keeping. Again, as Cather had forecast, the processes of standardization would be bound up with how a state like Nebraska preserved, or lost, regional distinctiveness.

A contemporary regionalism has to cope with this doleful overhang of negative commentary. A first step might be to return to what Cather actually said about her region, in order to test whether Quentin Anderson's imperial dismissal is fair. What strikes me about Cather's sense of her own region is its distinctive political and historical complexion; she had a very nuanced understanding of her local region, deploying a variety of geographical, social and political paradigms to understand the Nebraska she had first come to as a girl. The template for Cather's ideas about region is her 1923 *Nation* essay, 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle.' This essay, Cather's contribution to a series about the various states (it would be an interesting graduate topic to compare her essay to the others in the series), distills her distinctive views on the heartland and her sense of the United States's national identity. In order to understand Cather and region, we must start here, as the established writer (she had just won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*) takes the long view of her State.

'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle' opens with a compressed history of the State, taking in environment, early history and the nineteenth-century settlement of the prairies. Essentially, this is a historiographical model familiar from nineteenth-century

writing of the West. Civilization progresses through stages; there is an inevitable drive towards 'civilization' (4). Cather's essay thus follows the plains from pre-history through to the heyday of the native Americans and then on to pioneer wagons and the railroads. The essay is a fine example of Cather's skill as a journalist: her talents for compression and selection; her ability to weave a range of discourses into a seamless prose. 'Nebraska' is at once a natural history of the state, a historical account, a travelogue, a personal reminiscence and a thesis about nationhood.

For this is a major statement about how the ideology of progress has animated American civilization, particularly the westward movement of the pioneers. The essay forms, in a way, Cather's reply to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. The Wisconsin historian's essay, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' had originally been delivered at a conference in 1893; but Turner re-published this piece, along with other essays on Western history, in 1920 (5). Turner created a major historiographical justification for American exceptionalism. At the border between the savage and the civilized, a new being came into view—the American; Turner's potent brew of geographical determinism and crude psychology forged a powerful myth suggesting that a new form of national character, distinct from Europe, was evolving. Cather's essay occupies the same terrain as Turner's analysis; but it comes to very different conclusions.

Cather was an Atlanticist. To be more specific, she was an American Euro-Atlanticist. Indeed, of all the American modernists Cather was perhaps the most fully committed to a model of Atlantic civilization, even if (unlike Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Stein and the 'lost generation') she never lived in Europe. She shared the expatriate writers' interest in European culture (and, if her last novel on Avignon had been completed, would have been the author of two fictions set in Europe). But she also developed a

rooted, regionalist modernism that places her next to the defiantly native William Carlos Williams. Cather faces both ways; she created arguments for the inter-dependence of Europe and America. Cather believed in the interaction between and linking of, Europe and America. She also had a strong awareness of the diversity of European cultures. Looked at from an American exceptionalist's perspective, Cather's complex Atlanticism lacked a sense of Anglo-Saxonism. In fact, Turner himself castigated Cather for her representations of what he called 'non-English stocks', the Scandinavians and central Europeans who fascinated her (6). Cather articulated her own theory of civilizations—less a clash than a cross-fertilisation amongst the nations of the West. She was a Midwestern Atlanticist, a cosmopolitan, a pro-European American. This then led her to call for diversity and pluralism, often rendered in folksy images that might seem more Midwestern than metropolitan. The 'Nebraska' essay replays a favourite metaphor (that culture can be symbolised in terms of food) when she notes that Nebraska has better European pastry than Prague or Vienna. Cather finds on the Western prairies transplanted Europeans still imbued with their original culture and qualities—the 'cultivated, restless young men from Europe.' One might contrast Cather's figures with Turner's moccasin-wearing new Americans. There is, of course, some snobbery in the privileging of the 'cultivated' Europeans; but there is also a distinctive theory of cultural connection being advanced here. Her work presents a particular reading of what it means to be 'Western', not only in a narrowly geographical sense but also in the sense of a theory of the civilisation of the West. She projects a form of transatlantic progressivism, where the United States and Europe remain closely enmeshed. Thus her computation of the 'stock' of Nebraska, where she tells us that the majority of the population (some 75%, in fact) were non native-born:

