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Book Review: *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*

Marcia Robertson
Sweet Briar College

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Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South. Edited by Ann Romines. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. Illustrations, works cited, index. ix + 240 pp. \$59.50 cloth, \$18.50 paper.

The cover of *Willa Cather's Southern Connections* reproduces one square of what is Known as the Robinson-Cather quilt, an image that testifies to a communal—and female—artistic tradition in which Cather's Back Creek, Virginia, kinswomen participated and with which her often heroic literary fictions seem to have little relation. Ann Romines participates in a quilting process of her own, piecing together seventeen revised essays from the seventh of a series of international conferences on Willa Cather held in 1997. Both conference and volume recontextualize a writer so often seen as Nebraskan or Western within a Southern matrix, asking Cather's readers to view her in a web of Southern writ-

ers, dilemmas, and discourses so that we might begin to re-imagine our narratives about her career and her central texts. How, asks Judith Fetterley, might our official stories of Cather change as a result?

The work includes a number of essays that relate Cather to particular Southern texts and figures: Merrill Maguire Skaggs, for instance, traces Cather and Ellen Glasgow's career-long practice of one-upmanship and mutual appropriation. But to read *Southern Connections* is to go beyond local relations with specific writers; it is to see southern-ness and Cather's affiliations with it in ever widening terms. The work foregrounds race as an issue in Cather criticism, especially in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, whose portrayal of African Americans and whose fairly tale reconciliation between whites and blacks have made it one of Cather's most problematic texts. This focus continues a trend already well developed in Cather studies: to examine the explosive ambivalences and disruptions that so often lie beneath the polished surfaces of Cather's prose. Almost all of the work's essays on *Sapphira* take as their starting point Toni Morrison's chapter on the novel in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), which examines white writers' constructions of "Africanist others," a process helping to form "white subjectivities" at the expense of complex depictions of African Americans.

Such foregrounding of race brings the reader back to a central organizing principle of *Southern Connections*: to show Cather as a writer of multiply-constituted allegiances, a writer whose regional affiliations engage her in the most pressing of American issues. The writer who emerges from such discussions is far more fascinating and vexing than any image we might have of Willa Cather as a painter of iconic Western landscapes.

MARCIA ROBERTSON
Department of English
Sweet Briar College