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# Ethics of Care on the Narrative Margins of Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

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ETHICS OF CARE ON THE NARRATIVE MARGINS OF  
WILLA CATHER'S *THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE* and *DEATH COMES FOR THE*  
*ARCHBISHOP*

by

Jeannette E. Schollaert

A THESIS

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ETHICS OF CARE ON THE NARRATIVE MARGINS  
OF WILLA CATHER'S *THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE* and *DEATH COMES FOR THE*  
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University of Nebraska, 2017

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Willa Cather's Southwestern novels feature cultured male protagonists as the driving sources of action. The male characters explore the natural world and advance the plot, but Cather positions female figures, particularly spinster figures, on the sidelines of the protagonists' plots to offer support and connection with the natural world. Using an ethic of care framework and ecofeminist Val Plumwood's master model, this thesis examines the ways in which Cather marginalizes female figures even as they serve crucial roles in the male protagonists' development. While the male protagonists link spinster figures and sexualized feminine bodies with the natural world, they imbue the natural world with feminized characteristics. In this way, Cather's male protagonists reify the connection between women and nature that is used to dismiss and denigrate the autonomy of the natural world and women.

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Willa Cather's novels lend themselves to considerations of human relationships. The bonds between Marie and Emil, Jim and Antonia, Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland, Father Latour and Father Vaillant are just a few examples of the fictional relationships that buoy Cather's novels. Alongside these human stories, Cather's novels feature famous representations of the relationship between humans and the land, as her depictions of Nebraska prairies and Southwestern mesas earn her a place in the American literary canon of place-based writing. Literary critics, particularly ecofeminist critics, find both fault and power in Cather's association of femininity with the natural world.<sup>1</sup> Cather renders characters like Alexandra and Antonia as deeply connected with the natural world of the sprawling prairies, as other female characters like Thea Kronberg and Lucy Gayheart make their destinies in Chicago and urban spaces. While these female stories may be what come to mind as typical Cather in the popular cultural imaginary, her novels featuring male protagonists offer equally compelling depictions of human relationships to the natural world. But what of the female characters sidelined by the focus on these famous male protagonists and their connections with the natural world in Cather's texts?

Of Cather's twelve novels, seven feature female protagonists as opposed to the five featuring male protagonists.<sup>2</sup> Of these male centered novels, *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in particular represent cultured male protagonists' relationships with the natural world, as well as their relationships with female characters that Cather also associates with the natural world but nevertheless relegates to the

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<sup>1</sup> For a small sample of the ecocritical work on Cather, see *Cather Studies* volume 5, "Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination," edited by Susan J. Rosowski (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Novels I consider female-driven: *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Novels I consider male-driven: *Alexander's Bridge*,

<sup>2</sup> Novels I consider female-driven: *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Novels I consider male-driven: *Alexander's Bridge*, *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock* (though *Shadows* is driven by a female character, her story is framed within multiple male perspectives).

narrative margins. These female characters occupy the margins and provide solace and comfort to the male protagonists at the novels' centers. Both Professor St. Peter and Father Latour gain comfort from their relationships with the spinsters in their stories, Augusta and Sada respectively, who serve as spiritual spinsters – older women marginalized due to their religious beliefs and ethnic identities. Cather relegates these characters to the narrative fringes, although their presence provides the male characters with affirmation of their own benevolence.

To complement these spinsters and provide her male protagonists with more than spiritual sustenance, Cather populates her novels with sexualized female bodies that satisfy the male protagonists' voyeuristic desires, rather than sustaining them spiritually. Augusta and Sada satisfy the need for spiritual affirmation, while Mother Eve of *The Professor's House* and Magdalena of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* balance this spiritual affirmation as the male characters find symbolic meaning in the presence of sexualized bodies. The spirituality of the spinster women, then, must be complemented by the presence – rendered through the perspective of male characters – of sexualized female bodies. These sexualized bodies need not even be alive – the mere presence of a body marked as sexual and mapped with a history of sexual deviance satisfies the narrative need for a deviant feminine presence to balance the physically unattractive but spiritually fulfilling spinsters. Both the Madonna and the Whore are thus present, and yet both are marginalized, present merely to be observed, consumed, and used to affirm the security of the male protagonists' positions.<sup>3</sup> As Guy Reynolds notes, “Cather was

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<sup>3</sup> The Madonna/Whore complex originated from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic writings, and has become a common trope in feminist theory. The dichotomy between the Madonna and the whore suggests that women can inhabit one of two roles – the asexual, virginal, spiritual, presumably domestic and nurturing Madonna, or the promiscuous, deviant, sexual whore.

perhaps the first woman to establish a fictional, and therefore public, language of womanly American landscape,” but how does this language apply beyond the novels featuring spirited heroines, to her novels featuring male protagonists and marginalized female figures (*Twentieth-Century American Women’s Fiction* 75)?

### **Ecofeminism & Ethics of Care as Literary Frameworks**

The descriptions of spinster figures and sexualized bodies serve similar narrative purposes in regards to the male protagonists, and Cather’s descriptions associate both figures with the natural world. While Cather links the spinsters to the land through their simplistic goodness rooted to the natural world, the sexualized feminine connects to the earth in more nebulous, disparate ways. The presence of both kinds of women on the margins of the two novels reinforces the binary between men and culture and women and nature. While it is crucial to dismantle these human binaries in order to recover the importance of the marginalized spinster figures and sexualized bodies, an ecofeminist ethic of care reading must also consider the ways in which the male protagonists feminize the natural world. By aligning them with the natural world, the protagonists further marginalize already marginalized women and separate them from culture.

Simultaneously, while the male protagonists align the caverns and cliffs of the Southwest with the feminine body, they evoke for themselves the sense of terror and perverse pleasure of a landscape not organized by a phallogentric center. Their feminization of the land elides women and nature, and based on this elision the male protagonists distance marginalized women even further from their spheres of culture.

To analyze the narrative marginalization of female characters in Cather’s male-driven novels, I use an ecofeminist interpretation of the feminist ethic of care. Carol Gilligan developed the feminist ethic of care model as an offshoot of psychologist



Lawrence Kohlberg's Freudian view of moral development. Gilligan's ethic of care opposes the pre-existing model, Kohlberg's ethic of justice, "a hierarchical range of 'stages' of moral reasoning, with the highest – stages five and six – being those where subjects made moral decisions based on abstract rules and universal principles, rather than particular personal relationships" (*The Aesthetics of Care* 1). This ethic of justice is one that both Professor St. Peter and Father Latour live by: St. Peter, in his academic commitment to the Spanish conquistadors, who themselves employ justice- and morality-based frameworks, and his grudging resignation at the end of the novel to his duty to support his family, and Latour, in his hierarchical management of his bishopric based on bureaucracy and religiously informed moral codes. In *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Gilligan troubled the previously dominant model of ethics by demonstrating the danger of holding all moral responses to one abstract standard. Yet when Gilligan formulated the idea of a feminine ethic of care based on relationships and emotional attachments to rival an individual, masculine ethic of justice, she fell into the essentialist trap of second wave feminist theory (1). This alignment of men with justice and women with care reifies the dualisms between men/reason/culture and women/emotion/nature that Val Plumwood dismantles in her ecofeminist critique of the master model (to be discussed shortly).

In her 2000 monograph *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Karen Warren outlines the history of the feminist ethic of care as it relates to ecofeminism. Warren notes that feminist ethics involves three basic commitments: "[1] to critique male bias in ethic whenever it occurs and [2] to develop ethics that are not male-biased. A feminist ethic also involves [3] articulation of values

(e.g., care) often lost or underplayed in mainstream ethics” (97). Warren’s articulation of feminist ethics, like Gilligan’s original ethic of care, is an oppositional model that ultimately reifies the existing system of privileging one gendered experience of ethics over another. Warren goes on to note how ecofeminist ethics differ from more traditional feminist ethics: “For ecofeminist ethicists, *how* a moral agent is in relationship to another – and not simply the nature of the agent or ‘other,’ or the rights, duties, and rules that apply to the agent or ‘other’ – is of central importance” (99, emphasis original).<sup>4</sup> The importance of “*how*” the agents (“agent,” as opposed to “subject,” connotes any live, active being) interact complicates the essentialism of a purely oppositional “justice versus care” feminist ethics. This question of “*how*” also points to the increased significance of context, the potential differences in an agent’s social, cultural, institutional, and environmental situations. Theories of feminist ethics of care continue to develop that seek to respond to critiques of essentialism, like Warren’s critique of Gilligan’s original model. A specifically ecofeminist ethic of care is particularly suitable for my literary analysis of the female characters’ roles within Cather’s novels and the recovery of traditionally underappreciated values they represent. An ecofeminist ethic of care considers a relationship-based ethic in terms of both human/human relationships and human/more-than-human relationships, complicating the original dualism of masculine/feminine ethics.

Josephine Donovan offers another approach to an ecofeminist ethic of care, applying it to animal ethics and in this context performing close readings of Cather’s

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<sup>4</sup> Warren ultimately advocates for a separate “care-sensitive ethics” as opposed to ethic of care to completely escape the oppositional nature that adopting an “ethic of care” implies, but her creation of a new “care-sensitive ethic” seems redundant given the extensive work already available on complicating the ethic of care.

fiction. At this point, much of the ecofeminist work regarding ethics of care concerns animal welfare as opposed to the environment more broadly.<sup>5</sup> I agree with Ursula Heise's critique of animal welfare and animal ethics. Heise critiques animal welfare discourse as "mak[ing] claims on [animals'] behalf by pointing to the many characteristic features and abilities they share with humans." She favors the commitment of environmentalist thought "to species rather than individuals, it seeks to protect species well beyond just animals, including plants, fungi, and microorganisms, and it aims ultimately at the preservation of complex ecosystems" (135). Heise argues that environmentalist thought is more concerned with a broad, complex array of connections that cannot be explained using human-centric displays of feeling, while animal welfare activists are motivated by an anthropocentric empathy with beings who are believed to suffer like humans. This distinction is significant, as ecofeminist ethics of care theory goes beyond arguing for animal welfare based on human responses to animal suffering. Though Donovan operates within an animal welfare/animal ethics/animal studies perspective, her work provides a necessary starting point for developing an ecofeminist ethic of care based on more complex ecosystems. In Cather's novels, such complex ecosystems, such as the caves and caverns of the Southwest, are feminized and cast in terms of care, or the lack thereof, because of the pervasive male/culture, woman/nature binary.

A crucial point of Donovan's animal ethics is the recognition of the moral significance of an agent deemed "Other." Donovan notes, "When the oppressed are conceived as being morally significant, hearing their voices is an imperative step in the liberation process because it necessarily counters the ideological system that rules them

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<sup>5</sup> Though Carol Adams and Lori Gruen's 2014 edited collection, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & the Earth* attempts to rectify this over-commitment.

insignificant, rendering them silent - that system being sexism in the case of women, speciesism in the case of animals” (“The Voice of Animals” 10). In *The Aesthetic of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals*, Donovan discusses a range of Cather’s works, including *Alexander’s Bridge*, *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours*, and *The Professor’s House*, but she particularly valorizes Cather’s first Nebraska novel, *O Pioneers!* and the ethic of care Ivar embodies in his connection to the horses and other animals (65-71). By incorporating Donovan’s framework as part of my own application of the ecofeminist ethic of care, I do not mean to imply that Cather treats the marginalized women in her Southwestern novels as animals. I do argue, however, that there is a parallel in the spinsters’ “moral significance” and the ethic of care they employ, and the care associated with the treatment of animals and animal caretakers. Donovan valorizes Ivar for the care-sensitive model he provides to Alexandra, but she also finds an ethic of care in *The Professor’s House* in “the idea that knowledge and art are not something discrete and strained off of everyday familial matter; rather, they are rooted in it, intertwined in a web of relationship with it; and infused with its local qualitative energies” (63). Donovan’s argument locates an ethic of care in the local and interrelated nature of St. Peters’ interactions with Augusta, his guiding consciousness. Yet I believe that there is something to be explored in the way in which Cather renders her spinsters almost “silent,” which denies them participation in what Donovan considers “an imperative step of the liberation process.”