The census of 1910 showed that there were then 228,648 foreign-born and native-born Germans living in Nebraska; 103,503 Scandinavians; 50,680 Czechs. The total foreign population of the State was then 900,571, while the entire population was 1,192,214....With such a majority of foreign stock, nine to three, it would be absurd to say that the influence of the European does not cross the boundary of his own acres, and has had nothing to do with shaping the social ideas of the commonwealth. (7)

Cather's use of the term 'commonwealth' in this essay is important. Four States call themselves commonwealths: Massachusetts, Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania. Her deployment of 'commonwealth' carries with it a specific political tang; 'commonwealth' helps to establish this essay's distinctive idealism. 'Commonwealth' takes us back to the colonial roots of the United States; Cather, a native Virginian, would have known the term from her Southern origins. She was, in fact, nowhere more of a Virginian than when she called Nebraska a Commonwealth. One might also remember that Ellen Glasgow, another woman writer working to create a distinctive regionalist vision, referred to her 'novels of the Commonwealth' -- a 'social history of Virginia.' (8)

The ideal of the commonwealth might have had a particular poignancy during the Progressive era. Commonwealth: the common weal, the organization of society for the good of all its citizens. Commonwealth carries an idealistic, deeply democratic connotation; it calls for a *polis* of community and egalitarianism. A commonwealth is the opposite of a plutocracy. As the 'Roaring 20s' took shape around her, Cather explicitly attacked modern business, and particularly high finance, and she simultaneously cast her home state as a lost commonwealth: the place where the

common good, honest business and pioneer virtues were utterly paramount. In her veneration of the Nebraskan commonwealth, Cather articulates a version of that Midwestern idealism that runs from the Populists in Omaha in 1892 down to the Progressive Wisconsin heartland of Robert La Follette. But this is an American commonwealth made out of Europeans; it is at once a return to an earlier, puritan ideal of America and a prescient image of a pluralist community.

'Nebraska' contains her most explicit commentary on the state's politics, when she refers to the turbulent 1890s:

The rapid industrial development of Nebraska, which began in the latter eighties, was arrested in the years 1893-97 by a succession of crop failures and by the financial depression which spread over the whole country at that time—the depression which produced the People's Party and the Free Silver agitation. These years of trial, as everyone now realizes, had a salutary effect upon the new State. They winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents who are ever seeking a land where man does not live by the sweat of his brow. The slack farmer moved on. Superfluous banks failed, and money lenders who drove hard bargains with desperate men came to grief. The strongest stock survived, and within ten years those who had weathered the storm came into their reward. (238)

This passage encapsulates her complex reading of Nebraska's relative decline in the 1890s. She sees the period as a necessary purgative that helped to finish off inefficient businesses -- note the harshness that some commentators have associated with Mid-

western writing. There is toughness here, and an acceptance of *laissez-faire* capitalism that might have made a Populist wince; a Populist would also have rejected the latent social Darwinism of her judgement. Yet, in Populist style, her criticisms are directed specifically at the financial community, at moneylenders and banks, rather than the traditional trades and agricultural businesses of the Plains. She seems happy to accept the failure of financiers in the 1890s. It is significant that the symbol for the corruption of Nebraska's pioneer virtue is a medal, an unconscious but powerful echo of the Populists' concern with coinage, perhaps: 'there is the other side of the medal, stamped with the ugly crest of materialism, which has set its seal upon all our most productive commonwealths'(238). The Populists rejected the overwhelming importance of gold (and sought a currency based on the silver with which the West was blessed); Cather's imagination, too, configures a civilization in terms of debased coinage. Is it a coincidence that the image Cather should deploy to express the corruption of Nebraska's values should be that of a medal? The image is a classical one, but it carries with it a suggestive echo of the 'Battle of the Standards' of 1896, and the arguments over monetary value. The medal 'stamped with the ugly crest of materialism' is Cather's answer to William Jennings Bryan's 'cross of gold'.

Cather goes on to complain in this essay that, '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' (238). Cather was not a socialist; she admired capitalist enterprise and individualistic energy too much for that. But she was suspicious of a certain kind of capitalistic excess: the reckless and tasteless materialist culture of display. Her formulation might be seen as a patrician critique of popular culture (all those films and cheap novels); but it emerged out of a puritan

celebration of hard work and achievement.

