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Introduction to *Willa Cather and Modern Cultures* [*Cather Studies* 9]

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Introduction

MELISSA J. HOMESTEAD AND GUY J. REYNOLDS

To some, linking Willa Cather to "the modern" or more narrowly to literary modernism still seems an eccentric proposition. As Richard Millington has pointed out, "one will look in vain for Cather's name in the index of most accounts, whether new or old, of the nature and history of Anglo-American modernism" (52). Perhaps she fails to feature in these accounts because in her public pronouncements and certain recurring motifs in her fiction, she appeared to turn her back on modernity. Cather was skeptical about many aspects of the culture that took shape around her in the early decades of the twentieth century, in that most modern place, the United States of America. Born in rural Virginia during the decade following the Civil War, Cather felt herself to be part of a vanished world. She was already in her twenties when the generation of canonical American modernist novelists (F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway) was born, and late-Victorian culture formed her childhood world. By the time the modernist moment had decisively crystallized in the 1920s and 1930s, Cather was issuing jeremiads condemning aspects of modern life she felt to be cheap or "gaudy." In her essay "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" (1923) she attacked movies, consumerism, and education policy (including the changes at her alma mater, the University of Nebraska, that, in her eyes, made it a "trade" school). Cather's title

for her notorious collection of literary-cultural essays, *Not Under Forty* (1936), conveyed her sense that those younger than that age would not understand her cultural positions, prejudices, and beliefs.

As Millington observes, one strain of Cather scholarship has argued for her status as a modernist artist by focusing on her "affinities with the aesthetic ideals of particular modern artists" (52), and particularly her experiments with form and narrative technique. For example, is *The Professor's House* (1925), with its embedded narrative in the voice of Tom Outland, "modernist"? However, Cather, even at her most formally experimental, is still far removed from the main currents of modernist fiction. Unlike Gertrude Stein or James Joyce, she never wrote prose that radically challenged received ideas of conventional syntax; her sentences remained clean and classical, lapidary in their simple effectiveness. Her narrative structures, though more complex and experimental than many critics have acknowledged, never equaled the avant-garde complexity we associate with Faulkner. Furthermore, the themes and subject matter that define modernist storytelling are either absent or only marginally present in Cather's work. The urban cultures of Chicago and New York certainly feature in some of her fiction, but the city is not the cynosure of her literary imagination, as it is in John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*. His novel points to another thematic dimension where Cather is idiosyncratic: she does not share modernism's fascination with new technologies of the early twentieth century. *The Great Gatsby*, with its cars and movies and phones, best exemplifies the way American fiction of the 1920s registered the massive shift in the sheer "stuff" of everyday life. In contrast, Cather's fiction—much of it set in the late nineteenth century or earlier—can seem fetishistically wedded to imagined worlds where such technology was either absent or remained the object of suspicion.

Millington advocates a different approach to Cather's engagements with modernity—a historicist, cultural studies one

in which scholars are "interested less in the formal qualities of Cather's fiction than in the relation between the content of that fiction and the context of her society and culture" and "work to specify the nature of her engagement with the definitive experiences and ideological movements of twentieth-century life—migration and immigration, nostalgia, Progressivism, the emergence of a fully fledged culture of consumption, and so on" (52). The essays in this collection extend this contextual approach, adding more "experiences and ideological movements" for understanding Cather's engagements with what this volume terms "modern cultures." Our contributors write about the role of railways in Cather's work, her understanding of art history, music, and performance, her response to the opening up of the American Southwest to archaeology and anthropology, and her recurring engagements in her life and her fiction with the city of Chicago. Chicago was the first large modern city Cather encountered, and it was the site of the twelfth International Cather Seminar in 2009, at which earlier versions of many of the essays in this volume were presented. Throughout, the essays explore how Cather used fictional narrative to engage salient aspects of the complex, modern world emerging around her. While she sometimes feared or resented this world, it also prompted her to create her own distinctive narrative mappings of modern cultures.

The essays in this collection fall into two distinct clusters. As we approach the centenary of the inauguration of Cather's career as a novelist with the publication of *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), each group demonstrates how far Cather criticism has come. Essays in the first group focus on Cather's representations of place in the modern world, whether those places are the places traditionally associated with regionalism (farms, small towns, or the frontier) or are cities (particularly Chicago, but also New York). Although Cather is often identified as a Nebraska writer, in these essays she emerges as a writer able to move through and to imagine a whole range of different cultures. Deploying so-

phisticated conceptualizations of place and writing, these essays redefine Cather as a multifaceted regionalist with roots in strikingly heterogeneous places.