Donovan’s commitment to recognizing spaces of silence complements Warren’s belief in the power of narrative to understanding and implementing an ethic of care:

Narrative can give voice to a felt sensitivity, an emotional disposition, or an attitude, too often lacking in traditional analytic ethical discourse – a sensitivity to conceiving of oneself as fundamentally being in relationships with others, including the nonhuman natural world. Narrative is a modality that *takes relationships seriously*. (Warren 103, emphasis original)

Donovan directs her analysis to the role of animals in American literature, and Warren develops a broad-scale explanation, analysis, and critique of ecofeminist philosophy writ large. I use insights from both, including their claims about narrative as a key modality for recovering the agency of others marginalized and silenced by the dominant culture, to explore the moments in Cather's novels when marginalized female characters use their voices. I argue that Cather's female characters embody an ethic of care in relation to both the human subjects of the novels and the natural world. The webs of relationships Cather represents rely on a female presence that mediates between the "masculine" world of cultural and the "feminine" world of the natural world, even as the male protagonists imbue the landscape with feminine characteristics.

In using an ecofeminist ethic of care framework, I choose a framework that relies on the tradition of feminist theory and its attendant complexities. While other theories that value emotions and relationships, such as affect theory, may also apply to Cather's novels, affect theory lacks the explicit engagement with feminist theory of ecofeminist ethics of care. As Carol Adams and Lori Gruen note in the Introduction to *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & the Earth*, affect theory evolved out of psychology and neuroscience and thus takes a more scientific approach than the cultural analysis-based approach of feminist ethics of care theory:

By attending to responsive bodies as sites of organized, non-intentional subjectivity, affect theory may prove particularly useful in understanding the agency of other animals and this is important for ecofeminists who are concerned about the dangers of anthropocentric projections of sameness onto others. But ecofeminists want to avoid the dualisms that appear in much of the writing of affect theorists who maintain distinct divisions between the systems of reason and emotion, intention and embodiment, cognition and affect. (3)

Adams and Gruen point to affect theory's reliance on dualisms as making it unsuitable to ecofeminist analyses. To apply an ethic of care framework in an ecofeminist analysis involves grappling with the dualisms present in any theoretical or cultural text, as opposed to using a theory that builds upon such oppositional systems without questioning them.

In my ecofeminist ethic of care analysis of Cather's novels, I must acknowledge the complexities of dualisms in ecofeminist theory. Ecofeminist theorist Val Plumwood formulated the "master model" to explain the interconnected systems of domination that operate in in the dualisms of male/female, culture/nature, reason/nature:

The framework of assumptions in which the human/nature contrast has been formed in the west is one not only of *feminine* connectedness with and passivity towards nature, but also and complementarily one of exclusion and domination of the sphere of nature by a white, largely male elite, which I shall call the master model. But the assumptions in the master model are not seen as such, because this model is taken for granted as simply a *human* model, while the feminine is seen as a deviation from it. Hence to simply repudiate the old tradition of feminine

connection with nature, and to put nothing in its place, usually amounts to the implicit endorsing of an alternative master model of the human, and of human relations to nature, and to female absorption into this model. (23, emphasis original)

Plumwood's explanation here of the domination of nature in the "master model" points to the weaknesses of a feminist ethic of care that simply parallels a masculine ethic of justice. If a feminist ethics of care uses the master's dualisms, it can be easily dismissed as irrational and Othered, because, as Plumwood argues, one of the master's main sources of power is the elision of master as rational and the Other (read: feminine, nature) as irrational. Constructed as the norm, the "master model" is considered the "*human* model."

Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) explores the many ways in which the master model monopolizes reason and colonizes social, cultural, and environmental institutions. Plumwood offers a comprehensive exploration of how mastery structures dualisms and normalizes them in order maintain the master's dominance and control. She identifies the following ways that the master model structures dualisms: [1] Backgrounding (denial); [2] Radical exclusion (hyperseparation); [3] Incorporation (relational definition); [4] Instrumentalism (objectification); and [5] Homogenization or stereotyping.<sup>6</sup> All of these structures are present in Cather's

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of these facets of the master model: (1) *Backgrounding (denial)*: By denying the way in which the master benefits from the other, the master must "insist on a strong hierarchy of activities, so that the denied areas are 'not worth' noticing" [48]. (2) *Radical exclusion (hyperseparation)*: "Dualistic construal of difference usually treats it as providing not merely a difference of degree within a sphere of overall similarity, but a difference in kind, even a bifurcation or division in reality between different orders of things" (50). (3) *Incorporation (relational definition)*: "The definition of the other in relation to the self as a lack or absence is a special case of incorporation, defining the other only in relation to the self, or the self's needs and desires" (52). (4) *Instrumentalism (objectification)*: "Those on the lower side of the dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or centre, that they

Southwestern novels, in which the positioning of spinsters on the narrative margins benefits the male protagonists, ensuring their centeredness and domination of the narrative. I use Plumwood's model in conjunction with the ecofeminist ethic of care to explore the ways in which the spinsters operate on these narrative margins and to complicate the ethic of care as it works within the confines of Plumwood's master model. For although Plumwood offers her master model as a way to recognize the consequences of a dualistic system, she does argue that women's stories of care potentially push back against harmful dualisms: "Much inspiration for new, less destructive guiding stories can be drawn from sources other than the master, from subordinated and ignored parts of western culture, such as women's stories of care" (196). Plumwood's model provides an intersectional ecofeminist framework that accounts for the multifaceted ways in which dominant culture casts women, the natural world, and the connections between the two as subordinate and opposed to reason. Though I use Plumwood's model to illuminate the ways in which the male protagonists marginalize the female characters, Plumwood's model implicitly critiques the women/nature connection the male protagonists employ in their descriptions that feminize and sexualize the landscape.

Despite Plumwood's critique of the harmful effects of describing women as innately or closely connected to the natural world, many readings of ecofeminist ethics of care rely on the idea of motherhood, of the life-giving power of the female body, and the nurturing association between women and "Mother Earth." The celebration of the

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are conceived as his instruments, a means to his ends... This involves setting up a moral dualism, where the underside is not part of the sphere to be considered morally, but is either judged by a separate instrumental standard (as in the sexual double standard) or seen as outside morality altogether" (53). (5) *Homogenization or stereotyping*: "The dominated class must appear suitably homogeneous if it is to be able to conform to and confirm its 'nature'" (53).



connection between the feminine and the natural world, which relies on a dualism consistently used to dominate both women and the natural world, is controversial in ecofeminist theory. This line of thinking is particularly harmful if used to advocate for a maternal ecofeminist ethic of care. Lori Swanson advocates for a specifically feminine experience of ecofeminist ethics, rooted in her understanding of Nel Noddings' ethics of care, which, Swanson notes, "emanates from the potential caring bond between a mother and child" (86). Swanson crafts her own ecofeminist ethic of care using Nodding's ethic as a base, but Swanson insists, "I recognize the intersecting patterns of oppression and yearn to articulate an ecofeminist stance that elevates the *feminine* from the mire of dualistic thinking that has resulted in a selective logic of domination, privileging some, quashing others" (90, emphasis original<sup>7</sup>). Swanson demonstrates the difficulties of articulating an ecofeminist ethic of care without replicating gender essentialism.

Additionally, ecofeminists are still – like feminists more broadly – negotiating how to articulate such a multi-faceted theory underneath a single umbrella term without losing coherence or falling into essentialist traps. Does Swanson, who both advocates for a theory that "transcends gender at the same time that it acknowledges and celebrates gender" and potentially reifies gender dualisms in asserting that "it is practical to acknowledge and celebrate the *feminine* both in traditional meanings and through a contemporary understanding of *feminine* as characteristics that are the sole domain of women" properly belong under the ecofeminist umbrella (96, 99)? Ecofeminist theorists must tread carefully in advocating a reclamation of the feminine connection to the natural world, as the "traditional meanings" that Swanson advocates are the very meanings Plumwood reads as harmful cornerstones of the dominant master model used to denigrate

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<sup>7</sup> Swanson italicizes the word "feminine" throughout her article.

and other women, the feminine, and the natural world as opposed to reason. An ecofeminist ethic of care must not rely on assumptions and constructions of “traditional meanings” of femininity – which trap women in marginalized subject positions and the continued attempt to dominate, colonize, and exploit the natural world. Anyone who invokes the “traditional meanings” of femininity must grapple with the ways that the dominant master model can weaponize this constructed tradition to harm women, the land, non-binary individuals, and the more-than-human world.

In terms of a literary application of the ecofeminist ethic of care, Plumwood’s master model, as well as Warren and Donovan’s focus on narrative and intentional silences, provides theoretical precedent and weight to my analysis of the marginalized women in Cather’s Southwestern novels. By highlighting the ways in which the spinster figures, Augusta and Sada, claim power and voice, I call attention to moments that rupture the master model.

Considering the literary and cultural history of the spinster figure, Sarah Ensor analyzes the role of reproductive futurity in what she calls “spinster ecologies.” Spinsters, Ensor argues, “practic[e] an avuncular form of stewardship, tending to the future without contributing directly to it” (409). Spinsters like Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Jewett’s fictional characters are environmental stewards, and therefore arguably practice an ecofeminist ethics of care. Ensor notes:

Contemporary environmentalism...tends to be future-oriented, its rhetoric predicated on matters of inheritance and procreation alike... By redefining where and how we see the future, the spinster also alters our sense of how we might best

move toward it, no longer permitting us to understand the present and future as mutually delimiting terms. (409, 410)

Significantly, Ensor points to the idea of “future,” of time, as crucial to the spinster’s role, whereas I consider where spinster voices emanate from and the amount of narrative space their voices occupy in novels otherwise supporting the dominant understanding of the nature/culture divide. Carson and Jewett do not mask or minimize the role of women in their works. Carson’s *Silent Spring* relies heavily on anecdotes concerning housewives, and she did not hide her own identity as a spinster in the public sphere. Jewett’s fiction, as Ensor argues, centers spinsters and other female characters. The spinsters are not at the center of Cather’s novels. Instead, the cultured male protagonists of her Southwestern novels acknowledge, in small moments, their dependence on the spinsters in their lives. Nevertheless, the spinsters play an important – if not a central – role in *The Professor’s House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

The most useful points for my analysis are the following questions Ensor raises: What if the queer relationship to futurity is intransitive not because of how it refuses but rather because of how it facilitates a notion of the future (and of futurity) outside the realm of objects, outside the push and pull of acceptance or refusal, both outside and beyond our capacity to control? Perhaps the question is not the future, yes or no, but the future, which and whose, where and when and how. (414)

Ensor’s suggestion that spinsters operate beyond the complementary forces of heteronormativity and anthropocentrism is crucial to the idea of spinsters embodying an

agency historically denied to them. In their noncompliance with institutionalized forces that valorize reproductive futurity, spinsters occupy the margins of the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. The spinster's ability to exist on the margins testifies to her agency necessary to reject a system that would reduce her body to the biological ability to reproduce. This rejection, this "refusal" that Ensor points to, points us towards what escapes the control of the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and the master model, namely the spinster's voice on the margins of Cather's male-dominated narratives.

