

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SHAPING INFINITY: AMERICAN AND
CANADIAN WOMEN WRITE A NORTH
AMERICAN WEST

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This study posits a border-crossing, post-national conception of the "west," enabling a trajectory of women's literary history to become visible that transcends more narrowly-imagined Canadian or American paradigms. The dissertation looks across the 49th parallel to propose a semiotics and politics of North American women's writings about the West. As a part of an ongoing critical conversation about entanglements of body, and place, this study considers the way maps and bodies and the potential of new places open up opportunities for women writers.

My dissertation reimagines as a community texts that have previously been narrowly categorized as, for example, nature writing, or western, or written by a woman, or regionalist American or Canadian. The group of writers I've chosen includes Americans Willa Cather, Martha Ostenso, Terry Tempest Williams and Louise Erdrich, and Canadians

Margaret Laurence, Ethel Wilson, Gabrielle Roy, and Aritha van Herk. The texts written by this group consider intersections of gender, power, and the physical specificity of the land while redefining the terms belonging and Otherness in the context of a new space. Rethinking language leads to interrogation of the ways that bodies (nations, communities, people) both join and separate themselves from other bodies, including borders, houses, and the way maps of belonging are drawn. The work of feminist cultural geographers is crucial to my interrogation of geographic and political borders and borderlands, the physical bodies inhabiting those literal and fictional liminal spaces and the effects of the language used by and about women who choose to locate their work there.

The lived experience of westering women pervades the texts in this study; recognition of the great fact of the body grounds each one in a physical reality. Admitting the previously unspeakable female body precludes the preservation of those mythological structures that accompany given spaces. These writers create an imaginative space in which images of containing structures (maps and bodies, houses and even cars) escape their definitions to

deliver on the promise inherent in new places for women
writers and their texts.

SHAPING INFINITY:
AMERICAN AND CANADIAN WOMEN WRITE A NORTH AMERICAN WEST

by

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Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	.ii
<i>Introduction</i>	.1
<i>Chapter I- Bathtubs, bed linen, and birch trees:</i>	
<i>Bodies and landscapes in Cather and Ostenso</i>	.32
<i>Chapter II- "the least common denominator of nature":</i>	
<i>the imaginative space of the prairie in Cather, Roy,</i>	
<i>Laurence, and Erdrich</i>	.89
<i>Chapter III - "A wild cartography of longing":</i>	
<i>Wilson, Laurence, and Kishkan</i>	.137
<i>Chapter IV- Canadian connections:</i>	
<i>Willa Cather and Aritha van Herk</i>	.190
<i>Works Cited</i>	.254

Introduction

Where I live as a woman is to men a wilderness,
but to me it is home.

Ursula Le Guin

Are they assigned, or can the countries pick
their colors?

--What suits the character or the native waters
best.

Topography displays no favorites; North's as near
as West.

More delicate than the historians' are the map-
makers' colors.

Elizabeth Bishop, from "The Map"

In June 1995, at the Sixth International Cather seminar in Quebec City, the Canadian writer Aritha van Herk gave a plenary session entitled "Cather in Ecstasy," in which she performed Willa Cather on an imaginative excursion through the city. A milliner's shop was prominently featured, as was a bathtub—both important markers in Cather's novels and short stories. All in all it was a remarkable, funny, creative and irreverent

presentation (and, it must be noted, a talk that offended a number of those in the room). I left the room feeling that I had experienced a pivotal academic moment; that presentation was really the catalyst for this project. Demonstrating the connection between "Cather in Ecstasy" and the works of Willa Cather is one way to describe the way the texts included in this study form a continuum, working with ideas about and descriptive language for bodily occupation of imaginative spaces. Still, the methodology and theoretical underpinnings of the work were elusive until I began to understand that a cross-border project of this nature could not rest solely on literary theory. I read the work of feminist cultural geographers, historians, and cultural studies scholars. I thought about water, and bodies in water, and maps, and other ways that the texts I was interested in seemed to speak to one another. This study proposes a semiotics¹ and politics of North American women's writings about the American and Canadian West, an interpretive conversation among the separate political strategies of terrain, language, bodily and lived experience. To that end, this study draws together theoretical concepts from literary study, studies of cultural politics, and cultural geography to provide a

¹ I thank Marilee Lindemann for her help in articulating this concept.

new set of axes of meaning on which images of domesticity can be read as a part of the process of thinking about bodies in place, a new plane on which a set of stories about a North American women's West might be limned.

Annette Kolodny, in *The Land Before Her*, posits the Euro-American woman as "captive...in the garden of someone else's imagination," the "unwilling inhabitant of a metaphorical landscape she had no part in creating". Kolodny argues that such women turned to gardens and gardening to avoid the issues their male counterparts faced as despoilers of "lost Edens," and to resolve their exclusion from the wilderness. Stacy Alaimo comments that "the frontier women Kolodny describes imagine their gardens as an extension of domestic space, a ground within the sphere of their influence, a space of their own" (15). Vera Norwood, too, in *Made From this Earth: American Women and Nature*, links nineteenth and twentieth-century women to environmental activities through the domestic, arguing that "the values of middle-class family life were conflated with the domestication of the landscape" (277). If women are perceived as entering wilderness only under cover of the domestic, a realm that has tended to erase individual bodies in favor of the images of the Republican Mother, the housewife of the nineteen-fifties, and the turn-of-the-

century soccer mom, then it is no surprise that critical conversations about the implications of (and issues facing) real, individual, physical bodies in those spaces have taken so long to surface, as they began to do in the 1970s. The model of the Republican Mother, the precursor of the woman in that frontier garden, is a social and political construct, charged with the responsibility of bearing and raising a nation's leaders. Frontier women in English Canada operated under much the same set of expectations as American women on the frontier, as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) attests. Attention to women's bodies focused on the ability to bear children and stay healthy long enough to raise them. Bodies in domestic spaces are there for a purpose (nation-building, ultimately), and female bodies, regardless of the color of their skins, are considered primarily in those utilitarian terms.

Today, however, the effect of considering literal bodies in place is an interdisciplinary discursive trend, occurring in critical geographical studies, for example, as well as literary ventures. Yet despite all the interdisciplinary interest in embodiment and space, and "while it has become highly acceptable to employ postmodernist metaphors of fluidity and mobility, it is

still not acceptable for the flesh and boundaries of fluid, volatile, messy, leaky bodies to be included in geographical discourse."² In addition, the feminist cultural geographer Robyn Longhurst writes, "the reason this is significant is that the messiness of bodies is often conceptualised as feminised and as such is Othered...Ignoring the messy body is not a harmless omission, rather, it contains a political imperative that helps keep masculinism intact"(23). It is not only masculinism that is kept intact by ignoring the body, but the mythological structures accompanying a given space are preserved in this way as well, allowing a group to maintain a sense of nationhood, or empire, or even frontier. And taking note of literal bodies has begun to seem increasingly (and interdisciplinarily) important in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, or, in Linda McDowell's words:

What distinguishes the world at the end of the twentieth century is the transnational attenuation of 'local' space, and this breaking of space into 'discontinuous realities' which alters

²Robyn Longhurst. *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001: 23.

our sense of ourselves as individuals,
members of various groups and
communities, as citizens of a nation
state.³

The arrival of MTV, the pervasiveness of sexualized images in the visual environment, and the all-too-evident bodily needs of the increasing numbers of people living in poverty, as well as the burgeoning homeless populations in our metropolitan areas, all remind us on a daily basis of the range of demands our corporeality insists upon. Too, the distinctions among (consumable) representations of bodies in public spaces (bus-sized underwear ads, billboards advocating gun control, with holes punched in children's bodies and faces) and the individual bodies in which we live create liminal spaces of physical unreality where eating disorders and low self-esteem (integral to the plots of several texts considered in this study) thrive. And because the texts we study are products of cultural moments, and the theories we apply grow out of our experiences of contemporary cultural imperatives, the entanglements of place and body have captured the attention of scholars in a range of academic disciplines. As a part

³ "Spatializing Feminism: Geographic perspectives" in *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, Nancy Duncan, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1996:30.

of that ongoing conversation, this study considers the way maps and bodies and the promise of potential inherent in new places create possibility for women writers. Primary concerns are, as Margaret Higonnet writes, "the ways writers inscribe gender onto the symbolic representations of space within texts" and "the ways maps of gender overlap with maps of other status" (2). In this study, I argue that it is crucial to investigate the ways women writers transform traditional domestic spaces and utilize the female body in defining both belonging and Otherness in a new space. Such an inquiry leads to a consideration of the ways that bodies (nations, communities, people) both join and separate themselves from other bodies, including borders, houses, and the way maps of belonging are drawn. If male cartographers have, in fact, had "favorites," despite Elizabeth Bishop's assertion that topography itself does not, what happens when the cartographer is female, or when she considers a variety of topographies operating in a symbiotic relationship?

Karen Sánchez-Eppler's *Touching Liberty* (1993) lays out the early framework for reading the status of the body in nineteenth-century American political rhetoric, revealing "the bodily basis of women's and blacks' exclusion from political power and ... the physical

attributes of whiteness and maleness implicit in such power"(3). Sánchez-Eppler notes the irony, too, that in the evolving nation, while "political and cultural concern with the corporeality of identity effectively increased the centrality of the demand for suffrage" yet it "came to reiterate the rhetoric of abstract personhood that had traditionally erased and silenced their distinct flesh" (5).

Shifting to the cultural politics thread of this argument leads naturally to Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, in which the contributors complicate the master script of American nationhood, described by Donald Pease thus:

The metanarrative of American history should have been classified as political mythology rather than history. The complex mythological event informing this metanarrative cross-identified Columbus's discovery of the "New World" with the United States' successful War of Independence against the British Empire. As a consequence, referents embedded in this complex imaginary event [. . .] engaged a

prototypical American self (*American Adam*), in a quest romance (*Errand into the Wilderness*) to liberate "our" native land (*Virgin Land*) from "foreign" encroachment (*The Power of Blackness*) ("New Perspectives," 24).

Pease lays out the framework of cultural assumptions, complete with supporting texts, that not only underlies a common view of American nationhood but participates emphatically in the masculinized vision of the western frontier. It is primarily this paradigm that made such visionary entrepreneurs as William F. Cody so successful in marketing *their* wests,⁴ and it is with those images in full view that the writing of a North American women's west begins to take shape.

In considering the various revisions of the frontier as "a site of contacts, encounters, and collisions that produce new hybrid cultures,"⁵ Amy Kaplan asserts that "the borderlands thus transform the traditional notion of the frontier from the primitive margins of civilization to a decentered cosmopolitanism" (17). Current thinking about

⁴ See "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," by Richard Slotkin, in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, pp. 164-181.