Writing might be about particular spaces or regions, but it also then creates a new kind of imaginative space on the page. We can see this correspondence throughout European and American writing, a correspondence between space 'out there' in the literal world and 'in here', in the created forms and shapes forged by writing. One obvious example: the word for a poetic verse, the Italian term 'stanza', also means a 'room.' A poetic verse creates, on the page, a kind of room that the poet then stocks and inhabits. Cather worked within this tradition, drawing analogies between the 'real', literal spaces that she had grown up in, and the spaces created through writing. But here we come to a key aspect of Cather's regionalist aesthetic. Her native soil was 'empty', formless, unshaped; it seemed to be a kind of nothingness. How then could Cather's region suggest an aesthetic? The answer is, I think, absolutely at the heart of Cather's imaginative project. In a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (22 April 1913), more or less at the beginning of her career as her novelist, she outlined her sense of how landscape informs literary form. 'She agreed with Sergeant's one criticism that the book had no skeleton but defended it on grounds that the country she was writing had no skeleton either. There were no rocks or ridges; its black soil ran through one's fingers. It was all soft, and somehow that influenced the mood and the very structure of the novel!' (9). This is a major comment, and it is linked to other well-known insights where she uses a sort of 'negative aesthetic' to claim for her work qualities that a particular narrative does *not* possess. Cather was fond of what philosophers would call *ex negativo* reasoning, working paradoxically through negatives in order to define a problem. Thus her letter to *Commonweal* magazine, where she says that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a narrative *not* a novel. Cather has this rather teasing, almost-deconstructive wish to invert the logic writers use to de-

scribe their work. After all, we would surely expect a writer to immerse herself in a region because of its plenitude—its imaginative richness, historically or geographically, its ability to give shape to stories, to suggest narrative spines that can then become the subject of narrative. The plains 'had no skeleton'; the landscape is, simply, 'black soil.' The very region 'ran through one's figures.' It is shapeless or overly uniform or simply slips away. Cather then makes a very audacious leap, as this absence or lack (not only of history, but also of geographical variety) becomes a source of imaginative empowerment, allowing her remarkable latitude in thinking about how stories might be constructed. Seeming to have no shape, or to slip through one's fingers, the native soil would then encourage Cather to invent new kinds of 'skeleton', new forms of narrative, to embody her region. The very topographical nothingness would be a kind of liberation. You might see this argument as Cather's regionalist answer to Henry James's notorious complaint in his study of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1879), that America lacked the social texture (the simple 'stuff') necessary for realist fiction. Cather accepts the kind of absence or emptiness or lack that disturbed James; and, moreover, she then finds in such lack ('no skeleton') a paradoxical imaginative richness.

This absence or lack had a broader, foundational significance for Cather. So far, I have talked of her work in 'Plains' terms—the Commonwealth of Nebraska, the prairie soil. But, of course, this only tells a part of the story, a marginal part. It would be hard to say where the imaginative centre of her work is, since it ranges geographically across a variety of spaces and regions. Cather's fictional project embraced American geographical heterogeneity: the various and often-unfictionalised spaces of a country which in her work is coming into being. More than any other American writer, Cather's career is marked by promiscuous restlessness

within the continental boundaries, as she moves from one zone to another; and in her novels about France and the Southwest she even breaks down that margin, crossing backwards and forwards across 'America.' Each phase of her work sees a configuration of a new imaginative space or the exploration of a fresh environment. Her early work, with its epic celebrations and commemorations of the gains and losses of pioneering, grasps the prairies as the site for heroic endeavours with a classical resonance. But she then fictionalised a mosaic of peoples, places, cultures. Even in the early novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather was drawing on an interest in the Southwest, its history and anthropology, that she had developed during a trip of 1912. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is set in the hinterlands of Spanish America, and takes place in the nineteenth-century; it focuses on a Latin, Catholic culture, alongside the aboriginal world of indigenous peoples. *The Professor's House* (1925), above all, imagined a nation of juxtapositions: modernity and technology (the novel is partly set in a university, and Tom Outland invents a jet engine); antediluvian landscapes and ancient dwellings. *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) furthered this geographical sweep, as she turned towards French Canada in the seventeenth-century by setting her fiction in colonial Quebec. At the end of her life she was still exploring diverse terrains; she set her final novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) in plantation-era Virginia. And at the time of her death, Cather was working on the manuscript of *Hard Punishments*, a novel set in medieval Avignon.