Ensor considers an ecofeminist ethic of care only insofar as care relies on proximity and closeness and therefore diverges from her focus on a spinster's province of "affirmative dispassion or sincere indirectness" (426).<sup>8</sup> While Augusta and Sada are, at certain moments, indirect or dispassionate, they function differently than Ensor's model of the spinster suggests. An ecofeminist ethic of care model accounts for the marginalization of Cather's spinsters, provides the framework to identify the dualisms at work, affirms the importance of narrative in ecofeminist theory, and enables an analysis of the way Cather uses female figures to connect her male protagonists to a wider sense of the more-than-human world. If we fail to examine critically Cather's narrative marginalization of characters like Augusta and Sada, we allow the dominant narrative of the brooding male protagonists Professor St. Peter and Father Latour to go unchallenged.

**"The Taste of Bitter Herbs": Bodily Correctives in *The Professor's House***

Augusta, St. Peter's spinster seamstress, is introduced early in *The Professor's House* as "the sewing-woman, niece of [Professor St. Peter's] old landlord, a reliable,

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<sup>8</sup> Ensor notes this in her discussion of Jewett's characters, in regards to Ursula Heise's mention of ethics of care as an example of the environmentalist perspective's "associat[ion] with spatial closeness" (Heise, qtd. Ensor 426).

methodical spinster, a German Catholic and very devout” (8). Cather immediately characterizes Augusta by her steady presence, her spinster identity, and her religion. The second female character to be mentioned in the novel, Augusta is the first character besides St. Peter to be described at length.<sup>9</sup> That Augusta takes such precedence in the beginning portion of the section titled “The Family” suggests her importance to St. Peter, regardless of her standing with the rest of the family. At the same time, Cather downplays her importance to St. Peter, in a moment of master model Backgrounding. Cather introduces Augusta, who then banters with Professor St. Peter, and then her presence and work with the dressmaking forms serve as a catalyst for one of St. Peter’s many reveries.

St. Peter’s attic space – a space of both intellectual and domestic work – is the setting for Augusta and St. Peter’s “banter.” The attic is also St. Peter’s haven from the pressures of his family and his job in academia. He works on his scholarship while coexisting with Augusta’s dressmaking forms, which remind him both of Augusta’s calming influence and of the materialistic pressures his daughters and wife put upon him. Augusta rarely appears in the novel outside of the space of St. Peter’s houses, and, moreover, rarely appears outside of the space of the attic study. Augusta and the Professor converse about her work for other families, and the Professor notes Augusta’s departures and entrances from the attic, but Augusta appears only once outside the attic workspace – the Professor meets her by chance on the street as she is on her way home from Mass (82). Cather thus firmly roots Augusta within interior domestic space, removed from any larger landscape or natural environment. Augusta’s exchanges with the Professor in the attic occupy less narrative space than the Professor’s lengthy

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<sup>9</sup> Augusta’s introduction follows a quick mention of the Professor’s youngest daughter, Kathleen, who is mentioned due to her painting of a watercolor of St. Peter that Cather uses to provide a more detailed description of the Professor.

reflections, but their exchanges are nevertheless crucial to the Professor's wellbeing. This double confinement of Augusta to the attic and to dialogue with the professor in that space marginalizes Augusta in Cather's narrative.<sup>10</sup>

St. Peter, in line with Ensor's analysis of the spinster figure in relation to reproductive futurity, mirrors dominant attitudes when he cannot imagine that Augusta imagined a future for herself:

“Yes, Professor. When I first came to sew for Mrs. St. Peter, I never thought I should grow grey in her service.” He started. What other future could Augusta possibly have expected? This disclosure amazed him. (14)

Here, St. Peter's confusion and amazement that Augusta may have plans outside his own understanding of her life resonates with dominant narratives of spinsters. Following the revelation that Augusta has (or had) plans of her own, St. Peter reflects on her bodily presence and how Augusta's large and asexual body primes her for spinsterhood:

He had often wondered how she managed to sew with hands that folded and unfolded as rigidly as umbrellas – no light French touch about Augusta; when she sewed on a bow, it stayed there. She herself was tall, large-boned, flat and stiff, with a plain, solid face, and brown eyes not destitute of fun. As she knelt by the couch, sorting her patterns, he stood beside her, his hand on the lid, though it would have stayed up unsupported. Her last remark had troubled him. (14)

St Peter repeatedly perceives Augusta as large and heavy, making her the opposite of St. Peter's married adult daughters Rosamond and Kathleen, who embody slim ideals of feminine beauty. Still at this point in the novel – early in book one, “The Family” – the

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<sup>10</sup> Relative marginalization – she receives more direct narrative attention than Mother Eve, at least. See footnote 12 for details.

reader has yet to encounter any of the St. Peter women, let alone any another character, in as much detail as Augusta. Augusta is large, but not threatening, and is as rigid as, and yet less electric than, that of the black dress form with which she works. As Professor St. Peter reflects on her size, he stands above her, in a pose of unnecessary power. He looms, observing Augusta in her sewing-woman duties, as she kneels at his feet but not at his mercy, as her own conceptions of her future “disturb” his perception of her.

Though St. Peter thinks of Augusta as an awkward, overlarge woman, we see her—always through his eyes—mainly while she is working at the domestic tasks of sewing and organizing. Their conversation also focuses on the physical when St. Peter and Augusta discuss the new streaks of grey in Augusta’s hair – “I think it’s rather nice, that grey wave on each side. Gives it character. You’ll never need any of this false hair that’s in all the shop windows,” says St. Peter – before Augusta brings up her church (14). Continuing St. Peter’s discussion of false hair, Augusta mentions that her priest discussed the popularity of false hair in a recent sermon after seeing false hair in a female parishioner’s home. The Professor reacts strongly:

“Goodness gracious, Augusta! What business has a priest going to see a woman in the room where she takes off these ornaments – or to see her without them?”

Augusta grew red, and tried to look angry, but her laugh narrowly missed being a giggle. “He goes to give them the Sacrament, of course,

Professor!” (15)

In this conversation, the spiritual and sexual collide in a way that outrages St. Peter, who is half-mocking, half-shocked. He cannot imagine a proper occasion for a Catholic priest – a celibate man of God – to view a woman in a state of undress, especially “pious

women” like Augusta, whom he relegates to the margins, not as the center of man’s gaze or in the center of a narrative. Significantly, the priest focuses his gaze on spinster woman of his congregation only in the moment before her death. While St. Peter may recognize Augusta’s past ambitions for a different life and her experiences beyond the walls of his attic, he still cannot conceptualize himself or any other man turning his gaze on her in such an intimate manner as the priest does to the dying spinster woman and will do to Augusta in time.

Augusta’s stories disrupt St. Peter’s worldview. He cannot fathom the idea of her (1) having a future of her own and (2) participating in a church that allows spiritual women’s bodies to be viewed by the male gaze. As a man of letters, St. Peter is concerned primarily with women associated with culture rather than the church. At this moment, St. Peter’s perspective aligns with Ensor’s observations regarding the stagnancy of the spinster narrative: “[A woman] becomes a spinster only once it has been determined that she likely has no marriageable future; when that happens, however, she also comes to have no past—or at least no past in which a future, or the desire for one, ever existed” (414). St. Peter’s surprise at Augusta’s reflections about her past desires and his shock at the priest’s gaze on asexualized spinster women like herself match the typical cultural response to disruptions of the spinster narrative. Yet St. Peter’s reaction does not disturb Augusta – in fact, quite the opposite. Augusta faces the Professor’s “contrary” attitude with an almost-giggle, teetering on the edge of girlish emotion seemingly at odds with her grey hair and large, asexual, past-prime body (15).

Before Augusta can trouble the Professor’s worldview any further in this early interaction, she departs, after one last admonition from the Professor:



“You’ll never convert me back to the religion of my fathers now, if you’re going to sew in the new house and I’m going to work on here. Who is ever to remind me when it’s All Souls’ day, or Ember day, or Maundy Thursday, or anything?”...

How much she reminded him of, to be sure! (15)

Professor St. Peter clarifies his need for Augusta here and makes explicit his reasons and motivations for keeping her presence alive in his attic. He distances himself from discussions of her body, her future, her hair, and the potential for her body to be viewed by those in her church by firmly rooting her within her religion. Even though the Professor and Augusta’s first conversation is bantering and lighthearted, he makes it clear that her role is to provide domestic and spiritual care. She is to remind him of holy days of obligation, to stir his nostalgia for days gone by, as “she had been most at the house in the days when his daughters were little girls and needed so many clean frocks” (15-16). Coincidentally, “It was in those very years that he was beginning to do his great work; when the desire to do it... years when he had had the courage to say to himself: ‘I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing!’” (16). Augusta’s presence, which he views as a sort of spiritual offering, comforts him and enables him to accomplish his greatest creative feats. In this way, Augusta’s presence and her role as a spiritual token enables the Professor’s academic progress and deepens his commitment to his own kind of spirituality.<sup>11</sup>

Very few critics have given Augusta much critical attention. They have examined her role as the bearer of Catholic knowledge concerning the Magnificat, “a piece of female writing celebrating pregnancy without having sex with a man” (Goldberg 478); as

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<sup>11</sup> St. Peter states in his classroom lecture: “Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.” (55)

a “unifying figure... who moves easily between the two disparate [masculine and feminine] worlds of the novel” (Baker 264); and as a “heavy-handed,” “simplified version of femininity” (Gradisek 29). These critics reify Augusta’s role as a stereotypical spinster sewing woman without attending Cather’s positioning of her within the novel and simplify the different embodiments of femininity in the novel that Augusta’s character complicates. Certainly, Augusta provides domestic service, which connects to the ethic of care and makes her conductor of sorts between St. Peter and his wife and daughters: she makes clothes in the same attic creative space as St. Peter makes the family’s livelihood, and her presence alongside him reminds him of so many of his triumphs. Through the traditionally feminine domestic work of dressmaking and caretaking she brings St. Peter together with his female family members, although this caretaking is not often critically considered in terms of women’s labor or feminist ethics.

Augusta’s stereotypical function in the first section upholds an ethic of care extolling traditionally feminine, domestic values. Augusta’s spinsterhood complicates this association between Augusta and domestic values: she is rooted in the domestic despite the lack of her own family to motivate her domesticity. She and the Professor interact, as discussed above, primarily in banter regarding her domestic role and her religion. Yet in the last section of the novel, “The Professor,” the ecofeminist facets of Augusta’s ethic of care emerge more clearly. Augusta becomes more than an easily dismissed or Backgrounded<sup>12</sup> sewing-woman. Augusta rescues the Professor from his study after he nearly asphyxiates, using her overlarge body to drag him from the gas-filled attic. The Professor reflects on her actions:

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<sup>12</sup> I capitalize the term here to signal my use of Plumwood’s definition of the term in her master model.