⁵ "'Left Alone With America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," by Amy Kaplan, in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, pp. 3-21.

the borderlands allow a far greater range of transformative possibility than Huck Finn might have imagined pre-
"lighting out." Not least important in the recognition of
"multidimensional and transterritorial"(16) borderlands
comes a reconsideration of the place of the individual
within a democracy, a reexamination of the nature of the
United States (that empire so heavily reliant on the mythic
west as emblematic of something quintessentially American).
In a multidimensional borderland, with its constant
awareness of the importance of space, there is room for
more than one kind of story. And there is both tacit and
overt recognition that multiple stories exist; there is a
democracy of story.

In rethinking the word 'democracy', Russ Castronovo
and Dana D. Nelson organize a group of essays that look for
meaning in contemporary aspects of democracy and suggest a
range of approaches to politicizing concerns of space,
nation, and individual rights. Wai-Chee Dimock's essay in
this collection, "Rethinking Space, Rethinking Rights;
Literature, Law and Science," begins with Mary Ann
Glendon's description of the United States as "the land of
rights," a phrase implying a "space of sanctity that ought
not to be encroached" and resulting in the idea that
"within the paradigm of individual rights, every moral

dispute is spatially mappable, traceable to a territorial transgression" (249). Dimock's essay works to complicate such absolute notions of space and individuality. Methodologically, this leads to a confrontation between Newton and Einstein, and the influence of Immanuel Kant. The alternative model Dimock proposes is a cross-disciplinary project, asserting⁶ that New England "local color" literature⁷ "is one of the most compelling correctives to the fantasy of discreteness that so often accompanies the claim of rights. And, in renouncing that fantasy, it also renders vivid a democracy not mapped along the axis of winners and losers" (259). It is similarly a fantasy of discreteness, I argue, that American and Canadian women's writings should not constitute community, and particularly as regards the experiences of women in the North American West. And the "democracy not mapped along the axis of winners and losers" is also relevant to my project, as the writers in my study dissolve this and similar binaries in developing a semiotics of a North

⁶ "In the very circumscription of its setting, the sheer proximity of the lives it delineates, the fictive world here is relational in quite a stifling sense: it is a web, a history of entanglement, a space-time continuum alternately registered as friction and kinship, endearment and encroachment" (259). This description speaks equally well to U.S./Canada relations, especially in the current moment, when the American media, from the op-ed page of *The New York Times* to the monologues of late-night comedians, is tearing its collective hair out over Canadian policies on the Iraq war, on gay marriage and marijuana use.

⁷ Dimock's examples are all drawn from the work of Mary Wilkins Freeman.

American women's west. Integral to this process is the transformation of maps.

In *Territorial Disputes*, Graham Huggan proposes an initial set of rules for an interdisciplinary notion he calls literary cartography, defining the practice as:

fundamentally concerned with the process of representation; but whereas the symbolic representation of landscapes in literature is primarily directed towards the question of how the land is *perceived*, the metaphoric function of maps in literature is addressed first and foremost to the issue of how the land is *controlled*.

(31)

Huggan goes on to describe literary cartography as a means of exploring "territorial strategies that are implicitly or explicitly associated with maps" (31). For the purposes of a feminist literary enterprise, the implications of this theory are clear. Literary cartography is suffused with the dueling notions of perception and control, which, intertwined as they are with power relations, result in what Huggan rightly calls an "ambivalent" function, as "maps may be simultaneously perceived as useful tools and

dangerous weapons" (31). The writers I've chosen to study articulate in their texts the dialectic Huggan proposes: they are coming to terms with and tapping creative sources within a frontier entirely shaped by stories that exclude them as well as the realities presented by their physical presence, as they work to "fashion, explore, and map new [literary] territories" (57).

Like Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Robyn Longhurst is interested in what has happened to the distinct bodies that inhabit the maps in her own discipline of geography. Her proposed new territories would be sensitive to those inhabitants; Longhurst's discussion of fluid boundaries, for example, is an avowed "attempt to mess up geography's disciplinary boundaries...creating interstices through which to slip difference and Otherness into the discipline. It is also about geography's seepage into other disciplines"(1). Of course the image of one discipline's "seepage" into others is intriguing, but no less compelling is Longhurst's interest in the productive disturbing of boundaries. Longhurst notes, in setting the context for her own work, that geographers have "begun to pay more attention to bodies," but points out that "a distinction has been drawn between discursive bodies and material bodies"(1), that "the leaky, messy awkward zones of the inside/outside of

bodies and their resulting spatial relationships remain largely unexamined in geography"(2). Through discussions of "pregnant bodies in public places, men's insecure bodies in toilets/bathrooms, and managers' 'suited,' fit, and flexible bodies in [central business districts]," Longhurst reveals the materiality of bodies in body-space relations, and asserts that "the spaces of bodies themselves and the spaces of places do not remain clearly separable but make each other in everyday ways"(8), a statement that resonates in literary contexts as well.⁸ Hers is a book that invites reflection on and questioning of "some of the grounds upon which knowledges about bodies and spaces rests"(8). The plurals in Longhurst's phrasing remind me that interdisciplinary projects like hers (and mine) necessarily locate themselves in/of/against more than one ongoing conversation.

Another of the ongoing conversations in which my study participates is the question of how feminist literary critics engage "nature" and the environment. Stacy Alaimo wrestles with the question of essentialism in considering how gender inflects experiences in and understandings of nature and the environment. Noting the catalogue of images

⁸ Particularly, as I will show, in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*.

(“Mother earth, earth mothers, natural women, wild women, fertile fields, barren ground, virgin lands, raped earths, ‘a woman in the shape of a monster/a monster in the shape of a woman,’ the repulsively breeding aliens of horror films”⁹), Alaimo points out that “these creatures portray nature as a female and women as not exactly human,” and that such casting “thrusts woman outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency”(2). How then, to talk and write about women in nature? Insisting on women’s freedom being predicated on her separation from nature accepts the “nature/culture hierarchy” (4) as an absolute, creating other difficulties:

The recent rage to purge feminism of all vestiges of ‘essentialism’, for example, is one of the most striking instances of feminist theory’s flight from nature. Working within rather than against predominant dualisms, many important feminist arguments and concepts necessitate a rigid opposition between nature and culture.(4)

⁹ *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000: 2.

And, as Alaimo goes on to point out, "barring nature from entrance denies any space for the workings of bodies" (6). Alaimo notices the way some "radical" feminists (Adrienne Rich, for example) have imagined nature as beyond the influence of patriarchy, while ecofeminists make "even more explicit links between nature and feminism," arguing that the haste with which such claims are dismissed as essentialist "betrays a narrow rigidity on the part of the predominant feminist positions"(8). Alaimo finds possibility in repositioning women's bodies, experiences, and labor, "long [. . .] denigrated for their supposed proximity to a degraded natural world,"(9) along axes that redefine "woman" and "nature" - and, possibly, culture. In a consideration of women's bodies in new landscapes, it is my intention to participate in the discursive process Alaimo proposes, working across the United States/Canada border to envision a textual space in which culture and nature need not be halves of a rigid binary and in which boundaries of body, home, and country might be read as permeable and permitting inclusion, rather than requiring exclusion.

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The need for a study such as this is evident in the current culture of literary studies. As early maps of the

Trans-Mississippi West represented only major geographical features and employed a rather imperialist fashion in both naming said landmarks and including large areas of blank space, so scholarly works on the literature of the American and Canadian West have focused on just a few salient characteristics of those texts. Indeed, even at the end of the twentieth century, some scholars of the American West have a difficult time believing in a Canadian western literature. It is not surprising, then, issues of national identity being so problematic as we enter the new millennium, that there has been little work focused on subtler but no less important aspects of the study of western literature.

While a revised version of Robert Thacker's *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, currently out-of-print, is expected in 2004, and Laurie Ricou's genre- and border-crossing *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* appeared in 2002, there are no current cross-border studies incorporating the feminist focus of this work nor its interest in trans-mountain Wests. Krista Comer's *Landscapes of the New West* does not treat the same group of writers, texts, or regions. Carol Fairbanks looked across the border in her 1986 *Prairie Women*, as did Diane Quantic in *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (1995), but

neither envisioned border-crossing communities of texts in the way my study does. While Quantic notes, for example, "The Great Plains do not end at the northern border, but extend in a crescent into the prairie provinces of Canada—Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta", and that "although Canadian prairie literature recounts the same problems of establishing new communities in a demanding land, there are some differences in the myths, if not the realities," she chooses not to explore either differences or similarities in much detail. Quantic reminds her reader that "the Wild West is not a part of the tradition in Canada, where the Mounties' reassuring presence brought law and order at the time of settlement and the displacement of the Indian population was not such a violent confrontation" (xviii-xix), but does not bring the implications of those differences to bear on a range of texts.

Among other texts with transborder interests, Stanley Fogel's *A Tale of Two Countries* is limited in focus to a few texts by male writers, and Seymour Martin Lipset's monograph for the Borderlands Project, *North American Cultures: Values and Institutions in Canada and the United States*, presents discursive highlights on a broad range of issues, but is constrained by form in its ability to present any aspect of the discourse in depth.

Despite the muted level of critical conversation, the United States/Canada border is indeed a literary place to be reckoned with. It can be both porous and virtually impermeable, and that is particularly true as regards the literatures of the two countries. To most Americans, Canadian literature = Margaret Atwood. A very well-read person might be able to add Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje and Timothy Findley. It is my contention that it is more important than ever, in the early twenty-first century, for scholars of American literature to look outward, and northward. Reading the literature of the American West is a diminished experience without also reading literature of the Canadian West, and this is even more explicitly so when one is considering women writers.

This study concentrates on the United States/Canada border, positing the existence of a North American prairie and West and accepting the notion that "the need for a place where 'things are different' is the constant theme of the West, Canadian and American" (LaDow, 23). The writers I focus on in this study, including Willa Cather, Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy, Ethel Wilson, Theresa Kishkan, Louise Erdrich, and Aritha van Herk, work with the notion of a West as a place of difference, where lived experience matters in the content and context of their works as well

as in the language and form they use to shape those texts. Their texts include and celebrate the distinct bodies of their characters and their relationships to place and space while acknowledging and negotiating various literal, imaginative and political boundaries and borders. While the American and Canadian women writers included in this study individually privilege different rhetorical strategies, they produce texts with common interests. Reading Aritha van Herk against a literary backdrop that includes Willa Cather, for example, produces a fuller sense of van Herk's place in a historical continuum, and a clearer understanding of her aesthetic project. Van Herk's performance piece "Cather in Ecstasy," which places Cather's imagined body in an imagined Quebec City along with a number of her more memorable characters, makes creative and aesthetic sense in that context; without it, the performance looks like the whim of an academic dilettante.