A second group of essays explores Cather's relationship with the visual arts and music, "culture" in its most obvious form. Commentators have only recently begun to recognize the full extent of Cather's achievements as a cultural critic and as a writer with a profound and idiosyncratic enthusiasm not only for literature but also for music, theater, and the visual arts. Because of the major anthologies of Cather's late-nineteenth-century journalistic writings and reviews—*The World and the Parish* and *The Kingdom of Art*—literary historians have long had access to and have acknowledged the quality of her early writings on the visual and performing arts (and the Cather Journalism Project, produced by the *Willa Cather Archive*, will soon provide digital access to these writings in the form in which they originally appeared in newspaper and magazines). Essays in this group broaden and deepen this critical tradition by considering how turn-of-the-century visual arts shaped her fiction. Other essays suggest that the representation of music and musicians remains a fertile area for inquiry: Richard Giannone's *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (1968) inaugurated but did not conclude scholarly inquiry on this topic. From direct quotations from arias or popular songs to plots centered on performance or artistic apprenticeship, Cather's fiction teems with knowledge of the arts.

The cluster of essays on Cather and place begins with essays on Cather's West, a region that was both real and an imagined subject of an expanding range of stories and images in the early twentieth century. John Swift charts Cather's engagement with the West and the Western in an essay that links her to one of the major figures in the growth of Western genre fiction. In "Willa Cather in and out of Zane Grey's West," Swift emphasizes the importance of this commodified form of the West to the American national project in the region. Swift, like many other critics, identifies the Southwest as a major site for Cather's imaginative

rendering of the modern and reactions against the modern, and in particular, what cultural historian T. Jackson Lears calls antimodernism. Swift also brings a distinctively psychoanalytic slant to his meditation, arguing that figures such as Grey and Cather brought a therapeutic passion to their writing about this region of pueblos and mesas, a passion both individual and symptomatic of a broader cultural anxiety.

The Song of the Lark is the subject of many essays in this collection. A novel of place and places, saturated with Cather's knowledge of music and the visual arts, the book is at the center of arguments about her sense of modern cultures. Our contributors explore the text's mapping of apparent opposites: the rural and the urban, Chicago and the Southwest, the modern and the ancient. In "Thea's 'Indian Play' in *The Song of the Lark*," Sarah Clere considers the dynamic interplay between the modern and the antimodern in Cather's representation of Native cultures. Tracing the "discovery" of the Southwest by anthropologists and explorers at the end of the nineteenth century as a context for Thea's encounter with Indian artifacts in Panther Canyon, Clere shows how this particular place fed into American culture's ambiguous sense of progress and empire: in the Southwest, a once-powerful culture had seemingly vanished. Clere argues that a reconsideration of ideas of the modern provides new ways to approach old questions about how Cather represents female characters. In the 1970s Ellen Moers praised this novel for its feminized landscapes and its exploration of womanly creativity, but Clere argues that Cather's representation of landscape and female creativity is conflicted and troubled. Avoiding the critical dichotomy of praise or blame, Clere demonstrates the maturity of Cather criticism: we can now appreciate that Cather's work sometimes articulates a new vision of culture while simultaneously being bounded by her era's dominant cultural assumptions.

In her essay on Cather's layered, dense sense of place. "'Jazz Age' Places: Modern Regionalism in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*," Kelsey Squire extends work of the last decade that

has enriched our understanding of how Cather created a textured fictional topography. Focusing on the disparate places of *The Professor's House*, Squire's sophisticated reading revisits America's cultural understanding of region, unpacking the ways in which the rural has often been read as antimodern or backward. The novel grew out of a concerted phase of writing and thinking in 1924 and 1925, when Cather reconsidered her relationship to "the soil" and suggestively meditated on how writing and place interact. During this period, Cather gave an interview in which she discussed the setting of *My Ántonia*, published *The Professor's House*, and wrote an introduction to a collection of stories by Sarah Orne Jewett. Using the term "regional consciousness" to think about attachment to place, Squire analyzes how consumerism and cosmopolitanism complicated traditional linkages between a writer and her place. Professor St. Peter is a cosmopolitan figure, apparently at home in both Europe and the United States, but he is also deeply attached to his house and garden. His final near-death crisis testifies to a morbid, unsustainable form of place consciousness. In Squire's compelling reading of this most haunting of Cather novels, modern place consciousness fostered a profoundly ambivalent mixture of attachment and exile.