[St. Peter] lay watching her – regarding her in her humankind, as if after a definite absence from the world of men and women. If he had thought of Augusta sooner, he would have got up from the couch sooner. Her image would have at once suggested the proper action. Augusta, he reflected, had always been a corrective, a remedial influence... Very often she gave him some wise observation or discreet comment to begin the day with. She wasn't at all afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true, and though he used to wince under them, he hurried off with the feeling that they were good for him, that he didn't had to hear such sayings half often enough. (255-256)

Significantly, this passage comes immediately before St. Peter thinks to himself that Augusta is like “the taste of bitter herbs.” In this passage, St. Peter Homogenizes Augusta, aligning her not with sewing-women, not with his female family members, but in “her humankind.” That he aligns her with the universal “human” as opposed either end of “the world of men and women” is significant, as Augusta becomes a universal, asexual standard of human experience. Yet this instance of Homogenization differs from Plumwood’s model in that St. Peter aligns Augusta with a genderless, sexless “humankind,” rather than casting her as a gendered Other. Instead, he masks her gender to elevate her in his own – and the reader’s – esteem. Though he goes on to think of her domestic duties, he does so to make her humble, to align her with another stereotype of dependency. His thoughts operate in accordance with Plumwood’s Incorporation (relational definition) stage of dualism: “The definition of the other in relation to the self as a lack or absence is a special case of incorporation, defining the other only in relation to the self, or the self’s needs and desires” (52). Augusta is not an autonomous being

here. Instead, St. Peter paints her as his “corrective” – not a subject, not an agent, but a kind of supplement for his own lack – of groundedness, of connection to “humankind.”

Augusta’s rescue of St. Peter echoes their conversation in Part I in which she tells St. Peter of her Catholic priest’s visits to administer the last rites to other parish spinsters. St. Peter knows that Augusta is often asked to be present at the deathbeds of other parishioners to help usher them on – he reflects on this role after she rescues him. Augusta is inactive in these bedside moments, as she will be inactive when the time comes for the priest to turn his gaze upon her, to administer her own last rites. By diverging from this passive, inactive role by physically rescuing St. Peter from asphyxiation, Augusta robs him of his own reception of the sacrament of the last rites. That Augusta assumes this physical and life-saving power despite her association with death deviates from St. Peter’s understanding of her as a wallflower who sits and waits for death to capture her fellow parishioners, even as she foreshadows her own death with her mention of the priest’s gaze and the priest’s bestowal of the last rites upon her. Yet here, she actively works to save St. Peter’s life and thus delays the moment when the priest’s gaze would rest upon him. In this way, Augusta’s ethic of care is simultaneously passive and active, as she is capable of providing a sustaining, comforting presence for the dying, yet she is also capable of physically wresting St. Peter from death in a more active, demanding display of care.

St. Peter reflects on Augusta after his brush with death, as he acknowledges that he prefers Augusta’s company over that of any other person, “Seasoned and sound and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter-of-factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal. He even felt a sense of obligation toward her, instinctive, escaping

definition, but real. And when you admitted that a thing was real, that was enough – now” (257). Augusta’s ethic of care – her history of domestic help with the St. Peters, her rescue of St. Peter – is cast in terms of her relation to the natural world. St. Peter connects Augusta’s goodness to her being “on the solid earth” – she is “down-to-earth” but also humble, qualities evoking of the taste of “bitter herbs” with which he earlier associated her. She is not oversweet or superficial, like his wife and daughters. Instead, he connects the earth as giving necessary sustenance. Augusta’s ecofeminist ethic of care does not celebrate a uniquely feminine connection to the natural world, nor does she represent environmental stewardship, as Josephine Donovan argues Ivar and Alexandra do in *O Pioneers!*. Instead, Augusta’s ecofeminist ethic of care is a more basic and earthy, emerging almost in spite of her womanhood and spinsterhood.

As Anne Baker argues, Godfrey’s crucial reflection that Augusta is like “the taste of bitter herbs” evokes the history of the Jewish people in the Old Testament (256):

It is important not to overlook the reference to bitter herbs, the food the Jews ate while in captivity in Egypt, for the allusion conveys just how much the professor will suffer as he learns “to live without delight.” (264)

Professor St. Peter reflects, “Augusta was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from... She hadn’t any sentimentality that comes from a fear of dying. She talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy March, or any of the sadnesses of nature” (256). Baker locates a dark historical and spiritual significance in the allusion to bitter herbs, a kind of significance with which the Professor already imbues Augusta, as Jonathan Goldberg’s argues in his analysis of the Professor’s questioning of Augusta regarding the Magnificat. These two moments

considered together – the Professor’s connecting Augusta to a specific religious text and to a historically spiritual herb – suggest that he finds a kind of localized, nature-based contentment in Augusta, not just a spiritual comfort. Even as the bitter herbs evoke a broad historical and spiritual meaning, they are also small, local, and simple. This more localized experience of the natural world (by proxy) offers a subtle, marginalized comfort easily overlooked in a novel featuring grand, climactic revelations situated in the dramatic landscapes of the Southwest in “Tom Outland’s Story.”

If Augusta connects St. Peter to a localized, grounded, earthy natural world, then Mother Eve connects the male protagonists of “Tom Outland’s Story” with a more grandiose, large-scale experience of Nature. Desire drives Cather scholarship on Mother Eve – the desires that the characters project onto her, but also those of the critics, who maneuver Mother Eve to their desired ends. John N. Swift gives a brief summary of some of the most noted analyses of Mother Eve:

Seen through such an interpretive lens [informed by Freud’s Oedipus and Irigaray’s desire] (even without the colorful mythology of psychoanalysis), and with irresistible encouragement from her biblically charged name, Mother Eve tends to assume for her readers any number of weighty symbolic costumes: as the spiritual ur-mother suggested by her name (Harrell); as a sometimes fearsome reminder of matriarchal power (Schwind); as a general figure of irretrievable maternal wholeness (Swift); or as a type of female authorial creativity (Lindemann)... To discover Mother Eve inevitably seems to involve clothing her in significant desirous allegory. (14)

Mother Eve's mystique lures scholars to claim for her a driving role in Tom's narrative.

As Amanda Gradisek notes:

One wonders how any living, breathing woman could live up to Mother Eve, and the comparison between Tom's all-male frontier family to St. Peter's hyper-feminized family advances a simplistic, binary understanding of feminine identity. Modern women, like Rosamond and Lillian, are a far cry from the idealized Mother Eve before her fall off the cliff city. (28-29)

The scholarship on Mother Eve mirrors her treatment by characters in the novel – she is a floating signifier a multitude of feminine myth that can be mapped onto her silent, lifeless, sexualized body. The question becomes, what do we do with a figure already imbued – both within and beyond the novel – with so much meaning? We might consider not only what the characters project onto Mother Eve, but how these projections and implications manipulate her beyond her original context in the Eagle's Nest of Cliff City. Though Mother Eve is central to Tom's understanding of himself as part of a larger American lineage, Tom only briefly describes her body – we as readers are privy to Tom's account of his discovery of her, the history Father Duchene projects onto her, and to Tom's reflections on her importance after he learns that Roddy sells her to the German collector but before Roddy tells him that her remains fell into the canyon. Altogether, Mother Eve take up less narrative space than Augusta.<sup>13</sup> So why have scholars devoted so much attention to the evocative, enigmatic Mother Eve while being seemingly content to reify Augusta's narrative marginalization?

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<sup>13</sup> There are mentions of Augusta in twenty pages of the novel compared to Mother Eve's five (8-16, 82-85, 144, 251, 253-257; 191, 200-201, 221 respectively).

The scholarship on Mother Eve does illuminate Cather's treatment of gendered bodies in *The Professor's House*. As the starkest example in the novel of female heterosexuality labeled as deviant, critics use Mother Eve in analyses of St. Peter's joyless, sexless middle-age body, Rosamond and Kathleen's youthful infatuation with Tom, and – most compellingly – Tom and Roddy's establishment of an alternative, male-centered family model on Blue Mesa. Judith Fetterley writes,

In *The Professor's House*, then, Cather accords cultural meaning to the male body and permits no celebration of the female body and its desires. Indeed that desire... appears here in the figure of Mother Eve, the dead woman whose mouth still screams through all these years and whose face still keeps its look of terrible agony... Perhaps Tom discovers his own body in Cliff City, but Tom's experience is out of reach of St. Peter. (231)

Fetterley uses Mother Eve as a means to her end discussing female creativity and desire in the novel. Mother Eve's body serves as the novel's representative female because she is all body and only body. A preserved corpse, she has no voice or life and cannot speak back to the narrative about her body, her context, and her history. As a result, male characters embellish her history or idealize her as a source of colonized national origin.

Cather positions both Mother Eve and Augusta as secondary figures in the larger scheme of the male protagonists' stories, but despite their narrative marginalization these sidelined feminine figures are crucial to the colonizing effort of establishing an origin story, or a general American "humankind." Reading Mother Eve with an ecofeminist lens allows for an analysis of her body in the context of the natural world within which she is enmeshed, pushing back against the cultural appropriation of her practiced by Tom



Outland, the Cliff City men and the allegorical projections of meanings of desire and femininity by critics.<sup>14</sup> Karen Warren's ecofeminist philosophy provides a way to understand the ways Mother Eve becomes an Instrumentalised and objectified tool in the hands of male characters who marginalize her even as they use her to advance their masculine, individualist, endeavors and contribute to a dominant nationalist narrative.

Tom introduces Mother Eve into his story just after he describes Cliff City using gendered language. Cather's description of this landscape in Tom's voice crucially frames the characters's encounters with Mother Eve. From the outset, Tom personifies the landscape:

The mesa was our only neighbor, and the closer we got to it, the more tantalizing it was. It was no longer a blue, featureless lump, as it had been from a distance. Its sky-line was like the profile of a big beast lying down; the head to the north, higher than the flanks around which the river curved. (170)

Tom sees the mesa as an animate landscape. His description of the mesa as a powerful, as "beast" is not gendered, but he feminizes the provocative flanks and curved bodies of water, implying a romantic allure. As Tom notes, "No wonder the thing bothered us and tempted us; it was always before us, and was always changing" (171). Tom continues:

The lightning would play round it [the mesa] and jab into it so that we were always expecting it would fire the brush. I've never heard thunder so loud as it was there. The cliffs threw it back at us, and we thought the mesa itself, though it seemed so solid, must be full of deep canyons and caverns, to account for the prolonged growl and rumble that followed every crash of thunder. (171-172)

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<sup>14</sup> John Swift and Jean Schwind are careful to foreground Mother Eve's historical and cultural prototypes to avoid this kind of appropriation.

Here, Tom's description becomes increasingly gendered, with penetrable, and thus feminized, caverns and caves hiding inside the deceptive "beast"-like solidity of the mesa. The mesa thus evolves from an ambiguous bestial mass to a feminized space in less than a page. Cather's description of the landscape upholds the conventional gendering of the natural world as feminine even as Mother Eve further imbues the space with gendered significance.

The two distinct landmarks of Cliff City, the central tower and the Eagle's Nest, extend the land's gendered body. The central tower is a phallic landmark at its center while the Eagle's Nest is feminized, hidden away. The tower is the one feature of the City that deviates from the feminized natural world surrounding it:

It was beautifully proportioned, that tower, swelling out to a larger girth a little above the base, then growing slender again. There was something symmetrical and powerful about the swell of the masonry. The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something. It was red in colour, even on that grey day... It was more like a sculpture than anything else. I knew at once that I had come upon the city of some extinct civilization, hidden away in this inaccessible mesa for centuries... (180)

Tom devotes a page to lovingly describing this phallic object, which for him testifies to the artistry and creative force of the Cliff City dwellers; that is, he ties act of creation here to a manifestation of phallic power.