The first decades of scholarship on women and the American West of necessity established the need for that work in a landscape of criticism that had focused almost exclusively on the writings of men. Although a work such as *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (Faragher, 1979), began to consider that this migration could not be read through a

single lens, it is the work of Julie Roy Jeffrey, Annette Kolodny, Sandra Myres, Glenda Riley, Lillian Schlissel, and Joanna Stratton, among others, work that was and is heavily archival, that resulted in the discovery of a wealth of letters, journals, and other texts authored by women living or journeying to the West and literally opened the way for other scholars to think about issues beyond recovering the voices and texts of those women writers.¹⁰ In *The Land Before Her*, for example, Annette Kolodny's discovery, through archival research, that women's western experiences played out in images of gardens and making a new place into a home, rather than in a male conquest paradigm, informs her interrogation of women's experiences on American frontiers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

Recognition and acceptance of such different visions of frontier and West in the scholarly community enabled a range of feminist projects, and allowed critical focus to shift away from the task of articulating the exigence for feminist scholarship. It is now possible to begin to think both critically and in a wide-ranging manner about the

¹⁰ For example, in *Plotting the Golden West*, Stephen Fender remarks that the "complex dialectic between the idea and fact of emigrating to the West makes the collected letters of Mary Jane Megquier, written home from San Francisco between 1849 and 1856, one of the minor classics of the Gold Rush [. . . .] Her letters record her gradual transition from forty-niner's wife to independent settler. They show the mental process by which she worked out her own version of the rite of passage, now testing events against statements of the archetype, now qualifying the myth with the results of the actual" (97).

implications of gendered journeys to and in gendered landscapes, about the bodies that make those journeys and live in the new lands. The effects of this scholarship, and that accomplished under the more general heading of Women's Studies, have begun to be apparent in a variety of disciplines.

The recent work of feminist cultural geographers has consciously taken up the methodological issues that feminist theorists tackled three decades ago. Doreen Massey, in *Space, Place, and Gender*, and Gillian Rose, in *Feminism and Geography*, to name just two, specifically challenge the language and vision of leading male geographers—Edward Soja, for example—in their efforts to open the way for both actual women in the discipline and women's places and spaces. Their work informed the early stages of my thinking as I began to consider the effects of geographic and political borders and borderlands, and the effects of the language used by and about women who choose to locate their work in literal and fictional liminal spaces similar to eco-tones, those areas that exist at the boundary of sand and sea, or on the timberline.¹¹ And their work led me down the paths of the library stacks to cross

¹¹ The borderland defined by (but not necessarily symmetric about) the line separating the western United States from western Canada is such a liminal space.

research boundaries and investigate more recent works by feminist cultural geographers, including Nancy Duncan, Robyn Longhurst, Linda McDowell, and Joanne Sharp.

In the course of his discussion of contrasts between Canadian and American literatures of the West, Dick Harrison notes that "conflicts in [western] novels tend to be framed in [. . .] dramatic, rather than dialectic terms: that is, forces in opposition are conceived not as complementary or mutually dependent (as in the self/other opposition) but as exclusive, their conflict to be resolved through the triumph of one force over another" (64). Framing his own argument in these terms sets Harrison on course to consider only a narrowly defined community of texts, and bars him from a subtler consideration of western literature. It is not simply a logistical problem to agree with John R. Milton that "Writers such as [. . .] Willa Cather, whose novels do not readily fit the paradigm are [. . .] relegate[d] to the periphery of the canon, and their work would require separate consideration" (Harrison 64-65). It is also the inconvenient reality that including any women's narratives in this particular argument means changing the terms of the discourse. In focusing on what he calls "dialectic opposition," Harrison cannot consider fictions built on structures other than clear-cut binary

relationships, although his own text makes it clear to the reader that those "others" require attention. The "condition of division or alienation between consciousness and the natural universe is not represented [in W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind?* (1947)] as an incidental product of socializing influences or of avoidable participation in the exploitation of narrative," (67) but as a growing recognition of and need for separations from "other." In Canadian literary scholarship, this is a necessary next step from Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality", yet in the process Harrison overlays a deceptively simple structure on the genre expectations of both Canadian and American western fiction. Harrison goes on to remind his reader that "in classic western American fiction [. . .] alienation is commonly followed by escape into nature" (69). Yes, for many male authors. For women writers, however, those routes are less readily available.

If the standard discussion of western fiction began, then, with a deceptive simplification that in its own turn was already based on questions of national identity, what happens when the hierarchy is destabilized to consider other communities first? Canadian literary scholars have asked "How do you make love in a new country?" (Kroetsch, 73) and "How do you make writing in a new

country?" (Banting, 30). What happens when discussions based on an American or English-Canadian literary tradition become instead discussions of literature by women, inflected first by gender, then by landscape, and thirdly by questions of national identity? In what form does the "new country," or borderland, appear? Walter Benn Michaels ends his discussion of nativist modernism in *Our America* with the assertion that "what's wrong with cultural identity is that, without recourse to the racial identity that (in its current manifestations) it repudiates, it makes no sense" (142). Perhaps the thread of his argument can be tugged a little farther to suggest that talking about cultural identity without recourse to gender issues makes no sense.

Women's journeys to and experiences in the American West can be read with and against works by women dealing with similar journeys and experiences across the U.S./Canada border; "westering" must be understood alongside the continued activity of border crossing, producing a different kind of cultural community, complete with a group of texts that reflect concerns of 'women's westering.' In his memoir *Wolf Willow*, Wallace Stegner describes the 49th parallel as "an agreement, a rule, a limitation, a fiction perhaps but a legal one, acknowledged

by both sides"(85). In responding to Stegner's description, and his further assertion that "Civilization is built upon a tripod of geography, history, and law, and it is made up largely of limitations"(85), Morton L. Ross notes that "Stegner is right, but it is also true that students of the American West must resist one such limitation—the temptation to become not only a regionalist, but a nationalist" (1001). He concludes that "the very differences in these two literatures of the west [Canadian and American], adjacent and closely interwoven as they are, seem even more reasons to study them together" (1011). In the introduction to her own study of the 49th parallel, Beth LaDow notes that "North Americans tend to divide the American story from the Canadian along this boundary, as if it split the past as neatly as a meat cleaver"(1). The implicit violence of LaDow's image of separation is matched by the strength of the resistance to uniting those pasts, in some disciplines, as she notes that "today history divides on either side of the border, into the distant camps of the American Wild West and the orderly Canadian hinterland" (3). This study brings together several methods of political and critical inquiry, describing a community of texts that have previously been narrowly categorized as nature writing or western, as written by women, or as

regionalist American or Canadian. Acknowledging specificity of place is crucial for all the writers in this study. Christopher GoGwilt's explication and framing of the metaphor and cognates of "the West" centers on a recognition of all its connotations of otherness, and so it has been, exponentially so, for women in the west.

Conversations in western studies are enriched every time a barrier becomes merely a boundary.¹² In considering what is gained by reading across the U.S./Canada border, I work with the following framing questions: How does the physical experience of being women in the West inform these texts? Are different bodies generated in the new place, and if so, what do they look like? What happens to traditional literary paradigms if the body of the subject is female, rather than male? When women step outside of whatever it is they regard as their defining identity, how does the western aspect of their lived experience make that possible?

The notion of body-centered readings as integral to a consideration of place is crucial to this project. Other useful tropes occurring in these texts include the use of water and the work of maps. The bathing narrative in Willa

¹² I do not mean to suggest that the U.S./Canada border is a literary inconvenience; there are valid and important reasons to focus on issues germane to a "national literature," and I acknowledge these while choosing to consider different possibilities.

Cather's work with bodies submerged in a variety of wild and domesticated waters, the transformative floods in Louise Erdrich's *Last Report*, the power of water in liquid and frozen form in the Aritha van Herk oeuvre, and the widely contested nature of water in the West are all significant in the development of a textual North American West. Marianne DeKoven has argued the power of water imagery as a modernist strategy, and it is clear from these works that water's powerful presence reverberates in contemporary literature in an equally important way. From "something shining" in *O Pioneers!*, to Laurence's River of Now and Then, to the icy possibility of van Herk's Ellesmere Island, water imagery produces in this context a lens through which to reimagine a male-dominated landscape, that landscape previously feminized in terms of the discourse of male explorers, settlers, and cartographers. Water becomes a point of entry for female bodies as it flows in these texts, creating a transparent, mutable lens, but it can also be powerfully destructive, obliterating a familiar landscape/text, and, as we move to the Arctic, the literary and literal water eventually freezes, creating an opaque surface that becomes a site for inscription (and reinscription) of women's texts even as it resists the physical imprint of the woman narrator. Here, too, Graham

Huggan's 'literary cartography' comes into play as these writers work within established paradigms of western mythology, disrupting standard binaries and expectations for women through linguistic experiments ranging from subtle to blunt. Reading these texts together results in a sense of shared concerns, an evolving vision of a felt western terrain perceived through female bodies; the beginnings of a tapestry of women's western experiences re-rendered, as it were, through the voices of Willa Cather, Margaret Laurence, Ethel Wilson, Theresa Kishkan, et al.

The first chapter of this study focuses on bodily connections to place, framing Willa Cather's 'bathing narrative' as emblematic of concern for and awareness of the issues of 'leaky, messy' bodies in space. In this chapter, too, I consider Martha Ostenso's 1925 novel, *Wild Geese*, and Ostenso's vision of successful engagements with the land. This section clarifies Cather's work as emblematic of a version of women's westering, employing the literal bodies of her characters as teleological markers of meaning.

The second chapter considers four 20th century novels that provide examples of imaginative prairies where women's stories differ from Robert Kroetsch's paradigmatic house: horse binary and from traditional literary metaphors of

prairie barrenness. In addition, these texts demonstrate the production of alternate and destabilizing readings of the prairies through women's bodies. My readings of Cather's *O Pioneers!*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Gabrielle Roy's *The Road Past Altamont*, and Louise Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No-Horse* show that their maps of prairie experience are not drawn to conquer or possess but rather to give voice to difference, and to participate in the work of telling more than one kind of story about the prairie. Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, involving a water journey, birth and re-birth, and the process of coming to accept conflicting stories of women's experiences, all played out against a background of environmental exploitation and white vs. Native American politics, will enter into this conversation as well.

The third chapter centers on a group of Canadian texts set west of the Rockies, beginning with Ethel Wilson's *Hetty Dorval* and *Swamp Angel*, moving on to Theresa Kishkan's border-crossing novel *Sisters of Grass*, and finishing with Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*. The readings in this chapter do much to articulate the place of the house in my vision of a women's West. The house is not part of a strict inside:outside (house:horse) binary but, drawing on body-centered readings by Henri Bergson, Stacy

Alaimo, Robyn Longhurst, and others, is located as a permeable structure that positions transformative domesticity as integral to women's westering.