What does this peripatetic energy tell us about Cather's regionalism? And how does it relate to my theme of margin and centers? We can make two major points about Cather's regionalism, if we consider her career in its totality (rather than simply slicing off a section of her work). First, Cather's regionalism teaches us an important lesson about how generalisations work in the humanities. Most Cather critics at some point advance a gen-

eralisation based on a form of regionalist reasoning. For Quentin Anderson, head of the English department at Columbia, Cather's work had held importance because her home territory of Nebraska no longer retained national significance. But Cather's work, in its totality, probably does not have Nebraska as its centre: Anderson is generalising on the basis of *My Antonia*, *O Pioneers!* and a number of short stories. More recently, Sharon O'Brien constructs a psycho-biography where the journey to the Southwest in 1912 acts as the hinge of Cather's career, the moment where she went from being a highly competent professional journalist to become a truly creative writer. But one can place against this regionalist emphasis on New Mexico and Arizona other imaginative centers for Cather: Nebraska, most obviously, but also France, eastern Canada, even Virginia. What happens in this reasoning is that there is a fluid, dynamic interplay between generalities and specificities; we set up generalisation about Cather and place, only to inflect that overview in the light of different evidence. Academics outside of the humanities can find the reasoning generated by humanities scholars rather frustrating. Generalities are never as fully binding, authoritative and 'true' as an axiom or formula in physics, say; the general is continually inflected or modified by a new, specific piece of information. At its worst, this can lead to a deconstructive frenzy as any embracing generality is immediately held up to review and modification. At its best, it can lead to a demanding interplay between generalisations and specificities, as in Cather criticism, when the desire to create an overall regionalist paradigm for her work rubs up against the sheer heterogeneity of the work.

A second point: Cather's regionalism anticipates very many recent theoretical arguments about region in American culture. Krista Comer's *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (1999) constructs a story about the

history of regionalism. Regionalism 'enjoyed a considerable following at the turn of the century and in the 1920s-1940s', but by midcentury a 'relatively homogeneous national culture' had emerged (again, this notion might remind us of Cather's attacks on cultural standardization). But then a 'new regionalist movement' informed by feminism and postmodernism, appears: 'It bursts onto the cultural scene fully and powerfully only some ten years later, in the late 1980s, when the new western history takes 'the new West' (including the literary West) positively and provocatively public.'<sup>(10)</sup> This is a seductive story, with its bracing sense that Western regionalism has been unduly marginalised and that we are now in a moment of thrilling cultural change. It is, also, in one of those typical moments that dog the history of literary regionalism, a generalisation that founders on specificities. What about Cather in this story? Comer asserts that 'At no time in American cultural history prior to the 1970s has western literature garnered anything like a national (critical) reputation. Before the 1970s, western literature *has* no reputation.' And in a footnote, she says that 'even popular readers don't conceive of, say, Willa Cather as part of a "western literary tradition.'" <sup>(11)</sup>

I like Comer's book a great deal, but I also think she is perhaps guilty of doing something that most of us do at some point: burying a contrary argument in a footnote. One only has to think of the literary careers of Sinclair Lewis and Cather to see that it is preposterous to say that western literature has 'no reputation' before 1970 (though it might well have been under-rated). Equally, surely 'popular readers' are in part drawn to Cather because of her 'western' qualities? The surprise for such readers often comes when we tell them that there is more to Cather than just the prairie.

But there is a further and larger point to be made here. Many of the things Comer wants to claim for the post-70s regionalist writ-

ing (and she is interested in figures such as Joan Didion, Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Mary Clearman Blew) has been anticipated in Cather's work. Comer's post-modern, feminist West is, she tells us, a cultural geography that suddenly comes into view at the end of the century. I would want to argue that we might see many of its features much earlier in a figure such as Cather. The post-modern geography Comer celebrates, with its attentiveness to gender and to race, its sense that space is contested, its deconstruction of mythologies of place, is very much the kind of Cather landscape that has been analysed by critics from Ellen Moers to Susan Rosowski. This is not to say that Cather was a 'post-modernist' before the term was invented. But it is to say that the simple critical narrative (a naïve regionalism succeeded by a more critically-sophisticated regionalism) is made more complex by her fiction, where many of these later concerns already seem immanent. There can be a strange sense of *deja-vu* for the Cather scholar who reads in the post-modern geography that inspires Comer. Edward Soja begins *Thirdspace* (1996) with a ringing call to think freshly about space:

My objective in *Thirdspace* can be simply stated. It is to encourage you to think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent spatiality of human life: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography. <sup>(12)</sup>

If one were to substitute *The Professor's House* for *Thirdspace*, then this statement would still hold together: 'My objective in *The Professor's House* can be simply stated. It is to encourage you to think differently about the meanings and significance of space....'. In reading that novel, with its sudden shifts across spaces (both

geographical and historical), the reader is sensitized (as Soja suggests of his geographical model) to the 'inherent spatiality of human life.' And the construction of the novel, with its play with the framing of narrative, is a further and self-reflexive incorporation of 'spatiality' into storytelling itself. Cather places her embedded narrative, 'Tom Outland's Story', within a frame, so as to create a tripartite narrative, a form of triptych. But by the end of the novel, the frame seems less important than the embedded narrative itself. The frame dissolves, the narrative structure reverses itself, and 'Tom Outland's Story' becomes the dominant story rather than the surrounding frame narration -- to the extent that most literary criticism of the novel is not so much about the whole text as about the inset tale. As we read the book for the first time, 'Tom Outland's Story' looks like a digression, an aside; but then the story unfolds, and we start to recognise its importance. This is, quite literally, the center of the novel, not a marginal aside. As we have seen throughout my talk, a process of reversal has taken place, with centers and margins seeming to exchange places.

So, to conclude. Cather will remain a central figure in literary regionalism, I believe, because she puts the central tenets of regionalism under such intellectual pressure. One of the most familiar ways of thinking about American regions has been to think about an opposition between 'section' and 'region'. Region tends to be used to define a geographical area, whereas a section denotes political or cultural identity. In Howard Odum's 1938 distinctions, section leads to a divisive separatism, as happened during the Civil War. 'Inherent in it is the idea of separatism and isolation.' He contrasted 'the divisive power of self-seeking sections' to 'the integrating power of co-ordinate regions fabricated into a united whole.' (13). It's a seductive argument, where the region comes to stand for the country as a whole; regionalism is a route back to a form of American nationalism. This is a form of

reasoning that rests on a synecdoche, where a part stands for a whole. As Susan Rosowski notes, 'From the beginnings of discussions about American literature, writers identified its 'Americanness' with the West.' (14) Certainly, these kinds of linkages feature in Cather's work and in its reception. But her restless, decentralized work also breaks down Odum's binary oppositions. She is almost a sectionalist in her focus on the cultural and intellectual distinctiveness of the Nebraskan Commonwealth; but the very term itself links Nebraska to Virginia, rupturing a simple sense of section. Equally, Cather has a geographer's sense of regional identity—the 'black soil' of the prairies; but this is regionalism with a twist, since the terrain is so lacking, apparently, in distinctive features. At each point, Cather's definitions turn and inflect the definitions brought forward by regionalist thinkers. And this, finally, is the lesson that Cather teaches us about regional thinking: that we need ever more supple, inflected, nuanced definitions in order to understand the complexities of the inter-connections between writing and place.

## Notes

1. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956. London: Penguin, 1990), p. 86.
2. Quentin Anderson, 'Willa Cather: Her Masquerade,' *New Republic*, November 27th 1965, pp. 28–31.
3. Theodore Roosevelt to Frederick Jackson Turner, December 15th, 1896. *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morrison (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 571–72.
4. The classic account of 'Stadialism' and the literary imagination remains George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 73–98.

5. See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920)
6. Frederick Jackson Turner, Letters of July 16, 1913 and March 7, 1925 in *'Dear Lady': The Letters of Frederick Jackson Turner and Alice Forbes Perkins Hooper, 1910–1932*, ed. R.A. Billington (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1970), pp. 149, 365.
7. 'Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle', *The Nation* 117 (September 5, 1923): 237. Cather's article was one in a series about different States, and was followed by Arthur Fisher's 'Montana: Land of the Copper Collar'. Future page references to this essay are given in the text.
8. Ellen Glasgow, *A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction* (New York, 1943), p. 3.
9. Letter to Sergeant, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (1970. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 155.
10. Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 1, 6.
11. Comer, pp. 2, 242.
12. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 1.
13. Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-History Approach to National Integration* (New York, 1938), p. 39.
14. Susan J. Rosowski, *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 1.