Tom emphasizes the artistry and organization of the Cliff City dwellers throughout, yet it is the tower, the symbol of man's presence on the mesa, that "made them [the other dwellings and structures] mean something." Merrill Maguire Skaggs cites

this statement in her reading of gendered landscapes of *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Ian Bell proposes that Tom's fascination with the tower points to an "anthropomorphic naturalism" in which objects can express stories and histories. Specifically, Tom seeks a "masculine principle of order" to validate his androcentric perspective in a feminized space (28, 23). Josephine Donovan reads the artistry of the natural world in *The Professor's House* as evidence of an "aesthetic of care":

Under an aesthetics of care, then, while art inevitably modifies the natural environment, as in a garden, a quilt, Indian pottery, it does so by reworking the natural material in such a way as to preserve or enhance its inherent character or value, its local web of relations, and, insofar as possible, without harming the natural material or context. (*Aesthetics of Care* 62)

Donovan reads the introduction of human creativity to the natural landscape – which is evident in the organization of the Cliff City architecturally – as evidence of the care humans take in working with the natural world, as opposed to exploiting or dominating it. Harm or violence only enter the Cliff City and its natural surroundings with the Euro-American explorers, who deem the deceased inhabitants and ancient pottery as theirs by right. In a landscape that he sees as feminine, Tom seeks male validation in the ancient City to give "order" by providing a proper frame for the multiple feminized forms surrounding him.

Unsurprisingly, Cather contributes to the tradition of associating the landscape with femininity and culture with masculinity as she did in her earlier novels associating strong female characters with the natural world. Yet in *The Professor's House*, the sexualized and gendered landscape, with its penetrable caves, and the Cliff City, with its

phallic tower, establish a sexualized space for the mysterious Mother Eve, on whom the men project a scandalous sexual history that participates in an erotophobia at odds with the very sexualized space where her body is secreted. As Greta Gaard notes in her foundational text, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism”:

Colonization becomes an act of nationalist self asserting identity and definition over and against the other – culture against nature, masculine over and against feminine, reason over and against the erotic. (131)

Tom, Roddy, and Henry unquestionably enact a colonial re-definition of Mother Eve’s history and that of Cliff City as a whole. But Gaard suggests that this masculine, colonial, nationalist endeavor is tied to a desire for similar control over the erotic. Gaard associates the erotic with the feminine as it opposes reason and rationality, traits Plumwood also traces to a masculine tradition. Queer readings of Tom and Roddy and Tom and Professor St. Peter have been important, but they potentially Other the hyper-heterosexual Mother Eve, making her a foil to the male bonds developed on the Mesa.

Only after Tom encounters the central tower and Tom, Roddy, and Henry, have established their all-male home does Cather introduce Mother Eve. The men only discover Mother Eve’s female presence after they invade and penetrate the caverns and houses of the mesa. Tom and the others find Mother Eve in the Eagle’s Nest, away from the central phallic tower. By naming it the “Eagle’s Nest” the male explorers associate it with strength and nurture. They have no historical justification for this name, and it proves misleading, as Mother Eve, rather than being a strong and nurturing mother, is the object of male violence. Tom describes the discovery of Mother Eve:

At last we came upon one of the original inhabitants – not a skeleton, but a dried human body, a woman... We thought she had been murdered; there was a great wound in her side, the ribs stuck out through the dried flesh. Her mouth was open as if she were screaming, and her face, through all those years, had kept a look of terrible agony. Part of the nose was gone, but she had plenty of teeth, not one missing, and a great deal of coarse black hair... Henry named her Mother Eve, and we called her that. (191-192)

To complete their all-male household, the explorers discover a maternal placeholder. The only female figure on the mesa, Mother Eve has long been silent, even though her prominently described teeth remain intact, emphasizing her mouth as the vehicle for her frozen silent scream and the voice she is denied. As a placeholder for the absent feminine presence, Mother Eve, even though she is dead, completes the mesa's family structure, much like Augusta in the first section, "The Family." Furthermore, as the only feminine presence in the male-dominated household of the explorers, Mother Eve demonstrates the supposed fate of women in an erotophobic, master model culture.

The men construct Mother Eve's identity, assigning her a name and history. Interpreting her corpse, Father Duchene states: "'I seem to smell,' he said slyly, 'a personal tragedy... Perhaps her husband thought it worth while to return unannounced from the farms some night, and found her in improper company... In primitive society the husband is allowed to punish an unfaithful wife with death'" (201). Tom, St. Peter, and even, to an extent, Augusta can tell their own stories, but Father Duchene's narrative takes the place of the story Mother Eve herself cannot tell. Mother Eve's silent scream serves as a reminder of her inability to speak back to the male construction of her story or

the entire history of the mesa's inhabitants as the male explorers tell it. Tellingly, Tom leaves his journal of his findings on the mesa in the Eagle's Nest, symbolically replacing Mother Eve's corpse with his own narrative of her existence. Cather enables the male characters of *The Professor's House* to narrate their own stories, giving particular attention to the way in which the male characters can craft their stories through writing, as St. Peter authors his eight-volume history of the conquistadores and Tom both records his findings in his journal and tells his story orally to St. Peter. Male characters frame Mother Eve's feminine story, much as they describe the feminized natural world.

The men on the mesa use Mother Eve's corpse to define their own "Americanness"— she is a prop in an origin story that they feel they have been denied. In using her as a prop in this origin story, the men erase her personal narrative and instead impose a culturally constructed understanding of her history in order to soothe their Modern anxieties about the nature of American identity. After he learns that Roddy sold the the artifacts from the mesa, Tom tells him how important Mother Eve is to his sense of identity (only after the following impassioned speech does he learn that Mother Eve was not, in the end, a collectible commodity because her remains fell into the bottom of the canyon as Fechtig, the German collector, was attempting to remove them):

I never thought of selling them [the Cliff City artifacts] because they weren't mine to sell – nor yours! They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from... I'd as soon have sold my own grandmother as Mother Eve – I'd have sold any living woman first. (219, 221)

Though Tom here claims that the objects and figures on the mesa belong to a more general, American past, he later claims the mesa as a “possession” and expresses “filial piety” towards the place (226-227). Through the idea that he is descended from Mother Eve (she is like his grandmother), Tom claims a universalized American identity by inserting himself into the otherwise unrecorded space of history—he simultaneously claims possession of and erases a marginalized identity to define a broader “Americanness.” In voicing his feelings for Mother Eve and the Cliff City artifacts, Tom potentially voices his own version of an ecofeminist ethic of care. However, Tom’s commitment to Mother Eve, though based in care, relations, and “filial piety,” is not an ethic of care because, to draw on Plumwood’s model, he instrumentalizes her, making her a means to his own ends. Mother Eve, though ascribed a history and imbued with sexually deviant morals and mystique, still offers the orphaned Tom a connection to a more genuine American identity – she is the means by which he can define himself.

Cather’s positioning of Mother Eve is more complex than her positioning of Augusta because Mother Eve’s story gains layers as the novel continues. First, Tom and Roddy come across her body, then Father Duchene gives her a history, then Roddy sells her with the artifacts and Tom responds by imbuing her with meaning, and, finally, readers encounter these exchanges through “Tom Outland’s Story,” the inset tale in the middle of the novel’s frame structure, which is presumably Tom’s oral history of his journeys as told to St. Peter years in the past. With each narrative layer, Cather distances the reader from the material body of Mother Eve’s, making her body secondary to the abstract, mythic, and symbolic potential. The marginalization of Mother Eve – or whoever Mother Eve was before the men rechristen her “Mother Eve” – builds with each

remove from her lived experience, her existence muddled by the stories that the characters, Cather, and critics project onto her. But what are the consequences of this marginalization for her meaning in the novel? Augusta is nowhere near as marginalized as Mother Eve, and Cather gives Augusta a voice – although that voice comes to readers subjected by Professor St. Peter’s internal commentary – but still critics overlook Augusta’s role. Mother Eve, in her voicelessness, in her limited presence in the novel, becomes a floating signifier to be defined at will, a necessary, enigmatic feminine presence onto which the men of the novel can project their desires.

Augusta represents “the bloomless side of life that [St. Peter] had always run away from,” while Mother Eve is the destination to which the male characters turn to escape the reality Augusta represents. Professor St. Peter seeks refuge from the bloomless reality Augusta represents in his memories of Tom’s story of Westward expansion and Mother Eve’s mythic symbolism (256). Yet St. Peter acknowledges that “when he had to face it [this bloomless reality], he found that it wasn’t altogether repugnant” (256). Mother Eve’s body, marked as sexual, imbued with eroticism, and ultimately lost to the bottom of Black Canyon, stirs the desires of male characters and critics alike. But the loss of her body is only another opportunity to imbue her figure with meaning, as she remains a marginalized site of sexualized femininity from Professor St. Peter can return, home again, to Augusta. While in recognizing his relationship to Mother Eve and in developing an emotional attachment to her history and place Tom attempts an ethic of care, it is tainted by capitalist aspirations and the idea Mother Eve’s corpse should be preserved and displayed in a museum, robbing her of her context and environmental situatedness. Professor St. Peter’s ethos is one of documentation, recalling Tom’s oral story and



editing his journal, which the two men retrieved from the Eagle's Nest, and eventually he recognizes the value of Augusta's localized ethic of care. Yet the Professor can only value Augusta's ethic of care when he arranges it as a universal truism, made genderless, and connected to a grounded, earthy image of herbs that are both bitter and "corrective." Most importantly, the ethics of care of female characters are narrated through male perspectives, denying them a chance to present their own narratives of their experiences of providing care rather than being merely elided with the natural world.

### **Father Latour's "Food and Raiment" in *Death Comes for the Archbishop***

Published two years after *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* continues Cather's exploration of the Southwest through a male protagonist's perspective. While both *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* both foreground male stories of male bonding, Mother Eve's mythic role provides ample material for feminist analyses of *The Professor's House*, even if at the expense of Augusta. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* presents a significantly different case, lacking both plot and many significant female characters. The novel follows Father Latour on his journeys as the newly appointed bishop of New Mexico, from 1851 forward. St. Peter's plot unfolds in the present of the 1920s, despite "Tom Outland's Story" in the center of the novel, but Latour's narrative takes place firmly in the past in an un-Americanized Southwest far removed from the Southwest Tom and his companions encounter. The novel meanders as it follows Latour on his journeys, but it also includes the stories of those Latour encounters, as well as embedded stories located even further in the past. The women Latour does encounter on his journeys are often represented as caretakers or victims. For my purposes, the briefly-represented Sada and Magdalena are crucial. Comparing the role of the feminine in *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the*

*Archbishop*, I explore Cather's complex navigations of how – and specifically, how much – female characters should serve as a background to the male protagonists' journeys.

While Augusta is a constant, albeit sidelined, presence in the first and third sections of *The Professor's House*, the spinster of Cather's later novel, Sada, appears only in "December Nights," which occupies fewer than ten pages of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Though her section of the novel is small, Sada's impact on Father Latour is evident in the rest of the novel, as she reminds him of his spiritual duties as he works towards building his cathedral. Alex Hunt proposes that Cather "came to the Southwest [and] found indigenous cultures that apparently operated by means of gynocentric or matriarchal models that seemed to offer emancipation from gender-oppression that was typical of... Victorian-era upbringing," but the situation of Sada (and also Mother Eve) potentially contradict Hunt's claims (8). Father Latour accidentally encounters Sada late at night. Unable to sleep due to "the sense of failure clutching at his heart," as he struggles to find the means to build his cathedral (211), he dwells on this sense of failure: "His prayers were empty words and brought him no refreshment. His soul had become a barren field.... His work seemed superficial, a house built upon the sands... the bed on which the Bishop lay became a bed of thorns" (211). Latour's dissatisfaction registers through images of the natural world – he cannot find the refreshment he needs to nourish the barren field that is his soul, a field his body metaphorically pierced by the thorns of his own sense of failure. Latour soon encounters Sada, and her presence acts on him as Augusta's does on the Professor when her connection to the "taste of bitter herbs" inspires the Professor to face "the bloomless side of life."