The final textual chapter examines Cather's Canadian connections through the work of the award-winning Canadian writer Aritha van Herk, including her unpublished performance piece, "Cather in Ecstasy", and Cather's own 1931 novel, *Shadows on the Rock*. Van Herk's texts cross multiple genre boundaries, including narrative, theory and cartography. As in Cather and Laurence's work, leaving a well-known place creates an opportunity for imaginative return. Aritha van Herk's literal and imaginative landscapes in *Places Far from Ellesmere*, *No Fixed Address*, and *Restlessness* help the reader map new ways of reading and seeing, forcing active exchanges with each text. And in "Cather in Ecstasy," as van Herk performs her own Willa Cather enjoying an afternoon in Quebec City (the setting for *Shadows*), we are reminded of the explicit continuum binding these texts. Van Herk's invocation of Cather serves both to validate and move forward from the earlier author's creative aesthetic, acknowledging shared concerns and intellectual curiosity.

CHAPTER I: Bathtubs, bed linen, and birch trees:

Bodies and landscapes in Cather and Ostenso

As with so many binary accounts of difference, the difference between [. . .] real and non-real spaces is constructed through the terms of sexual difference. The real is simultaneously concrete and dynamic, yet both these qualities signify the masculine; the non-real is simultaneously fluid and imprisoning, but always engendered as feminine.¹³

Gillian Rose

In mapping a path through western women's writings published in Canada and the United States during the entire twentieth-century, echoes of Willa Cather resonate at every turn. This study, then, reflects off a notion that Cather's works model a range of strategies for writing women in the west. As part of her evolving creative teleology, Cather's West is an imaginative place in which more traditional

¹³ Gillian Rose, "As if the Mirrors had Bled: Masculine dwelling, masculinist theory and feminist masquerade," 59.

paradigms of a male-centered frontier and western mythologies are inverted, turned inside out and redeployed on an alternative set of axes. As the body of Cather's work grew, so did the effect of her vision, which has influenced numerous writers, male and female.¹⁴

The phrase "Willa Cather's West" calls up, for many readers, the famous image of the plough silhouetted against the setting sun in *My Antonia*. But Cather's West is much more than that romantic image. The opening scene of *O Pioneers!* and the description of the weather on the open prairie, the descriptions of the little towns left behind by the railroad in *A Lost Lady*, Aunt Georgiana's Nebraska experience in "A Wagner Matinée" all speak to a rendering of the West and western experience that is firmly anchored—like the town of Hanover—in a reality as non-fluid, to use Gillian Rose's category, as any imaginable. That reality includes the specific, well-documented hardships faced by women whose lives are entirely constrained by the demands of patriarchal society and issues of physical survival,¹⁵ or, in other words, by the bodily experiences of her

¹⁴ See especially the work of Merrill Maguire Skaggs, including "Thefts and Conversations: Cather and Faulkner" and "Cather and the father of history."

¹⁵ This is not to deny the suffering of male characters in Cather's fiction. Claude Wheeler's misery is an integral part of my later discussion of Cather's bathing narrative, for example—and there are always characters like Mr. Shimerda, who cannot adapt to a new culture.

characters. In the process of creating and using alternative axes of meaning, binary distinctions are complicated by multiple visions of possibility. Cather's West is a place where women are not limited to cultivating their gardens. They are landowners, like Alexandra Bergson, or artists, like Thea Kronborg. They are childfree, they have large families; they are married, they are single. And Cather's exploration of distinct bodies on the prairie is not limited to the experiences of women. As I will show, Jim Burden and Claude Wheeler, too, have significant physical epiphanies that belong in any discussion of Cather's treatment of the body.

In this chapter, I trace Cather's use of water imagery in what I have called her bathing narrative, focusing on the interplay of bodies, water, and issues of power, and noticing tropes that resonate for other women writers of the west. Gillian Rose's proposed real/non-real paradigm, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, plays out across the expanse of Cather's work, particularly in the ways notions of fluidity work in explorations of social structures and the construction of gender. The recurring trope of water and the issues involved in building a new cultural model and 'mapping' a new way of life suggest ways in which Cather's strategies are exemplary of a particular

kind of subversive un-myth-making among women writers of the American and Canadian West. In particular, recalling Robyn Longhurst's assertion that discussions of space need to account for the physical bodies therein, this study focuses on ways bodily imperatives inform imaginative construction of space in all of Cather's works and serve as models for other writers. Cather's interest in the physical lives of her characters is evident in the scenes that comprise the bathing narrative, and echoes as well in the work of her contemporary, the writer Martha Ostenso.

Cather's myth-dismantling strategies provide models that can be extended to other border-crossing texts, and demonstrate ways in which the recognition of such work solidifies the importance of transborder reading; for the purposes of this study, other texts will be reflected off the aesthetic structures proposed by Cather's works. Willa Cather's well-known recognition of the importance of details, for example, functions as an anthropological approach to meaning-making. Her attention to seeming minutiae serves to reframe traditional male markers of significance—those images of the western landscape as regenerative and optimistic, of the frontier as the place to begin anew—into avenues for the empowerment of her characters. By shifting the axes of meaning away from

traditional perceptions of domesticity, Cather re-positions Alexandra's bathtub in *O Pioneers!* as a place of power and liberation just as she endows a dirty pillowcase with the weight of a new culture in *Shadows on the Rock* (a scene I will examine in greater detail in a later chapter).

As Joan Acocella notes in *Willa Cather & the Politics of Criticism*, the evolution of feminist and gender studies has had a profound influence on Cather studies, which in its early days focused almost exclusively on biographical aspects of the works themselves and the celebration of work and writer. Acocella describes some of the categories of Cather criticism in the following chronology: "the spinster schoolteacher" (31), "taxidermic" (32), "the celebratory" (33), "Rushmoresque" (35), reading Cather as "a disaster" to the feminist cause (41), "the unreliable-narrator school" (41), "a thwarted homosexual" (49), and, last but by no means least, the "reconciliation model" (51), based on Acocella's reading of Sharon O'Brien's interpretation of Cather's relationship with her mother. Productive disagreements about the directions of Cather studies among scholars better-versed in the subject are ongoing: witness the discussion in recent issues of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter and Review among John Murphy, Joseph Urgo and Marilee Lindemann. And this is, in fact, where

(and why) I quickly part company with Acocella, who provided such a useful summary of the history of Cather studies: I find that previous work in Cather studies, rather than damping down potential critical insights, leads to productive moments for contemporary scholars, and not only the debate mentioned above. The potential for more complex readings is there precisely because there is such a substantial history of gender criticism in Cather studies.

Building on the critical work already done by Cather critics, including Susan J. Rosowski, Janis Stout, Marilee Lindemann and others, I argue that Cather develops a feminist, western, acutely body-conscious aesthetic that undermines masculine markers and other boundaries through a series of crucial textual moments evolving over the course of a writing career. The Stegnerian model, cogently outlined by Krista Comer, of "western narratives [that] were hopeful," containing "the founding promise of westward expansion [. . .] a last stand of liberal humanism" (*ULW*, 20) does not apply to Cather's West, a place that, while it may contain illusions of the West as providing "a geography of national hope," (*ULW*, 23) still resonates with the particular and powerful realities of women's daily lives. Cather eschews the classical heroic model of *The Virginian* for more complexly drawn artists, railroad barons, lawyers

and landowners. Ivy Peters, of *A Lost Lady*, as repellent a character as Cather ever imagined (even considering *My Àntonia's* Wick Cutter), has important work to do in Cather's vision of her West; the menace of the corporatization of the West and the inevitable environmental damage that will follow hard on its heels are embodied in Ivy's blinding of the woodpecker and his desire to drain the marshes around the Forrester place. The physical effects of the commodification of the West extend to Cather's characters as well, marking her concern for place and people as inseparable, intertwined.

All the writers considered in this study have similar interest in the work of place. The prairie itself, localized by Cather in Nebraska and Colorado, intact, extends across the U.S./Canada border; over the next two chapters my discussion of prairie novels crosses this border in order to show that women writers in both nations are working toward the development of similar feminist body-centered and place-conscious modes of storytelling about and in the west.

In what she referred to as her "second first novel," *O Pioneers!*, Cather writes one of her best-known protagonists, Alexandra Bergson, whose determination to make her father's farm successful baffles her brothers. The

concept that the prairie was an unsuitable setting for literary endeavor is one Cather had to deal with in contemporary critical responses to her text, but it is a notion that persists, albeit at a different level, in criticism of prairie fiction today, closing off much more rewarding (and equally valid) interpretive possibilities¹⁶.

To understand the vast nature of Cather's project in her Nebraska novels, it is important to (briefly) consider other studies of prairie fiction and the paradigms they employ. Although there is a tendency among critics today to defensively deny the persistence of the idea of the prairie as empty, the first response most make to the question "what did you see on the prairie?" is "nothing". This misleading picture of the prairie as barren, because there is nothing on it that they know how to see, has led critics to misread widely. For example, critics often miss important aspects of a classic Canadian prairie novel, *As For Me and My House* (1941), by Sinclair Ross, in ways that are applicable to a new understanding of Cather. While I

¹⁶What, for example, happens when we read Alexandra's prosperity as an exercise in building a new culture but preserving valuable moments from the old, comparable to Cecile's tending of her mother's parsley in *Shadows on the Rock*? This frees her from the masculinized readings of other characters in the novel, for one thing. It also provides some explanation for her supportive words toward Frank Shabata in jail. If Alexandra is read as understanding the institution of marriage as important in and of itself, then her ability to step away from her grief over Emil's death and assume an attitude of understanding toward his murderer is, at least, explicable.

will discuss only one of those readings in depth, it is but one voice in a long conversation about this text.¹⁷ Ross's novel, disappointingly unknown to so many American readers, is presented in the form of a journal, written by a woman, over the course of a year spent in the prairie town Horizon with her minister husband. Ross's narrator, the titled, categorized, but unnamed Mrs. Bentley, struggles with issues of avocation and vocation—she was a musician before her marriage, her husband is an artist reduced to sketching bitter visions of false-fronted buildings on the sly—and the price one pays for art, issues of marriage, home, and the requirements of domesticity, and, last but not least, life on the prairie in the Dust Bowl years. The prominent Canadian writer, poet, and critic Robert Kroetsch argues that

the book is in effect a powerful novel about the inability to make art—it is a novel as a set of diary entries about an unwritten novel. The meta-narratives—religious, artistic, social, economic—do not hold. Even the great

¹⁷ The list of those who have written interestingly (but, I would argue, incompletely) about *As For Me and My House* includes, as well as Robert Kroetsch, Sandra Djwa, John Moss, Pamela Banting, and Dick Harrison. David Stouck's collection of five decades of Ross criticism is most useful, revealing intriguing trends in scholarly thinking about this important novel.

European metanarrative about 'nature'
 does not hold here, as nature turns
 into wind and moving dust and an
 unreachable horizon. (24)

Kroetsch goes on to suggest that the questions asked over and over about this novel are what creates 'unity,' that what is important is the "concern for process" (26) in both narrative and meta-narrative. (Although my reading of *As For Me and My House* is quite different from Kroetsch's, his vision of the way literary texts and lovers of literature work to come to understanding serves as a model for me in thinking about new communities of texts. Additionally, Ross' novel is integral to any discussion of prairie fiction in the twentieth century.)