Mark A. R. Facknitz's essay "Changing Trains: Metaphors of Transfer in Willa Cather" demonstrates the ways in which a critical focus on a specific historical detail can yield a rich analysis of the writer and her milieu. For Facknitz, the train and its networks help us see how a language of movement, exchange, and transfer operates throughout Cather's fiction. His essay brings together two themes in the collection: the importance of technological change to an understanding of modern culture, and the centrality of place to Cather's conceptions of modernity. This is an essay about Chicago, about the sweeping changes that the development of the railroad and the expansion of that city brought to the Midwest as a whole. Cather, Facknitz shows, developed train travel—and particularly the experience of changing trains

at the rail hub of Chicago—into an aesthetic, a way to think about borders, boundaries, and thresholds. The literal "line" of the railroad is crucial, becoming a link to other "lines" in Cather's work, such as the Divide on the prairie in *O Pioneers!* The centrality of movement in train travel, the sense of a visual apprehension that is so fleeting as one looks through the train car window, also becomes, according to Facknitz, a way for Cather to explore a technology to arrive at a modern aesthetic.

As Facknitz's essay demonstrates, Cather's fiction not only focuses on a single place but holds together disparate topographies through complex narrative shapes. Her fictional world, as Joseph Urgo demonstrated in *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995), is founded on displacement, movement, and migration. Cather's own journey from Virginia to Nebraska as a child became her primal scene, a real-life prefiguring of the journeys, epic and unsettling, that provided the basis of her stories. Movement and migration are the deep background for her characters, who, even as they forge new attachments to place, remain shaped by journeys they have made.

For Cather, culture was a conversation, and Michelle E. Moore uncovers just such a conversation in Cather's representation of Chicago in "Chicago's Cliff Dwellers and *The Song of the Lark*." According to Moore, 1890s Chicago was a cauldron of conflicting ideas about culture. A commercial and highly materialistic city, Chicago was also home to boosters who wanted to "raise" the place culturally and aesthetically. Moore moves between literal and metaphorical notions of "raising" or of being "up high," and focuses in particular on the ways Henry Blake Fuller's Chicago novel *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893) created a suggestive language in which skyscrapers and ideals of cultural aspiration mixed and cross-fertilized. Furthermore, the Anasazi people of the Southwest, culturally advanced but ultimately doomed, were also cliff dwellers. Cather appropriated this provocative mixture of motifs drawn from both modern urbanism and the late-nineteenth-century's fascination with primitivism in

her work from *The Song of the Lark* through to *The Professor's House*. Cultural uplift becomes an ideal in her fiction, but it is threatened both by contemporary commercialism and the realization that the utopian world (of the ancient cliff dwellers or the modern artist) is ultimately doomed.

Fuller's work is also central to Richard C. Harris's essay, "Willa Cather and Henry Blake Fuller: More Building Blocks for *The Professor's House*." Harris recovers the Chicago novelist as a central inspiration for a Cather novel that Harris tellingly describes as a "collage." For Harris, Cather's sense of place is profoundly intertextual, shaped by other narratives as much as by place itself. He reads Cather as a creative borrower, able to see how she might reenergize and redeploy themes and motifs in an earlier writer's work. Intriguingly, Harris concentrates on two Fuller novels published in the 1890s (*The Cliff-Dwellers* and *With the Procession* [1895]), again suggesting that to understand Cather's sense of the modern we must look back to her intellectual roots in late-Victorian, fin de siècle culture.

As Amber Harris Leichner shows in "Cather's 'Office Wives' Stories and Modern Women's Work," the city as place was important to Cather on a professional level. As an editor and journalist in Pittsburgh and New York, Cather became part of a new modern workplace, the office, increasingly populated by women workers in the early twentieth century. The modern office culture in American cities was open not only to professional women like Cather but also to working-class immigrant women, and Leichner explores Cather's fictionalization of that milieu in her small body of office stories published in magazines in the 1910s. Her essay demonstrates that to read Cather in terms of modern culture allows us to revisit important questions and shed new light on them. Leichner shows that Cather's sense of the office as a place is deeply and complexly bound up with gender—indeed, Leichner reads these stories (including "Her Boss" [1919]) as contributions to a feminist examination of office culture.

Matthew Lavin's essay, "It's Mr. Reynolds Who Wishes It:

Profit and Prestige Shared by Cather and Her Literary Agent," moves from the topographies of the regional and the urban to a more abstract and national topography, the literary marketplace. Lavin shows that as a national literary marketplace developed, writing's "place" as defined by its origin and dissemination became more complex. New hierarchies of value developed, and writers balanced the desire for profit with concern for the symbolic capital of artistic reputation. Publishers, editors, and literary agents increasingly entered the terrain of writing. Focusing on Cather's relationship with her literary agent, Paul Revere Reynolds, Lavin pushes the received understanding of the literary modernism as a stylistic or formalistic movement to the background. Instead, he attends to the fine detail of how Cather and Reynolds together situated her as an author in a stratified and very modern marketplace, negotiating complex hierarchies of elite and mass culture in the process.