In the December snow, Latour finds Sada on the doorway of his church. Sada's backstory follows Latour's discovery of her in her desperate state: she is a Mexican woman enslaved to an American family, forced to hide her religion and made to sleep in the family woodshed even during the winter cold. After Latour recalls her story and assesses her pitiful condition and the heroism of her brief escape from her family's domination, Latour thinks, "It seemed to him that he had never seen pure goodness shine out of a human countenance as it did from hers" (213). In Sada, Latour finds inspiration for his mission work and reconnects with the tenets of his faith, which values the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. For Latour Sada is the meek martyr he needs to inspire him to build his cathedral, but Cather amplifies Sada's importance by connecting her with the Virgin Mary, another woman whose story is inseparable from her pitiable circumstances of poverty, near-martyrdom, and consummate goodness. The only hint of gynocentrism here is when Latour observes Sada in the Lady Chapel: "Old Sada fell on her knees and kissed the floor. She kissed the feet of the Holy Mother, the pedestal on which they stood, crying all the while. But from the working of her face, from the beautiful tremors which passed over it, he knew they were tears of ecstasy" (214). Latour's observation of Sada "permitted him to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion" (216), amplified by Sada's lack of possessions and agency. He gains inspiration from her but also transforms her suffering into a spectacle of a specifically female experience of religion; which in turn serves as a moment of triumph and validates his own faith. While Latour does not, in the fashion of Father Duchene, tell Sada's story, Sada's story as seen through his eyes affirms his own beliefs – his dedication to religion, the potency of his

vision for the cathedral, and his dominance as part of the master model that values his rational perspective over Sada's emotional, feminine one.

Latour perceives Sada's suffering as uniquely feminine and imbues her connection to the Virgin Mary with additional meaning:

He seemed able to feel all it meant to her to know that there was a Kind Woman in Heaven, though there were such cruel ones on earth. Old people, who have felt blows and toll and known the world's hard hand, need, even more than children do, a woman's tenderness. Only a Woman, divine, could know all that a woman can suffer. (217)

This reflection demonstrates Latour's awareness that Sada's positionality differs from his, yet he also valorizes the feminine as tender, nurturing, passive, and kind. Latour hyperseparates himself as a man from Sada's feminine suffering. Latour recycles the tropes of divine femininity as he connects his feelings regarding the meek, lowly "Kind Woman in Heaven" to the spinster slave beside him. In recalling Sada's backstory Latour does not reference her marital status, so it is not entirely clear whether she is a spinster. Sada's past is wiped away and unreachable—she is known only in her current role as Mexican slave – but defines her worth in terms of her womanhood. The priests in Cather's Southwestern novels seem uninterested in learning the histories of the women they encounter – Father Duchene makes up a history for Mother Eve, and Latour makes no effort to learn Sada's history

Latour continues to reflect in the Lady Chapel on the unique power of the Virgin Mary in relation to Sada's uniquely feminine suffering:

Not often, indeed, had Jean Marie Latour come so near the Fountain of all Pity as in the Lady Chapel that night; the pity that no man born of woman could ever utterly cut himself off from; that was for the murderer on the scaffold, as it was for the dying soldier or the martyr on the rack. The beautiful concept of Mary pierced the priest's heart like a sword.

*"O Sacred Heart of Mary!"* she murmured by his side, and he felt how that name was food and raiment, friend and mother to her. He received the miracle in her heart into his own, saw through her eyes, knew that his poverty was as bleak as hers... This church was Sada's house, and he was a servant in it. (217)

As Professor St. Peter relies on Augusta for her knowledge of the Magnificat (the Song of Mary), Latour relies on Sada to access a different aspect of his connection to Mary. While the Professor – an academic who views art as connected to religion, whose own religious beliefs are suspect – seeks knowledge in an offhand manner, bookish, cultured Father Latour already possesses the theological knowledge of Mary. Yet in this moment, he uses Sada not to gain knowledge but a spiritual connection: “he received the miracle in her heart into his own, saw through her eyes, knew that his poverty was as bleak as hers.” Latour accesses a new spiritual relation with the Virgin Mary by imagining himself inside Sada's body and having her experiences. His reflection here that “his poverty was as bleak as hers” ignores the immense power differential between the two – he, as a respected official with financial and professional security, power over his life, and freedom to control his own body, while Sada is a slave, permitted neither shoes nor shelter. He thus flattens the Hyperseparation between his masculine and Sada's feminine

knowledge in his effort to empathize and experience her seemingly superior spirituality and sanctifying poverty.

After Latour notes the uniqueness of women's suffering – itself tinged with essentialism and relying on traditional tropes of gender – in the first paragraph discussed above, Cather includes Latour's full name, as if to more forcefully assert his presence in a scene, otherwise dominated by Sada and her religious experience. Latour's connection to women is universalized to all men. It is not enough for Latour to note Sada's unique connection to the Virgin through, he must connect himself back to the Virgin through Sada's suffering, then use her words, heart, and eyes to metaphorically embody her suffering. Ultimately Latour's connection fails, as he cedes possession of the chapel to Sada, in an acknowledgement of his role as a priest and servant of the Lord.

At the beginning of the "December Night" chapter, Latour's empty prayers "brought him no refreshment," but as he observes Sada's prayer, "he felt how that name [Sacred Heart of Mary] was food and raiment to her." Latour finds his "refreshment" by observing Sada, and readers perceive her experience of prayer through his eyes. Sada does not narrate her own experience of prayer, so her perspective of her connection to the Virgin Mary is not part of Latour's reconstruction. Though Sada's fulfillment is rendered through Latour's eyes, Latour finds his "refreshment" and his shelter from his bed of thorns in Sada's piety. Latour consumes Sada's spirituality and inhabits it a prop, as she symbolically owns the church that he inhabits and supervises. Latour perceives Sada both in terms of a small sustenance and large shelter, as the scale of her importance shifts throughout "December Nights." After repeatedly reflecting on Sada's lack of possessions and her pitiful state, Latour ends their interaction by giving her a medal of the Virgin

Mary: “Ah, he thought, for one who cannot read – or think – the Image, the physical form of Love!” (218). After spending an extended, reflective period alongside Sada and elevating her piety and unique connection to the Virgin Mary, Latour asserts his place in the master model by assuming the role of benevolent patriarch. He bestows one of his possessions – blessed by the Pope, no less – on Sada, but at the same time, he reminds the reader of her place in his own worldview. She is a Mexican slave, denied the freedom to read, think, pray, or exist as she sees fit, completely robbed of agency. The last image of Sada is through the eyes of the rightful, spiritual owner of the Chapel, as she becomes again the meek, thoughtless woman leaving fleeting footprints in the snow as she walks away from the Chapel and back to her life of slavery.

Sada effectively operates as a spiritual prop, used by Latour as a conduit for his own connection to the Virgin Mary. Significantly, “December Night” advances a strategic essentialism, as Latour uses Sada’s identity as a pitiful, poor woman to better connect to the Virgin Mary – a connection he himself cannot claim due to his privilege within the master model of domination. Sada is denied a past and a history, but she provides Latour a surface on which to pontificate and reflect about the fates of those who are less fortunate than him, but who ultimately serve to heighten his own connection to his spirituality. The “December Night” chapter is one of the most moving and poignant of the novel, and Cather allowed it to circulate independently as a Christmas gift book with illustrations evoking an illuminated Biblical. This separate publication demonstrates its importance to Cather’s publisher and the market public but why does this attention not extend to scholarly analyses of Sada, or even the fate of Sada beyond the chapter? Latour does not reflect on Sada again in the novel, and she presumably continues to live as a

slave, trapped by the Latour's decision not to intervene in her situation due to bureaucratic concerns over disrupting an American family's homestead.

Sada and Father Latour's relationship serves as a moment of Incorporation (relational definition), much as Augusta does for St. Peter. Latour uses Sada's abundance of spirituality to define his own more privileged devotion to the Virgin Mary. Although Latour uses Sada's spirituality to define his theologically-based spirituality as a lack, he ultimately assumes mastery by objectifying Sada. In her interaction with Latour, Sada's spirituality aligns with Plumwood's concept of Instrumentalism: "Those on the lower side of the dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or centre, that they are conceived as his instruments, a means to his ends... This involves setting up a moral dualism, where the underside is not part of the sphere to be considered morally, but is either judged by a separate instrumental standard... or seen as outside morality altogether" (53). Though "December Night" depicts Sada as a martyr, Latour uses her martyrdom and spirituality to motivate his own project of building his mid-Romanesque cathedral. Sada's spirituality – poignant and revelatory– falls to the background after Latour gains what he needs to achieve his own ends.

To Instrumentalize Sada establishes Latour's own moral dualism: of the differing connections of women to the Virgin Mary. As noted above, Latour mentally lavishes praise and distinction on the unique connection between women and the Virgin, but he is quick to reorient this connection in towards himself – "he received the miracle in her heart into his own" – and for his own ends – "[he] knew that his poverty was as bleak as hers." Yet he also objectifies Sada's spirituality in his reconceptualization of the church as "Sada's house." By claiming that Sada operates under a different, more divine



connection to the Virgin, Latour uses her spirituality to stake a grander claim to the church. Though he calls himself a “servant” in Sada’s church, Sada ultimately leaves the chapel, reasserting Latour’s authority over it. For a brief moment, Latour vacillates between acknowledging Sada’s deeper suffering and claiming his own equal experience of “poverty,” and then he cedes his authority over the church to her before reclaiming sole possession after Sada leaves. Latour vacillation is significant because it complicates his monolithic authority and opens him to the plight of others beyond his own cultured experience. But ultimately, the master model remains in place, and Latour retains control of his church, his apostolic, and his connection to the Virgin.

While Sada appears in only one chapter, Magdalena appears sporadically throughout the novel. Early in the novel Latour and Vaillant first encounter Magdalena on the road to Mora. Their initial encounter with her is strained because she is married to a brutal American man who, unbeknownst to the priests, kills those who pass through his home. Latour and Vaillant greet Magdalena “in the name of the Holy Mother, as was customary. She did not open her lips, but stared at them blankly for a moment, then dropped her eyes and cowered as if she were terribly frightened” (67). Latour thinks Magdalena is “not old, she might have been very young, but she was probably half-witted. There was nothing to her face but blankness and fear” (68). She silently warns the priests to flee the house – “instantly that stupid face became intense, prophetic, full of awful meaning” – for fear that her husband will murder them in order to steal their horses (68). Here, Magdalena – a young woman, as we learn, sexualized in her marriage to the brutal, aggressive Buck Scales – offers the priests a silent scream evoking Mother Eve’s. Latour’s initial perceptions of Magdalena uphold a narrative of mastery, as Magdalena is

a Mexican woman essentially enslaved by her American husband. When she warns the priests away from certain death, she risks becoming a martyr at the hands of her husband. Latour views Magdalena from a privileged position, much as he does Sada. He assesses both female characters' positions and powerlessness from his own privileged position as a priest – a foreign priest at that, removed from the social imbrications of the Mexican or American communities he encounters. But unlike Mother Eve's unheeded silent scream to the explorers in Cliff City, Father Latour and Vaillant perceive Magdalena's silent, urgent warning, which ultimately saves their lives.