In *As For Me and My House*, structured, as noted above, as a journal kept by the nameless narrator, the prairie and the endless wind blowing across it invade the traditionally safe home space, forcing the narrator to look elsewhere for freedom from a variety of enervating frustrations. When Kroetsch frames his famous Prairie Fiction Argument in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction," he does so in a way that seems to leave little room for discussion: "The basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy-line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be *on* a horse is to

move: motion into distance. To be *in* a house is fixed: a centring unto stasis"(76). The distinction that horses move while houses do not (other than in *The Wizard of Oz*) is seemingly inarguable. Mrs. Bentley's house, however, is far from safe, as in it is contained her husband Philip, the unwilling minister and failed artist, and the reverberating resentments and desires of their marriage. The inherent dualism of Kroetsch's argument is one of the assumptions I challenge in proposing a third alternative, an interstitial corporeality of objects¹⁸. In Ross's novel, as in others I will discuss later in this study, the house comes to function as a second skin for the woman who inhabits it. This house is a structure, rather than an animate body, yet like some animate bodies it contains bodies (incompletely, impermanently, as animate bodies do); it is permeable, failing to protect those within its walls. It is another kind of "leaky body," in Longhurst's evocative phrase, informing and being informed by wind, dust, and place. Reading the house as another skin productively disrupts the model Gillian Rose describes as she engages in an imagined dialogue with Luce Irigaray, contesting a scenario in which "the body is imagined through mirrors." These "mirrors

¹⁸ Gillian Rose's essay "As if the Mirrors Had Bled: Masculine Dwelling, masculinist theory and feminist masquerade" was crucial in shaping my thinking on this issue.

envelop the master subject[. . .] looking out from his palace of mirrors, from his study constituted as an invisible space, the site of sight, the subject sees the world, his world" (Rose, 67-68). Mrs. Bentley cannot afford mirrors, the study is already occupied by her husband (usually with the door closed), and she needs a different vantage point from which to imagine her world. She will gain that new perspective as she accepts her relationship with her house.

In the past critics have read Ross's prairie as barren and applied that reading to Mrs. Bentley herself, her only child born dead, and little prospect, based on narrative evidence, of an opportunity to have another. Throughout this novel domestic spaces seem to be portrayed as imprisoning, while the outdoors is a worthy opponent: "This house huddles me. I need a tussle with the wind to set me straight"¹⁹. In fact it is the house that forces Mrs. Bentley out, that refuses to keep her within, that forces a confrontation with the forces of nature surrounding her and the town itself. The house will not separate her from nature but rather requires her to confront it.

¹⁹ Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, (1941) reprint edition 1993: 59.

The desire for that "tussle" is evident, too, in characters like Cather's Alexandra and Antonia, who precede Mrs. Bentley both textually and chronologically. Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, in fact, on both sides of the U.S./Canada border, a proliferation of prairie novels (including Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and the works of Gabrielle Roy, discussed in the following chapter) began to consider the possibilities inherent in a place Willa Cather has John Bergson identify as "the same land, the same lead-covered miles" (*OP*, 20).

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Reading Willa Cather's novels chronologically and examining the narrative formed by the entire body of texts reveals an increasingly complex treatment of bathers, a narrative-within-an-oeuvre that reflects Cather's developing sense of story. This set of key images, or stories-within-stories reveals one of the strategies Cather employed in the process of complicating an existing mythology. While many male writers sent their protagonists to sea, Cather's watery imagery is centered on the seemingly more domestic notion of the bath. Cather's bath, however, is far more than the usual tin or porcelain object common to most bathrooms. Rather than functioning in these texts as a feminized, domestic travesty that attempts to

imitate the limitless ocean wave, the bath in Cather's fiction works instead as a liberating and empowering space. The sequence of bathing scenes that begins with "Coming, Aphrodite!"'s Don Hedger and Eden Bowers' dispute over the dog Caesar's use of the bathtub (clearly a distinction between the signifying power of human and canine bodies) continues through "Before Breakfast," with Henry Grenfell's observation of the nubile Miss Fairweather enjoying a morning swim in frigid North Atlantic waters.

Cather crosses genre boundaries in shaping a narrative that is both circular and linear, circular as it begins and ends with concealed or unobserved solitary men gazing at physically attractive young women, linear as it follows Cather's developing notions of the importance of sensuality in the life of the individual. Cather's bathers can be loosely linked to the familiar visual image of Botticelli's Venus emerging from the ocean (see, especially, Miss Fairweather in "Before Breakfast"), as they, too, are newly-formed characters arising from the bath or stream in all their beauty.

In positioning two of her best-known female protagonists, Thea Kronborg and Alexandra Bergson, so memorably in the bathtub, Willa Cather clearly had a momentous vision, if not multiple visions, of the power of

the bath. Hygiene is an important cultural marker in Cather's novels, but, more than that, the female form, white (always), statuesque, magnificent, becomes in this set of images the repository for Cather's vision of the evolving America--its landscape, culture, and ideals. Yet Cather's interest in immersing her characters in water is not limited to her female characters, and she resists a traditional possibility of confining the women to indoor scenes while the men are all outdoors. Thea, for example, bathes outdoors in Panther Canyon as well as in her hotel in New York, and both are important moments of renewal and celebration of the body; Alexandra's bath is conducted in a shed off the kitchen, at once within and separate from the domestic interior of her house; Jim Burden finds himself the object of the female gaze as he swims in the creek in *My Ántonia*; Claude Wheeler has an important moment of revelation under the night sky, immersed in the horses' water trough; Godfrey St. Peter swims regularly; Henry Colbert finds temporary solace in the mill pond in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*; and Henry Grenfell returns Cather's narrative to a traditional form as he observes Miss Fairweather at her morning swim in "Before Breakfast".

In his reading of section eleven of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (the twenty-eight bathers passage), David

S. Reynolds suggests that the proliferation of sexual imagery in Whitman's work was an effort to recover sexuality from the prurient sensationalism of the time and render it more natural, and this reading provides a lens through which to regard Cather's bathing narrative as well:

To some degree, Whitman seems to be borrowing from the popular sensationalists in the woman's fantasy scene: like them, he stresses that the woman is wealthy, that her sexual thoughts about the men are secretive, and that she fantasizes about not one but many lovers. But here the similarities stop. Whitman adopts the voyeuristic eroticism of the popular sensationalists but revises it in ways that make it natural and redemptive rather than selfish or destructive.

(330)

The notion of fusing cleansing language with the erotic is an important way to look at Whitman's work, and applicable to Cather as well. It is possible to read Whitman's bathers passage as an erotic fantasy, or the ultimate emptiness of the solitary woman's life, or an effort to

recover sexual fantasy and language from the corrupt popular culture and relocate it in the realm of the natural. It is equally possible to read it as a deliberate refashioning of popular Biblical stories that would, presumably, have been familiar to Whitman's contemporary audience, or, last but not least, as an attempt to work with language and narrative to rethink traditional storytelling boundaries. This last possibility links Whitman's work to Cather's more deeply than the use of similar imagery. It is important to note that Cather's work, too, is "rife" with what Reynolds calls "cleansing rhetoric," not, I think, in an effort to rework popular sexual imagery but instead to rethink the role sexuality and sensuality play in the formation of (both individual and cultural) character.²⁰

In *O Pioneers!*, as the tragic romance of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata draws to its inevitable and bloody conclusion, Cather's narrative detours through Alexandra's personal life, or lack thereof, describing it as "like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields" (203). Alexandra is unskilled

²⁰ John Anders, too, has considered implications of the Whitman-Cather connection. See *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

at personal relationships, Cather argues, and lacks the skill to see "what was going on in Emil's" mind or imagine "what was going on in Marie's mind" (203). Yet Alexandra has the capacity to preserve meaningful moments in her memory. The day she and Emil saw the wild duck is one of these resonant moments. Alexandra and Emil were on a long drive, "looking over the land" (204), when they stopped to eat their lunch in a shady spot by the river:

Under the overhanging willows of the opposite bank there was an inlet where the water was deeper and flowed so slowly that it seemed to sleep in the sun. In this little bay a single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flickering light and shade. They sat for a long time, watching the solitary bird take its pleasure. No living thing had ever seemed to Alexandra as beautiful as that duck. Emil must have felt about it as she did, for afterward, when they were at home, he used sometimes to say, 'Sister, you know our duck down there-'

Alexandra remembered that day as one of the happiest in her life. Years afterward she thought of the duck as still there, swimming and diving all by herself in the sunlight, a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change (204-5).

This moment, unlike Whitman's bathing scene or Cather's rendering of Don Hedger in the closet, allows Alexandra and Emil to watch the duck openly, and the duck herself to "take [her] pleasure" without fright. Alexandra and Emil find pleasure and a measure of ongoing solace in the scene, both in each other's company and in the gift of the duck's freedom of expression, suggesting an exchange among the participants not present in Whitman's poem. While Alexandra preserves the duck in her memory as an "enchanted bird," Emil describes her as "our duck," showing that this moment, while important to both sister and brother, resonates quite differently for each.²¹ Emil speaks of the bird in the possessive,²² just as he finds himself driven to speak of

²¹A reading of Emil's "our duck" as referring to shared experience rather than possession, while eliminating the now pejorative connotation of ownership from his reminiscence, fails to recognize the link between Marie and the duck, and, therefore, a troubling aspect of Emil and Marie's relationship.

²²Later in the novel Emil has another important scene with ducks, shared this time with Marie. The later scene, discussed in greater detail in

and to Marie Shabata. He cannot leave the duck "swimming and diving all by herself," just as he cannot leave Marie alone in the aspects of her life that give her pleasure. Cather's language here is telling: "Emil must have felt about it as she did," suggests, in fact, that Emil did not feel about it as Alexandra did, that his memory of a female creature taking her pleasure alone in a natural setting must be inflected by the language of ownership. It is not insignificant that the duck thus disporting itself is "solitary," linking her even more closely to Alexandra. This memory is termed "impersonal" (205), yet it is followed almost immediately in the narrative by Alexandra's dream/fantasy of being lifted and carried off by the yellow man, and her own bath, undertaken for a very different purpose than the duck's:

After such a reverie she would rise
 hastily, angry with herself, and go
 down to the bath-house that was
 partitioned off the kitchen shed. There
 she would stand in a tin tub and
 prosecute her bath with vigor,

the next chapter, again imagines a link between Marie and the duck—in this instance, the warm, dead duck, producing a moment of impending horror rather than the solitary pleasure Emil and Alexandra observe here.

finishing it by pouring buckets of cold
 well-water over her gleaming white body
 which no man on the Divide could have
 carried very far. (206)

Cather's choice of the word "prosecute," a verb in more common usage a hundred years ago, suggests to contemporary readers a distinctly punitive aspect to Alexandra's bath. This linguistic choice supports a very straightforward reading of this section of the narrative as a series of fantasies, culminating in an overtly sexual fantasy or daydream, followed by the proverbial cold shower, a suggestion that, for Alexandra, such fantasies are definitely taboo. Another possible reading involves Cather's interrogation of what is necessary for Alexandra's physical and psychic survival--the question of whether Alexandra can be permitted to dream about someone other (some male other) who will ease her burdens, who will take away "all her bodily weariness" (207), and relieve her of the draining work of being an independent woman, especially in contrast to the reality of the wild duck, who seems perfectly able to manage her life and her pleasure alone.

