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Winter 2001

Review of *Willa Cather: Queering America* By Marilee Lindemann

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Barale, Michele Aina, "Review of *Willa Cather: Queering America* By Marilee Lindemann" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2265.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Willa Cather: Queering America. By Marilee Lindemann. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. xvi + 185 pp. \$47.50 cloth, \$17.50 paper.

Arguing that for Willa Cather “the body that signifies the nation is a queer body indeed,” a body that is always out of the control of the very subject inhabiting it, of its own symbolic meaning, of even its relationship to citizenship itself, Marilee Lindemann tracks the “queer” as a “deviant, disruptive figure” in Cather’s early fiction and letters. In both, the prairie “is even more elaborately figured as the staging ground for several impossible struggles: between immigrant and native-born, the illicitly sexual and the erotophobic, the effeminate male and the too-powerful female, the homewreckers and the nation-builders.” And just as the queer is a body consistently disturbing order on all levels, the very meaning of the word “queer” is itself multivalent, slippery.

Rather than explicate whole texts, Lindemann prefers “to excavate salient images or moments from a range of texts” and place them in dialogue with one another. This method works well as a way to invest the whole of Cather’s works in a set of concerns that need not be their sole or main logic. In *O Pioneers!*, for example, Lindemann notes how Cather relies “quietly but systematically on physical appearance as a means of judging and classifying individuals.” Cather stages the bodies of the murdered lovers, Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata, for us: Norwegian Emil’s body is

nearly pretty, so bloodless is it in death, while Marie’s, her French complexion marked by her deep red cheeks, is exposed to us, riven and bloody, in a “kind of autopsy.” For different reasons, each is termed “queer” in the course of the novel. And once together they must be expelled from the prairie, not simply because they have transgressed against marriage but because they have violated a code “that defines safe sex as intercourse with one’s own (ethnic) kind.”

In the second half, Lindemann shifts her attention to Cather’s letters, literary criticism, later novels (*The Professor’s House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*) as well as her editorial preparation of *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*. Also reframing her inquiry at this point, Lindemann now uses “queer” to describe Cather’s rhetorical strategies in the culture wars that followed World War I. Intervening in the debates about the “‘Americanness’ of American literature,” and troubled by “the masculinization” of its literary history, Cather sought to “queer” both. Thus she revises the classic American (male) adventure tale in “Tom Outland’s Story”; she revises the canon in her introduction to the Jewett collection; and she exposes the political limitations of assimilation and pluralism in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

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