Magdalena is no spinster – she is married and subjected to abuse from her American husband, the details of which emerge following her own escape from him. Magdalena is subject to sexual abuse at the hands of her husband who is holding her prisoner in their home as evidenced by her desperate escape and fear that he will kill her. He has denied her the traditional feminized occupation of motherhood because her husband kills her newborn children and focuses his sadistic energies solely on Magdalena. As she relays her story to the priests following her escape, the tragedy of her situation is laid bare: “Magdalena had borne three children since their marriage, and her husband had killed each of them a few days after their birth, by ways so horrible that she could not relate it” (72). Unlike Sada, whose history before she became a slave remains a mystery, readers learn Magdalena's backstory through Latour. However, Magdalena herself does not voice her experience. Latour still controls her narrative, although not to the extent that Father Duchene relates a fantasy of Mother Eve's history to his companions on the Blue Mesa. Significantly, Magdalena herself refuses to tell part of her story (how Buck Scale killed their children), and Latour leaves the gaps in Magdalena's

story because she is too traumatized by violence to recount the details. As a young woman Magdalena is a live counterpart to Mother Eve, and is similarly subject to the heterosexist male gaze and to compulsory reproductive futurity of the kind from which Sarah Ensor's spinsters gain exemption. Yet as a result of her suffering at the hands of Buck Scales, Magdalena, like a spinster, gains exemption from compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive futurity. However, though she is spared remarriage and reproduction, she is essentially transformed from a victim of sexual abuse to a widow upon the execution of her husband, and finally to a spiritual spinster. In this final role Magdalena offers her ethic of care in her relationships with Latour, Vaillant, and Kit Carson.

As Magdalena's husband awaits trial, the priests and men of Mora debate what to do with her. Kit Carson enters the scene and offers to take Magdalena to his home in Taos:

"I'll take you home with me, Magdalena, and you can stay with my wife. You wouldn't be afraid in my house, would you?"

"No, no Christóbal, I would not be afraid with you. I am not a wicked woman."

He smoothed her hair. "You're a good girl, Magdalena – always were. It will be all right. Just leave things to me."

Then he turned to the Bishop... (74)

In this dialogue, Kit Carson – known to Magdalena as Christóbal – reconstructs Magdalena's image of herself. Twenty-four-year-old Magdalena has lived through six years of abuse, witnessed countless murders, grieved for her murdered children, and braved an escape from her abuser into a nearby town. After her tribulations, she clearly

identifies herself as a fully adult woman. In saying “I am not a wicked woman” Magdalena dispels doubt regarding the nature of her character and claims adulthood. Carson, however, paternalistically smooths her hair and comforts her as a dependent child— “You’re a good girl, Magdalena.” This comforting reassurance infantilizes Magdalena and erases her experiences. In this way, though Latour’s rendering of Magdalena’s story respects her own perspective of her experience, Carson marginalizes and infantilizes her.

Latour first meets Carson because of Magdalena’s predicament, and both Magdalena and Carson become recurring characters. At the close of this scene, as Carson leaves Latour, Cather writes, “This was the beginning of a long friendship” (75). In the novel’s final chapter, “Death Comes for the Archbishop,” Latour reflects on his late life, “there was not much present left: Father Joseph dead, the Olivares both dead, Kit Carson dead, only the minor characters of his life remained in the present time” (289). As we learn just before Latour thinks this, Magdalena is one of his late in life caretakers. Even though Magdalena saves his life, serves as a constant reminder of resilience and redemption through her role as a servant to the nuns in a convent (though she never becomes a nun herself), and now cares for him as he nears death, Latour only awards her the distinction of being a “minor character” in his life.

Magdalena’s connection with the natural world is more idealized than any of the female characters discussed thus far. As Latour and Vaillant speak of their futures near the Academy of Our Lady of Light school, the two lapse into silence and witness Magdalena in the garden:

A bright flock of pigeons swept over their heads to the far end of the garden, where a woman was just emerging from the gate that led into the school grounds; Magdalena, who came every day to feed the doves and to gather flowers... She advanced in a whirlwind of gleaming wings, and Tranquilino dropped his spade and stood watching her... [The doves] settled upon Magdalena's arms and shoulders, ate from her hand. When she put a crust of bread between her lips, two doves hung in the air before her face, stirring their wings and pecking at the morsel. A handsome woman she had grown to be, with her comely figure and the deep claret colour under the golden brown of her cheeks. (209)

Magdalena is no longer the fearful victim, but the healed survivor, idealized and fully connected with the natural world. She is circled by the birds she feeds in a garden named for the Virgin Mary, to whom Vaillant has just announced a month-long period of devotion. Magdalena's connection to the natural world here is a corrective of care, as she who was once the focus of so much care from others now cares for the doves. The scene is one of reflective spirituality and contentment with the church, as evidenced by Magdalena's full embodiment of the Catholic church's pastoral ideal of feminine care. Following the observation of Magdalena and the doves, Latour and Vaillant remark on her progress, and Latour wonders if she should marry again. Vaillant responds: "Her very body has changed. She was then a shapeless, cringing creature. I thought her half-witted. No, no! She has had enough of the storms of this world. Here she is safe and happy" (210). Vaillant's judgment in regards to Magdalena's marital status continues the male presumption and narration of women's experience, particularly the non-married or spinster experience. Magdalena is technically a young widow, but the conversation

between Latour and Vaillant suggests that her decision to not remarry is a point of contention. Vaillant uses Magdalena's body to mark her changing health, as opposed to offering her the opportunity to voice her feelings for herself. The section ends with Vaillant's invitation for Magdalena to join the priests in conversation, but Magdalena's contributions to the conversation are excluded. Significantly, the following section is "December Night," discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Sada's connection with the natural world is secondhand and rendered, much like Augusta's, through the male perspective, but Magdalena's connection is more idealized and explicit here. Magdalena's care is focused on the doves on her arms, and the priests who invite her for conversation and voice concern about her wellbeing – though not to her directly, but to each other, the people capable of effecting change. The reader does not directly experience Magdalena's care for the priests, but the minimal references to her throughout the novel connect her with strong images of nurturance and care, enough so that her lack of dialogue or action does not work against her role in the novel.

While the feminized Eagle's Nest in Cliff City is the site of Mother Eve's corpse and is thus the symbolic origin of culture and a maternal, nationalistic history, the desert Latour encounters early in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is more bare, and from Latour's perspective nightmarish in its lack of features:

He must have travelled through thirty miles of these conical red hills, winding his way in the narrow cracks between them, and he had begun to think that he would never see anything else. They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare; flattened cones, they were, more

the shape of Mexican ovens, red as brick dust, and naked of vegetation except for small juniper trees. (17-18)

The repetitive feminized curves of the landscape overwhelm him—there is no phallic object, like the central tower of the Cliff City, to give the hills meaning, at least until Latour comes upon a juniper tree in the shape of a crucifix. Merrill Maguire Skaggs suggests that this opening scene is “the most malevolently predatory *female* landscape I know about in fiction,” with the conical hills serving as “breasts and buttocks.” She continues, “only when Latour spots the male icon of the cruciform tree – a natural form fitting his chosen vision – can he surrender his consciousness to the suffering of his Lord, pray, recover, and escape the devouring female” (204, emphasis original). As Skaggs notes, the feminized desert landscape offers no care, like the maternal care Tom Outland imagines emanating from the Eagle’s Nest. Instead, Latour kneels before the phallic tree amidst a conical, curving landscape, evoking the structure of the novel as a whole: Cather populates it with silent female caregivers on the margins of Latour’s adventures, and these women have meaning only in relation to larger-than-life men such as Buck Scales, Kit Carson, and Latour himself.

While the cruciform tree provides Latour a respite from the aggressively feminized desert landscape in the opening of the novel, he finds no such respite in the “Stone Lips” section of Book Four, “Snake Root.” Seeking shelter from a blizzard, Jacinto takes Latour into an underground cavern known only to the indigenous residents of the area. As Jacinto is guiding him, Latour looks up and sees “a peculiar formation in the rocks; two rounded ledges, one directly over the other, with a mouthlike opening between. They suggested two great stone lips, slightly parted and thrust outward. Up to

this mouth Jacinto climbed quickly by footholds well known to him. Having mounted, he lay down on the lower lip, and helped the Bishop to clamber up” (126). Not only does he perceive the entrance to the cave a mouth and lips, he climbs up the rock formation clumsily, unable to navigate the feminized curves. Once he is inside the cave, he,

found himself in a lofty cavern, shaped somewhat like a Gothic chapel, of vague outline, - the only light within was that which came through the narrow aperture between the stone lips. Great as was his need of shelter, the Bishop, on his way down the ladder, was struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place. The air in the cave was glacial, penetrated to the very bones, and he detected at once a fetid odour, not very strong but highly disagreeable. (127)

Latour experiences the wet, moist cavern as distinctly vaginal, eliciting distaste and repugnance for his temporary shelter. The shelter is an underground perversion of his dream Midi-Romanesque cathedral, as it is a pagan place of ceremony for Jacinto’s Pecos Pueblo people. There is no statuary to adore, no ornamentation befitting his own French origins – just the stone walls of the cavern, the underground smell, and the small glimpses of light make their way through the snowstorm to shine into the cavern.

Significantly, Jacinto, whom the novel Others because he is an Indian, takes Latour to this shelter. Latour consistently employs Jacinto to guide him through the foreign lands of New Mexico. Jacinto makes the cavern more pleasing for Latour’s tastes, arranging blankets, making a fire, and sealing and hiding a mysterious small hole in the stone wall with clay. Jacinto completes a mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine



tasks. As an Othered male character who deviates from the white masculine ideal, Latour perceives him as not wholly masculine.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Jacinto's efforts to make the cavern more comfortable for Latour, the priest feels unsettled by a vibrating noise in the cave. Jacinto shows Latour a crack in the stone floor:

Father Latour lay with his ear to this crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under the ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power. (129-130)

The anthropomorphized power of the natural world here is remarkable. Deep within the cavernous chapel, the natural world has a voice – the rush of an ancient, underground river, imbued with indigenous cultural significance and cloaked in secrecy. Latour acknowledges the ancient nature of the river, as well as its “majesty and power.” Because this source of great and terrible power comes from below the rock of a feminized landscape and is beyond the reach of the Bishop's above-ground authority, it horrifies him. The Bishop “remember[s] the storm itself... with a tingling sense of pleasure. But the cave, which had probably saved his life, he remembered with horror. No tales of wonder, he told himself, would ever tempt him into a cavern hereafter” (133). In this

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<sup>15</sup> As Alex Hunt notes in his analysis: “Not surprisingly, in revising and reclaiming the Eden story in their own literary constructions of the Southwest, these writers [Cather included] return to Romantic tropes that evoke the indigenous figure as the denizen and caretaker – whether pure or corrupted – of the garden. Without question, this is a colonial trope which risks alignment with a masculine discourse of conquest...” (17).

moment, Latour recognizes the life-saving power of both cave and Jacinto's care, just as he acknowledges Sada's life-sustaining spirituality and Magdalena's life-saving power – just as St. Peter recognizes the life-saving power of Augusta, and Tom Outland finds life-sustaining power in Mother Eve's mythos. The cultured male protagonists constitute all these feminized moments and characters for us as readers, and they serve the interests of these protagonists. Yet neither Latour nor St. Peter looks upon their feminized saviors with “pleasure” – instead, there is a tinge of horror in the life-saving power of the spinster figures and feminized places of the natural world.