Regardless of which gloss a reader prefers, the corporeality of the duck and the fantasy of the yellow man, arranged in the narrative to lead into the cleansing scene,

suggest that Alexandra's own bodily reality is more complex than the text has allowed up to this point. Her sexuality, nonexistent according to her brothers and most of her own community, is part of the "underground river," clearly surfacing here and making its presence known. This moment, significantly, occurs at a point in the narrative when Emil and Marie's thwarted, unsuitable romance is about to come to its (melo)dramatic end. Alexandra and Emil share the experience of watching the wild duck, but her dream(s) of the yellow man and her bath are undertaken alone. When Emil and Marie are together, the result is tragedy and death. Their togetherness disrupts the conventional marriage narrative and breaks a cultural boundary in ways that neither the novel nor its characters, as I suggested earlier, can support. Solitude, then, may be read as integral to the experience of finding pleasure in the physical, within the constraints of this society.

Thea Kronborg is more aware of her body than other female protagonists in Cather's novels (save, perhaps, Eden Bowers in "Coming, Aphrodite!"), and Cather's evocation of Thea's watery experiences is rendered more powerful, rather than less, by the absence of a partner. Thea has two important bathing scenes, the first in Panther Canyon and the second in her hotel in New York, after singing the role

of Elsa. The scenes in Panther Canyon have figured prominently in criticism of *The Song of the Lark*.²³ Early in the sequence of the bathing scenes in her novels, Cather's own cleansing rhetoric makes it clear that, while hygiene for its own sake is not insignificant, the bathing experience also produces intense moments of revelation:

When Thea took her bath at the bottom of the canyon, in the sunny pool behind the cottonwoods, she sometimes felt as if the water must have sovereign qualities, from having been the object of so much service and desire. (304)

Describing the water thus provides an obvious link to the female form, but the water is already possessed of "sovereign qualities," leading Thea to make further connections among the water, herself, and the "Ancient People":

Thea's bath came to have a ceremonial gravity [. . . .] One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her shoulder-

²³For example, Janis Stout locates Panther Canyon as the location of several "intensely female images [that] dominate the text]" (*Strategies of Reticence*, 102), and Susan A. Hallgarth says that "in the symbolic womb of Panther Canyon, where Thea births herself, she discovers that women have always been artists" ("The Woman Who Would Be Artist", 172).

blades with a big sponge, something
 flashed through her mind that made her
 draw herself up and stand still until
 the water had quite dried upon her
 flushed skin. The stream and the broken
 pottery: what was any art but an effort
 to make a sheath, a mould in which to
 imprison for a moment the shining,
 elusive element which is life itself,--
 life hurrying past us and running away,
 too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?
 (304).

Other critics have read this scene through the 'central
 image of running water [as] concerned with life as
 ceaseless change and motion which can only be 'arrested by
 art' [. . .] the only source of permanent value," (Thomas,
 41) and used the scene to further connections between Thea
 and the Rhine maidens and Thea and artistic identity. The
 positioning of the subject in the water, occupied in a
 literal act of self-cleansing, to be sure, but an act of
 sensual pleasure as well, makes this a moment resonant with

more than grand statements about Art.²⁴ The language of ritual and ceremony combined with Thea's own "flushed skin" produces an intensity of sensation in this scene. Thea's body is important; this is not just a moment of abstraction. Janis Stout suggests that Alexandra's and Thea's triumphs have come at a price, the "redirection of sexuality to make its great energies serve a larger discipline," and that their sexual selves have been "driven into deep submersion" (103). This is true if sexuality, by definition, may only be expressed with a partner. The bathing scenes speak clearly to the existence of Alexandra's and Thea's sexual, sensual selves, present and integral to their daily lives and submerged only by bath water. While Alexandra's sensual moment occurs in a room connected to, but not a part of her house, Thea's two bathing scenes occur in diametrically opposed locations, the gleaming bathtub in her hotel room in Manhattan and the scenic beauty of Panther Canyon. All three spaces are removed from the domestic realm.

Cather's female characters express their sensual selves in other ways than through their own water play. As noted above, Alexandra and Thea's sensuality is revealed in

²⁴ This moment resonates powerfully and creatively for writer Aritha van Herk, too, as I will show in my discussion of her performance piece, "Cather in Ecstasy", in the final chapter of this study.

solitude, but not so the hired girls'. This is evident in one of the scenes in which Cather consciously reverses the direction of the appraising/approving gaze, Jim Burden's day in the country with the hired girls before his departure for university:

After my swim, while I was playing about indolently in the water, I heard the sound of hoofs and wheels on the bridge. I struck downstream and shouted, as the open spring wagon came into view on the middle span. They stopped the horse, and the two girls in the bottom of the cart stood up, steadying themselves by the shoulders of the two in front, so that they could see me better. They were charming up there, huddled together in the cart and peering down at me like curious deer when they come out of the thicket to drink. I found bottom near the bridge and stood up, waving to them.

"How pretty you look!" I called.

"So do you!" they shouted altogether, and broke into peals of laughter. (226)

While this scene is Jim's Edenic moment, it is also a moment of open enjoyment for Antonia, Anna, Tiny, and Lena. They find Jim attractive as he stands below them, naked in the stream, and they do not hesitate to share their appreciation (or to appropriate the words Jim, and other males, apply to them). As in Whitman's poem, then, the key to the scene is participation rather than possession. This scene involves a reversal of the traditional gaze (and traditional use of the word "pretty") and an exchange of seeing: while the girls are admiring him, Jim regards the girls from an unaccustomed vantage point and finds them "charming," natural, and innocent, although he has previously been accustomed to view them as highly sexual, somehow suspect beings within the context of Black Hawk. This exchange ends with a moment that links Jim briefly with Alexandra's wild duck, taking pleasure in a solitary natural paradise:

Anna Hansen shook the reins and they
drove on, while I zigzagged back to my
inlet and clambered up behind an
overhanging elm. I dried myself in the
sun, and dressed slowly, reluctant to
leave that green enclosure where the
sunlight flickered so bright through

the grapevine leaves and the woodpecker
hammered away in the crooked elm that
trailed out over the water. (226-7)

Jim's moment of sensual pleasure is not disturbed and in fact may be enhanced by the arrival of the four young women. This moment of watery pleasure is different from the scenes involving female protagonists, however. While Cather still celebrates a particular kind of hygienic sensuality, in this scene the narrative is specifically interested in the role of landscape as it positions the bather as an emblem of culture or nationhood. Jim's body is submerged in the stream of narrative, unlike Thea's as she stands up in the stream, her body exposed, while the water dries on her. It is the hired girls' unabashed rejoinder that marks this scene and places them further outside Black Hawk society. This scene could not have taken place with Jim bathing in a horse trough in the front yard: its location on the prairie that already holds so much meaning for Jim (as a place where he was able to be free in his dreams, activities, and associations) heightens the significance of his pleasure in the water as well as the girls' pleasure in seeing him disporting himself in the stream below them. They are all outside the hierarchical (deadening) social structure of the town at this moment, able to experience,

see, and articulate pleasures that cannot exist within Black Hawk's boundaries.

Claude Wheeler finds as much pleasure in bathing unobserved as Jim Burden does basking in the gaze of *Ántonia* and her friends. The long bathing scene in *One of Ours*, when Claude takes advantage of Enid's absence to relax in the sun-warmed water of the horse trough, begins with a carefully organized repetition of flower imagery:

The moon swam up over the bare wheat fields, big and magical, like a great flower [. . . .] He stretched himself out in [the water], and resting his head on the metal rim, lay on his back, looking up at the moon. The sky was a midnight-blue, like warm, deep, blue water, and the moon seemed to lie on it like a water-lily, floating forward with an invisible current. One expected to see its great petals open. (169-70)

The moon lying on the sky offers a different possibility for Claude, lying emotionally and spiritually unopened in the water. Unlike Jim, playing in the naturally flowing stream in the sunlight, expecting and eagerly anticipating the company of *Ántonia* and her friends, this male bather

is, like Thea and Alexandra, able to experience this moment only as a result of his solitude. While the water of the stream reflects Jim's pleasure in the hired girls and theirs in him, the water in the horse trough works to unmirror Claude, reflecting a moon that is essentially his opposite and revealing possibilities in the process. As Claude is slowly able to relax and give his body over to the unfamiliar experience of sensual pleasure, his mind opens to the imaginative possibilities the moon suggests:

the moon, somehow, came out of the
 historic past, and made him think of
 Egypt and the Pharaohs, Babylon and the
 hanging gardens. She seemed
 particularly to have looked down upon
 the follies and disappointments of men;
 into the slaves' quarters of old times,
 into prison windows, and into
 fortresses where captives languished.

(170)

Nearly submerged in the water of the horse trough, yet distinctly outside the prison of the house he shares with Enid, Claude allows his imagination the freedom to call up images of imprisonment. And it is the process of doing so that is ultimately crucial for Claude. While reading the

images of slavery and imprisonment is a fairly straightforward process given Claude's disastrous marriage to Enid Royce, his unrequited/unspoken/possibly unconscious feelings for Gladys Farmer, and his evolving sympathy for his mother and her own limited marriage, still the experience of the al fresco bath is freeing. Claude himself, though written as a male character, is imprisoned and miserable in a Western space governed by alien sensibilities, an argument, in this context, that can be described as "emblematic of a feminist sensibility;"²⁵ the revelations of the bath prove eye-opening.

While Claude regards the sun in purely practical terms, the moon is linked to history, to a specifically Biblical past, and to human limitation. This imaginative liberation occurs at a moment when Claude himself is least limited: when he is, temporarily, free of the imprisoning illusions that caused him to urge marriage on an unwilling Enid. The effects of her eventual acquiescence and their marriage ripple outward through Claude's life, forcing him to give up his friendship with his boyhood companion Ernest (and his relationship with kindred spirit Gladys), as well as condemning him to an enervating existence with his wife.

²⁵ Peter Mallios, e-mail April 18, 2002.

His temporary freedom from illusion allows Claude a moment of unusual and, briefly, disturbing empathy: "inside of people who walked and worked in the broad sun, there were captives dwelling in darkness" (170). His insight recalls Thea's revelatory moment in the Panther Canyon stream. Claude's bath is undertaken with the same desire for refreshment and rejuvenation as Thea's New York bath, yet the male bather is so unused to enjoyment of anything physical that this spiritual moment takes on the resonance of a sexual encounter.