For three contributors to this volume, Cather engages modern culture through the visual arts. In "Thea at the Art Institute," Julie Olin-Ammentorp weds an investigation into Cather's representations of art and artists to a site-specific analysis of the cultural impact of the Art Institute of Chicago on Thea in *The Song of the Lark*. Olin-Ammentorp rereads Cather's novel of music and female maturation as a text in which encounters with the visual arts play a central role in the protagonist's self-development. Serendipitously wandering around the Art Institute, a curious and engaged Thea makes herself. A provincial girl with little experience of the city or high culture, Thea encounters art on her own terms. Olin-Ammentorp shows that Cather is interested in the *how* of cultural encounter as process, as well as the *what*. Across her fiction, Cather references specific paintings and works of music, but what most concerns her are the particularities of how a character engages with a work, meets it, understands it and then remembers it.

Diane Prenatt, in "Art and the Commercial Object as Ekphrastic Subjects in *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's*

House," focuses on Cather's use of the classical rhetorical device as means to critique modern cultures. Ekphrasis—instances in which a verbal work of art references a visual one (as in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn")—structures *The Song of the Lark*, a novel that takes its very title from Jules Breton's 1884 painting. Cather, Prenatt claims, uses this ancient literary device to open up a discussion about culture and commodification. Defining ekphrasis broadly enough to include Cather's representations of Thea's encounter with the cliff-dweller artifacts in Panther Canyon, Prenatt moves on to *The Professor's House*, charting Cather's extended meditation on the function of art in supposedly primitive cultures and its denigration through commodification. Ekphrasis thus acts as a key for understanding the earlier novel's valorization of non-classical art and the later novel's critique of the apparent triumph of modern consumer culture.

Janis Stout's essay reads Cather's relationship with modern visual art through the prism of Katherine Anne Porter's complex rivalry with Cather. Seeing Porter's "Reflections on Willa Cather" as "an essentially duplicitous essay," Stout considers how Porter sought to strengthen her own reputation as an author by undermining the status of the senior writer. Analyzing (and sometimes inventing or misrepresenting) Cather's reactions to various modern artworks, Porter creates a portrait of Cather as resistant to modernism. Stout sees modern art as a mirror in which the writer imagines herself and sees other writers. Writing and painting enter into a complex dance, with authors using the visual arts as a means to define their own work and the work of their peers (in a deeply conflicted relationship based around admiration and rivalry). Stout's essay richly revisits debates about the "sisterhood" of female writers and shows how modernity became a vital term in the conversation between authors.

In "'The Cruelty of Physical Things': Picture Writing and Violence in Willa Cather's 'The Profile,'" Joyce Kessler analyzes a 1907 Cather story, reading it through a conceptual framework drawn from art history. Cather's "visual semiotics" are central

to Kessler's analysis of what she calls Cather's "picture writing." Cather's story focuses on Virginia Gilbert's facial scar, and Kessler unpacks the significance of the scar through a contextual discussion of representations of female beauty in late-nineteenth-century visual culture. Linking Cather's story to Manet's revolutionary 1863 painting *Olympia*, Kessler's interdisciplinary analysis draws on art history, feminist studies, and knowledge of the transatlantic cultural world that shaped the young Cather's imagination.

Cather was a friend to many singers, a devotee of opera, and an author of stories about the growth of musical creativity. In "'Before the Romanzas Have Become Street Music': Cather and Verdi's *Falstaff*, Chicago, 1895," John H. Flannigan describes the eclectic range of music that animated Cather's imagination. Through a forensic reconstruction of a single musical encounter in Chicago early in Cather's career, Flannigan develops a reading of Cather and the changing nature of "taste" at the turn of the century. Tracing evidence of Cather's interest in both elite and popular (or folk) forms of music, Flannigan reads her eclecticism as emblematic of her fondness for both "high" and "low" forms of culture.

The writers in this volume create a layered, multivalent sense of what "modern cultures" might mean. What unifies many of the essays is an understanding of Cather as a writer of transition: she straddled the late-Victorian and modernist eras and saw many aspects of the contemporary world emerge over time. As a result, her fiction set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meditates on the transition into the modern. Her sensibility forged by this shift, Cather captures the massive and irrevocable cultural change that had taken place. This cultural dynamic structures many of her novels, which foreground the processes of looking back, memorializing, and remembering, as if to acknowledge how much had altered in the period between the 1880s, when the young Cather moved to Nebraska, and the 1920s, when she entered her major creative phase.

The profoundly elegiac cast of Cather's works relates complexly to the passing of time and to the realization that—for good and ill—her protagonists were living in modern times. Cather's characters, like Cather herself, often exhibit profound disquiet about this passage to the modern. However, we can see in the distinctive shapes of her novels, with their recursions into memory and their attempts to synchronize and bridge very different cultural eras, the modern emerging with full force. Protagonists such as Jim Burden and Professor St. Peter try to recall and capture the past in order to understand the present and, perhaps, create a bridge to the future. In this desire, they are fully modern.

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