As Latour later searches for answers about the nature of the underground cavern, he questions Zeb Orchard, an Anglo who trades with the Indians and is intensely curious about the Pecos people as a result of his failed plan to marry a Pecos woman. Orchard tells Latour about Indian men carrying a chest the contents of which he was unable to discover: “It might have been only queer-shaped rocks their ancestors had taken a notion to. The things they value most are worth nothing to us. They've got their own superstitions, and their minds will go round and round in the same old ruts till Judgment Day” (135). In his confidence in his position and his superiority as a white man (instilled in him by his mother), Orchard, like Latour and St. Peter, establishes an oppositional system of values implicit in his judgments. What Latour and St. Peter value – hierarchy, authority, rational knowledge, art, and religion – differs from what they suppose the spinsters and other female characters value. Because, as their attitudes towards marginalized characters, whether female, like Magdalena and Augusta, or feminized, like Jacinto, demonstrate, these marginalized characters value care, relationships, nurturing, and life, which mean less to Cather's cultured male protagonists. Latour and St. Peter so

value a hierarchized, rational model of being following Plumwood's master model and encompassing an ethic of justice relying on abstract notions of morality and value. Even though female characters and feminized spaces embracing an ethic of care briefly disrupt the master model in *Death Come for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, Cather's novels focalized through her cultured male protagonists ultimately marginalize and contain this potential disruption to the master model

### **Conclusion: Finding Power on the Margins**

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Augusta, Mother Eve, Sada, and Magdalena – all of these female characters offer care in vastly different ways to the male protagonists of their respective novels. Augusta and Sada's connections to the natural world are more peripheral, rooted in references and connections made entirely in the interior thoughts of the protagonists, while Mother Eve and Magdalena are situated among the trappings of the natural world, on clifftop cities and gardens, that shape the ways the male protagonists interpret their character. These two ways of representing marginalized women provide a dualism of sorts within Cather's writing, one that distinguishes between female characters who fit an ideal provider or caretaking role and those who do not. Spinster women secure in their spinster (or at least, presumed spinster/widower) identity can provide care, but only in built environments in which the male protagonists can cast their connection to the larger more-than-human world as peripheral. There is no such need to trap the sexualized women of these novels in the domestic or built environments of homes or churches, as the protagonists come across Mother Eve and Magdalena in direct contact with the natural world, as if their female bodies and feminine plights are amplified in the already-feminized spaces of the Southwestern landscape.

The opposition between these two depictions of women relating to the natural world fits with a running challenge in Cather's novels. Cather's work presents a challenge to dismantling dualisms, as her work so often relies on dualisms to capture the spirit of her complex heroines and the distinct nature of the landscape, always set in opposition to another landscape deemed the norm. As Kathleen Wheeler notes in her consideration of Modernist women writers:

[Cather's] own values and beliefs seemed to her to diverge increasingly from the consumerism and material, machine-age advances of the post-war period... Oppositions that had been thematic aspects of Cather's novels provided the material for this... conflict, oppositions between country and city life, between society, or family, and the individual's need for solitude, between artistic genius and mediocrity, between nature and the urban, Europe and America, order and chaos, male and female, experience. (20)

Wheeler notes some of the many oppositions in Cather's works, but I would add the dualism most prominent in Plumwood's work: the gendered divide between reason and nature. I would not go so far to argue that Cather "should be regarded as [an] early ecofeminist who engaged in constructive work that sought to elevate and defend woman, natives, and the natural world," as does Alex Hunt in his ecofeminist reading of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (8). But she does populate the narrative margins of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House* with quiet yet strong female figures, who embody an ecofeminist ethic of care in their connections to the natural world and the moments when they save the cultured male protagonists, from death, apathy, or lost spirituality. To complement these female figures, Cather sets all or part of

each novel in feminized Southwestern natural spaces that challenge the cultured male protagonists' worldviews, which depend on phallic landmarks to define and give meaning to the surrounding feminized shapes.

As Anne E. Goldman argues in relation to Cather's Midwestern novels featuring female protagonists,

I have called attention to the 'significant exclusions' in Cather's work, as well as to the ways in which it 'is clearly invested in master narratives of Western cultural dominance and white superiority.' While such criticism corrects blandishments that oversimplify her writing in the service of a reductionist, nationalist history, I suggest we rethink the time and energy we are committing to such interpretations of Cather's midwestern novels... In her conscious and unrelenting insistence on representing middle-aged women, however, the people most consistently underrepresented across a wide range of arts, then and now, Cather's work remains distinctive. (160-161)

Goldman thus reclaims the importance of the middle-aged woman in *My Ántonia*, the role of older Ántonia at the novel's conclusion rather than the oft-mythologized young Ántonia. By focusing on marginalized women in Cather's Southwestern novels, particularly the spinsters Augusta and Sada, I contribute to a recommitment to Cather's older women, who differ markedly from her young, spirited heroines. In depicting spinster women alongside other marginalized female figures, such as Mother Eve and Magdalena, Cather complicates depictions of feminine presences in Southwestern landscapes often defined by the white male explorer narratives that constitute the

American cultural imaginary of the region. Even Cather's male explorer protagonists traveling through Southwestern desert landscapes perceive its caverns as feminized

These feminized landscapes present an interesting opportunity for ecofeminist theory, and ecofeminist ethics of care in particular. In his recent monograph, Timothy Clark argues ecocritics should turn away from the cultural imaginary as a subject of analysis, as conversations about cultural representations pale in comparison to confronting the grim realities of climate change and the Anthropocene. Clark quibbles with material ecocriticism and ecofeminism, and he states:

After all, a reader of 'material ecocriticism' can only be reminded so many times that ecology is all about interdependence... and that this should reinforce an ethic of respect for 'the other'. Yet material ecocriticism's attention to the agential effect of matter, as these emerge in new configurations, does not consider directly the most salient of such phenomena, the emergence of the human *en masse* as a new kind of thing, a Leviathan more like a geologic force than a reflective being, along with kinds of threshold and scale effects that mock or erode old categories of ethics and politics, even though these are all we have. (147)

Clark argues for a redefinition of the human, but arguments like his are dangerous in that "human" comes to denote one way of being and this universalized "human" may reify Plumwood's master model. In adjusting the scale of our lenses as cultural critics from the local interdependencies to the more global "geologic force[s]," the intricacies of being on a smaller scale in the natural world are lost. Clark represents the large-scale effects of the human presence "mock[ing]... categories of ethics and politics." However, misunderstandings of ethics and politics result in the kind of mistreatments endured by

Augusta, Sada, Magdalena, and even Mother Eve. By turning attention to these female characters and the ways Professor St. Peter and Father Latour's narratives rely on them, relationships and local interdependencies become central. Goldman notes, "The most compelling figures receive the writer's [Cather's] grace because she refuses to let them be devoured by loss... Men, in Cather's fiction, do not often have the strength of mind to recover from hurt... By contrast, the older women of her novels are more determined than thoughtful. Forgoing the attitude of contemplation, they remain connected to the world, risking its apparently never-ending capacity to hurt" (166). The marginalized female figures on whom I focus represent connection, fortitude, and care for those around them, including the male protagonists (Goldman cites both Father Latour and Professor St. Peter as two of Cather's "bereaved" and "brooding" men). They represent values that Clark would dismiss as insufficient in the face of impending large-scale natural disaster.

Goldman's analysis of Cather's women supports the claim that they enact an ethic of care, even a specifically feminist ethic of care, but is it an ecofeminist ethic of care? *The Professor's House* situates Mother Eve in the compelling space of the Eagle's Nest, within the feminized hills of the Southwest. Tom and his Cliff City family project meanings onto her and imagine her as a maternal origin point of nationalism. But her very appearance rejects "care" – her silent scream and decayed wounds identify her as a victim of violence rather than an object or agent of care. The feminized underground caverns of "Stone Lips" are similarly unsettling. By taking Father Latour to the cave Jacinto enacts an ethic of care, but the cave nevertheless evokes strong horror and repugnance in the priest. So while the marginalized female characters provide a feminist ethic of care that propels the male protagonists forward, the feminized spaces of the

Southwestern novels are simultaneously necessary (origin-giving and life-sustaining) and intensely unsettling to the male protagonists.

In *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* the female protagonists find themselves in the abundance of the prairie, but Professor St. Peter and Father Latour experience cognitive dissonance in the feminized hills of the Southwest, which they experience as both terrible and caring, horrifying and nurturing.<sup>16</sup> These landscapes complement the powerful domestic care provided by the spinster – the ecofeminist ethic of care offered by the land takes a different turn from that offered by the female characters. Augusta is tied to the land by St. Peter’s association of her with “bitter herbs,” while Sada’s religiosity is rendered as “food and raiment” derived from the earth. These small-scale, local, and metaphorical mentions of the natural world reify, in a small way, the woman/nature connection. It is when the male protagonists venture into the desert that the ecofeminist ethic of care becomes disconnected from women as the men experienced the landscape’s unnerving curves

Cather’s representations of marginalized female figures and feminized landscapes offer two connected, yet distinct, ecofeminist ethics of care. Both ethics of care are connected to the natural world, and both rely on connotations of femininity that signify within the dominant cultural imaginary. Reclaiming the moments in which ecofeminist ethics of care operate provides a different mode of reading these male-centered narratives. While Timothy Clark calls for more global scales of thinking, we should still attend to the local space of the attic, a chapel, and a desert landscape. By locating these

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<sup>16</sup> It is crucial to note that the land can only be read as embodying an ecofeminist ethic of care through the male protagonists’ perspectives. I do not imply that the land should be personified as providing an anthropocentric ethic of care, but instead I suggest that the male characters read the landscape as providing these potentially caring and life-saving moments.



female figures and feminized landscapes on the margins, Cather reifies facets of Plumwood's master model, including the dominance of male narratives. Yet, as Anne Goldman notes, these characters on the margins, Augusta, Sada, and Magdalena, experience grace as they go about their business of providing care. There is a grace, too, in the steadfast reliability of the desert landscape, despite its capability to disturb the white men who enter its caverns. Recognizing the power of the ecofeminist ethics of care in Cather's novels will not solve climate change or the problems of the Anthropocene at the scale Clark advocates for, but an ethic of care provides a way of revaluing the small scale. Professor St. Peter, Latour, and Clark all put forth a large-scale perspective – St. Peter, through his historical assessments of progress and bleak outlook on the future at large, Latour, from his reluctant appreciation of the snake river's history to his preoccupation with his cathedral's (and therefore his own) long-lasting legacy, and Clark, who addresses the more contemporary scalar issue of literature and the cultural imaginary as connected to climate change and the Anthropocene. Augusta, Sada, and Magdalena provide care that the protagonists marginalize, and their care – like the care the men believe they find in Mother Eve and the natural world's loaded landscape – complements and complicates the plots of the male protagonists. This small-scale care is equally important to considerations of Cather's Southwestern novels as critical considerations of St. Peter's and Latour's broodings, yet such care is not often a focus of literary criticism. Foregrounding the ethics of care that Cather's marginalized female characters provide in her Southwestern novels offers an alternative way of reading the texts that values the small-scale moments of marginal care as a relevant component of ecocritical, feminist, and ecofeminist literary criticism.

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