Lacking Thea's ability to revel in the sensual pleasure of her bath, Claude's interaction with his own insight produces a powerful, almost frightening reaction:

He dismissed [the thought] with a quick movement of his hand through the water, which, disturbed, caught the light and played black and gold, like something alive, over his chest [. . . .] The people whose hearts were set high needed such intercourse—whose wish was so beautiful that there were no experiences in this world to satisfy it. And these children of the moon, with their unappeased longings and

futile dreams, were a finer race than
 the children of the sun. This
 conception flooded the boy's heart like
 a second moonrise, flowed through him
 indefinite and strong, while he lay
 deathly still for fear of losing it.

(170-171)

For Claude, then, this is not merely a moment of bodily freedom. It is, rather, an unexpected set of spiritual insights produced by an exchange between himself, the moon, and the water, which becomes a physical presence as it catches the light and plays on his body. Like the "Little streams" in "Song of Myself," the water is an active participant in this scene, yet Claude's solitude is unthreatened by its animation. The narrative presents this interchange as an experience of almost shattering intimacy, threatened by Enid's arrival in that controversial car:

At last the black cubical object [. . .]
 came rolling along the highroad. Claude
 snatched up his clothes and towels, and
 without waiting to make use of either, he
 ran, a white man across a bare white yard [. . .]
 . . .] he found his bathrobe, and fled to
 the upper porch, where he lay down in the

hammock. Presently he heard his name called, pronounced as if it were spelled "Clod". His wife came up the stairs and looked out at him. He lay motionless, with his eyes closed. She went away. When all was quiet again he looked off at the still country, and the moon in the dark indigo sky. His revelation still possessed him, making his whole body sensitive, like a tightly strung bow. (171)

As "a white man in a bare white yard" Claude is unlikely to leave an impression, yet as a white man in a tank of dark water he becomes a participant in an intimate, revelatory, and physical exchange with the moon and the water. The "white man" displaces the dark water, allowing the light to become animate and playful. Finally, Claude's spirit dares to imagine contact with others, though contact with a flesh-and-blood wife is to be avoided. Claude hides from Enid, preserving the secret pleasure of thinking thoughts and visualizing images so revealing and intimate she might as well have caught him in a sexual encounter with another person. The "black cubical box" of Enid's car stands in stark contrast to the fluidity and flower imagery of the

water, sky, and moon and further separates her from the moment of revelation.²⁶

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, water provides a different kind of escape for Henry Colbert, serving as moral respite from issues of power and sexual violence:

The miller got very little sleep that night. When the first blush of the early summer dawn showed above the mountain, he rose, put on his long white cotton milling coat, and went to bathe in the shallow pool that always lay under the big mill-wheel. This was his custom, after the hot, close nights which often made sleep unrefreshing in summer. The chill of the water, and the rays of gold which soon touched the distant hills before the sun appeared, restored his feeling of physical vigor. He came back to his room, leaving wet footprints on the floury floor behind him. (192)

Colbert's "physical vigor" is restored by the water, but his body is invisible in the narrative, concealed first by

²⁶Although the narrative presents Enid as an intruder, and Claude clearly feels her presence to be almost unbearable, throughout this scene Claude never considers how determined he was to have this marriage despite all her objections. Despite the transformative nature of this moment, his mind is not completely open.

the "long white cotton milling coat" and then by the water. This invisibility has taken the male bather even further from Thea and Alexandra. While Jim's body was invisible in the narrative, it was quite obviously visible to *Ántonia* and the other hired girls; Claude's body mirrors the moon; Godfrey St. Peter's head (although covered by a bathing cap) and shoulders remain visible as he swims; but Henry Colbert's physical presence is as nearly absent as is possible in a scene involving a human in water. His feet leave clear imprints on the "floury floor," but Colbert's overwhelming desire is to leave no physical imprint on this scene (or Nancy):

He did not know why, but he felt strongly disinclined to see Nancy this morning [. . . .] Now that he must see her as a woman, enticing to men, he shrank from seeing her at all. Something was lost out of that sweet companionship; for companionship it had been, though it was but a smile and a glance, a greeting in the fresh morning hours. (192-3)

And something else has been lost: Henry Colbert's physical being. By making himself invisible to Nancy that morning

(and, more importantly, by absenting himself from Rachel's plan to help Nancy escape), Henry merely continues the process begun by his bath in the mill pond. Cather writes Henry's disappearing body as a process set off by the idea of a woman as sexual being, an almost complete inversion of the David and Bathsheba story.

The bathing scenes span nearly the breadth of Cather's work, but it is worth noticing when they are absent as well. There are no bathers in *A Lost Lady*, for example, save Marian Forrester's tale, designed to entrance Niel and his companions, of wading in the stream. Marian Forrester herself is differently embodied than Thea, or Alexandra, or Antonia. Cather describes Marian's adornments in great detail but treats her physical body in asides: "It was not until years afterward that she began to wear veils and sun hats, though her complexion was never one of her beauties" (*LL*, 11). Marian's skin, the container and boundary of her distinct body, doesn't meet the standard set by Thea's "flushed skin" in the Panther Canyon stream, or Alexandra's "gleaming white body" in the bathtub. And not only is her skin itself inferior, Marian is not a good caretaker (of her skin, of her reputation, of Niel's illusions. . . or of the Forrester land).

The Sweet Water, too, is far from Jim Burden's clear prairie stream, as Mrs. Forrester describes it: "mud and water snakes and blood-suckers--Ugh!" (LL, 12). Marian Forrester would probably have been safer with the blood-suckers in the Sweet Water than those she encounters on land. The bathing has moved into story in this novel, and the erstwhile curative, transforming water is itself in need of healing. Marian's body is a commodity: the price of her security in marrying Captain Forrester, icon of Niel's romantic imaginings, site of Frank Ellison's pleasure-taking, and prey for Ivy Peters' rapacious acquisitiveness.

While the scenes I have focused on here suggest that, for Cather, bathing is a moment for solitary revelation, a wider investigation of the bathers narrative shows important communal and community experiences as well. Beginning with the exchange among Jim and the hired girls in the stream, continuing on to Anton Rosicky, and Claude Wheeler's wartime bathing experience with his fellow soldiers, and on to Monseigneur Laval washing little Jacques' feet in *Shadows*, sharing in the bathing experience does produce comradeship and a benevolent exchange of religious satisfaction, if lacking a sense of play akin to that of Whitman's poem. The bath, for Cather, is an image of a particular domestic luxury (whether it occurs indoors

or out), a confined watery space that blurs boundaries and provides time and opportunity for complex meditations on freedom and physical pleasure.

The work of the bathing scenes is multiple: like Whitman's "Song of Myself," and other narratives focused on the work of becoming American literature, Cather's metanarrative seeks both to celebrate solitary physical pleasure without recreating popular romances or sensational depictions of sexuality and to experiment with the boundaries of body, landscape, and culture.

The bathers tell a story of Cather's developing and increasingly complex sense of narrative and the nature of story. Echoes of biblical stories, Whitman's poem, and Cather's own novels reverberate in these scenes: Claude's bath evokes Thea's; Henry Grenfell recalls Don Hedger (and, in some ways, David watching Bathsheba and the Elders observing Susannah in her bath); Jim Burden's play in the stream follows that of Alexandra's duck. The juxtaposition of sensuality and ceremony, ritual and play, works to complicate Cather's rendering of the body. As the narrative moves from the concealed male observer to the monumentally visible white female and back again, so does the landscape emerge and subside in Cather's work. This union of body and terrain suggests that the experience of forming and

belonging to a new country (and a new literature) was an endeavor integrally linked to the physical.

Extending this notion reveals that the efforts of people (like the inhabitants of Black Hawk) to remove bodily sensation from daily life were not only unnatural, in all senses of the word, but destructive. The nature of an evolving American identity, for Cather, seems inextricably linked to these naked bodies, surfacing and submerging in various bodies of water. Those who live on prairies and write about the Great Plains can attest to the significance of water, as Diane Quantic asserts, "It is a rare plains writer who does not invoke the image of the sea of grass". Elaborating, Quantic evokes "the undulating, palpable emptiness and the absence of landmarks" which "force observers to describe the vast spaces before them in the only terms they know." Too, she notes, "both the prairie and the ocean[. . .]present a featureless face of indifference, a sense of eternal possibility, or annihilating isolation that can lead to madness. In yet another sense the image is ironic. The prairie begs for water: the life-giving element that threatens to destroy men at sea is withheld on the prairie, with the same ultimate possibility. As a result, both voyagers and

settlers must come to terms with water on the ocean or the prairie" (157-158).²⁷

The list of works by American and Canadian women writers of the last century or so who have chosen the prairie as their setting includes memoir and novel, mystery, historical fiction, and children's literature. These texts span the 20th century, offer numerous instances of border-crossing, and provide examples of imaginative prairies where women's stories differ radically from the Kroetsch house:horse binary described in the previous chapter. They envision fluid new categories of engagement with the land and writing in language that encompasses and celebrates physical, lived, experience. In particular, Martha Ostenso's 1925 novel *Wild Geese* explores notions of bodily connections to landscape in ways that echo Cather's.

Martha Ostenso wrote *Wild Geese* in order to enter the best novel contest sponsored by the American publisher Dodd, Mead, and Company, which she won. Born in Norway, raised in Minnesota and North Dakota, and sometime resident

²⁷ In Quantic's own discussion of Cather's *Song of the Lark*, Ross's *As For Me and My House*, and Wright Morris's *The Home Place*, she uses the texts to establish features of Great Plains prose: "images recur: the sea, the town, the elevator, the train, the store, the trees. One might assume that in a landscape supposedly bereft of concrete detail authors would merely describe again and again what *is* there, and yet it is clear that Cather, Ross, and Morris mean for these objects to represent more than what is on the surface [. . .] the human connection to space is the focus of these descriptions. In Great Plains fiction, men and women must first come to terms with the land" (163-164).

of Manitoba, Ostenso is difficult to place in the context of a national literature. She is not difficult to locate, however, as an important voice in prairie fiction. And dealing as it does with a landscape completely resistant to European notions of beauty, prairie literature has posed numerous creative challenges to those who would inhabit its literary landscape.²⁸ Ostenso's novel takes on issues of land use, the silencing of women's voices, the forging of new communities (Ostenso is as aware of immigrant communities as Cather, although she uses them differently in her work), and the effects of the land on women's bodies (and their daily lives). Rather than reading this novel as an example of the creation, in Canadian prairie fiction, of "a 'garrison' for their own closed society between the howling wilderness and the civilization they left behind" (Quantic, *ULW*, 646), I argue that in the fate of Caleb Gare, Ostenso articulates a vision of prairie life centered on values of exchange, physical connection, and sense of community, sending the imperialist possessor and coveter of land as commodity to a grim death.

Wild Geese opens with the arrival of the new schoolteacher, Lind Archer, in a community ostensibly in

²⁸ See Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, Robert Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, Carol Fairbanks, *Prairie Women: Images in Canadian and American Fiction*, Diane Quantic, and Aritha van Herk, *In Visible Ink: crypto frictions*, for example.

Manitoba. Setting in this novel is never linked to nation. As Deborah Keahey notes, "Among the most interesting silences in *Wild Geese* are those involving its geographic setting and the national or 'ethnic' background of its main characters. Winnipeg, where [Ostenso] lived while writing the novel, is referred to simply as 'the city,' and there is no reference to Manitoba or Canada. For a novel in which 'place' plays such a central role, Ostenso seems not to have wanted to 'place' it." (15) The novel's genesis as contest entry may be the motivation for this omission, but it may also suggest Ostenso's interest in universalizing her prairie across the United States/Canada border. And Ostenso never suggests that place of national origin is broadly irrelevant.²⁹ Like Cather, she is careful to notice the ethnic background of all the secondary characters, including "Icelanders, Swedes, Norwegians, Hungarians, 'mixed bloods', half-breeds, and Indians" (Keahey, 16) in her cast. These ethnicities exist as more than labels in

²⁹ "Beyond possible motivations, however, the disaffiliation of the setting from the specific geographic space that generated it has interesting effects. One of these is that it mirrors the erasure of history that is characteristic of Ostenso's description of the Gares, which itself mirrors the Gares' desire to escape their own past, embodied in the ill-kept secret of Amelia Gare's illegitimate child, Mark Jordan, which Caleb uses to blackmail Amelia into silence and submission" Keahey, 16.

the terms of the novel, as the traditions of each group are crucial to the plot.³⁰

Ostenso pairs the tyrannical paterfamilias, Caleb Gare, and the newly arrived schoolteacher Lind Archer as fatally competitive for the souls and hearts of the Gare family. Caleb Gare operates within his family like a general, ruling his wife Amelia through blackmail and his grown children, the twins Martin and Ellen, and Judith, the younger daughter, by fear. Youngest son Charlie mostly escapes Caleb's strictures, enabling an inverted hierarchy among Caleb and Amelia's children further to fracture their sense of family.³¹ Lind Archer comes into the Gare home bearing markers of a different world, including soap (that marker of hygiene so important in Cather's work), ornamental clothes, and a sense of the importance of small daily pleasures. As a living example of a differently civilized place, Lind is instantly fascinating to Judith Gare, and instantly threatening, in various ways, to Caleb, Amelia, and elder daughter Ellen.

³⁰ The Icelanders' traditional refusal to let anyone fish in the lake until it has given up its dead, for example, becomes a point of conflict for some of their neighbors.

³¹ Keahey remarks of Caleb Gare that he "erases history and internalizes empire, embodying and enacting its principles as an individual" (14), recognizing the almost military precision with which Gare identifies human weakness and exploits it; setting his youngest child in a position of power vis-à-vis the rest of the Gare children is just one example of this strategy.

Judith Gare is described throughout the novel in terms that position her squarely in the realm of the physical; that "she had a great, defiant body [. . .] and stood squarely on her feet, as if prepared to take or give a blow" is the teacher's first reaction to Judith, thinking that "she had never before seen such vigorous beauty." (2) Judith's forceful physical presence is in stark contrast to the efforts of other members of her family to remain unnoticed, yet it is a link to her father. Caleb, too, has imposing physical presence: "his tremendous shoulders and massive head, which loomed forward from the rest of his body like a rough projection of rock from the edge of a cliff, gave him a towering appearance"(5).³² Yet, Ostenso writes, "when attention was directed to the lower half of his body, he seemed visibly to dwindle"(5). Caleb's manhood is located in his resemblance to physically dramatic (non-prairie) landscape; used to threaten and dominate, Caleb's body is, in significant ways, in disharmony with itself. And while Judith's body is described in mythic or animal terms, Caleb is written in terms of immovable physical objects. When he thinks, alone on the prairie at night,

³² Robert Thacker notes that, "likened to a cliff, Caleb may be seen as analogous to Cooper's rock tower, which serves as Ishmael Bush's bastion in *The Prairie*" and that "his role in the novel...is analogous to Bush's: he too is antagonist and catalyst for his book's action" (*Great Prairie Fact*, 192).

that "Judith, yes, she was a problem. She had some of his own will, and she hated the soil [. . .] she would have to be broken" (16), Caleb fails to recognize that Judith hates the use he makes of the soil, not the soil itself. Her connection to the land is outside Caleb's frame of reference; Judith enters into an exchange with the land, while Caleb sees all land in terms of possession and control. Martha Ostenso saves her most sensual language for Judith Gare's encounter with the land, forcing an examination of the contrasting ways father and daughter engage in erotic connection with the physical ground on which they live. Judith goes to a secluded spring one evening to meet her lover, and arrives before he does:

She threw herself upon the moss under
the birches, grasping the slender
trunks of the trees in her hands and
straining her body against the earth.
She had taken off the heavy overalls
and the coolness of the ground crept
into her loose clothing. The light from
the setting sun seemed to run down the
smooth white bark of the birches like
gilt. There was no movement, except the
narrow trickle of the water from the

spring, and the occasional flare of a
 bird above the brown depth of the pool.
 There was no sound save the tuning of
 the frogs in the marsh that seemed far
 away, and the infrequent call of a
 catbird on the wing. Here was clarity
 undreamed of, such clarity as the soul
 should have, in desire and fulfillment.
 Judith held her breasts in ecstasy.

(216)

This is Judith's Eden, before the arrival of Sven, her
 Adam, who steps into view "as a god, out of space" (216)
 but ruins the scene as soon as he opens his mouth. Judith's
 fulfilling, joyful intimacy is with the land and the birch
 trees and the silence, producing a moment of absolute
 clarity evocative of Claude Wheeler's revelation in the
 water trough.³³ Her solitary pleasure is reminiscent of
 Thea's Panther Canyon epiphany, although more overtly
 sexual, and unrelated to any articulation of a grand
 purpose; the overflowing satisfaction in physical sensation
 disappears once Judith's human lover is embodied in the
 scene.

³³*One of Ours* was published three years before *Wild Geese*. Although it seems likely, for a number of reasons, that Ostenso would have read Cather, I have, as yet, no evidence of that connection anywhere other than the echoes of Cather's text in Ostenso's.

Judith's literal physical encounter with the land emphasizes the specific importance of place in her life, and demonstrates a positive alternative to Caleb's philosophy of control. The land itself is described in terms that increase the sense of this moment as sexual intimacy: the "smooth white bark" of the "slender trunks of the trees," Judith "straining her body against the earth," the cool moss welcoming her into the oasis of clarity and fulfillment. While Caleb's desire to possess this land, to own it and cultivate it and prevent others from using it, thwarts and dominates the rest of the Gare family, Judith finds a different relationship with the earth.

Ostenso privileges this connection above Judith's relationship with Sven Sandbo, and uses Sven's intrusion on the birch pool scene as another marker of his inability to forge a meaningful emotional connection with Judith. He asks her to speak, complaining that he never knows what she is thinking. Judith attempts to share the scope of her dreams for the two of them: "We're goin'—going—to be somebody else, great people, like you read about. I know I can be, and you *must* be, because you can hurt me. We're going to be different, not like people round here." (217) Sven's response is to pat her shoulder as "he strove to understand her. He wanted to be kind, but a man couldn't

lie." (217) Judith's definition of potential (in the power to hurt) is shaped by her experience as Caleb and Amelia's child, her only frame of reference for the world. She mistakes this kind of power as her only alternative when, goaded beyond sense, she throws an axe at her father after he spies on her meeting Sven, and taunts her.

Aside from the presence of this moment as one of the few instances of unchecked emotion in the novel, Judith's hurling of the axe solidifies each member of the Gare family within a particular survival strategy. Caleb leaves Judith tied hand and foot in the barn while he uses her as an example to the other children, and then offers Amelia the apparent power to choose Judith's fate: should she be judged in the city, or will he, Caleb, determine her punishment? Amelia instantly realizes what Caleb intends: "It was coming now, then. Mark Jordan would have to pay for Judith's insane act. No, as God lived, she would kill him first—no one would know the reason for that." (244) Her choice is never in doubt, as Amelia repeatedly resolves that their status as Caleb's children has already doomed Martin, Ellen, Judith and Charlie. Amelia clearly sees her role as protector of her illegitimate son Mark Jordan, son of the man she loved, as the motivation for every choice, every action. Neither Martin nor Ellen intervene on

Judith's behalf, as fear of their father informs every choice they are seen to make.

Like Cather, Ostenso suggests that successful 'frontiering' is predicated on an ability to recognize new as more than Other, a willingness to tolerate change in an open-minded way. The ability to accept a range of potential hybridizations is crucial to an individual's survival. Deborah Keahey notices "Caleb's complete intolerance of difference" in any form, and his determination to prevent Amelia, Ellen, and Judith from every effort to mingle cultures and ideas. His intolerance extends to any difference of opinion, and informs the life of the entire family. Lind Archer, living in Caleb's home and subject to many of his rules, is nonetheless free to visit other homes in the community while Amelia and her children are not. In trips to visit the Aronsons and Sandbos, Lind travels across land possessed by families other than the Gares; in crossing those boundaries she encounters and falls in love with Amelia's illegitimate son Mark Jordan, and their relationship persists in the face of Caleb's menace.

The effects of the contrast between two narrative threads in the novel, the romance of Lind and Mark, the two outsiders, and Caleb and Judith's struggle with one another through their ties to the farm, come together in the person

of Amelia Gare. Amelia occupies the traditional role of farm wife and mother, yet, at the same time, she repeatedly makes choices that place her outside that role. For one thing, before she agreed to marry Caleb, Amelia fell in love—with someone else. When the man was killed, she was already carrying his child. Amelia was subsequently forced to give the baby up for adoption, yet Caleb, through an acquaintance, makes it his business to keep track of the boy from afar. Another aspect of her life that sets Amelia apart is Caleb's refusal to allow her to participate in the traditional activities of community-building. Amelia is made to suffer for wanting to go to church, for permitting Mrs. Sandbo to enter the house on a social call, for her children's requests to visit the neighbors or attend school. Every perceived transgression against Caleb's strictures results in threats against Amelia's illegitimate son, now an adult with no knowledge of his biological parents. Caleb sees without rancor that Amelia is prepared to sacrifice every one of the children she bore him in order to protect Mark Jordan; in fact, he is pleased by the clarity of Amelia's priorities, as it makes her that much easier to control.

Ultimately, Caleb's determination to subjugate land, community, and family to his will results in his death. In

an inversion of the possessiveness of the settler mentality, the land itself reaches out to absorb and annihilate the man who was prepared to sacrifice his family to it. Toward the end of the novel, strong female personalities conspire in ways that presage the loosening of Caleb's iron control. The romance and suspense of Judith's nighttime flight with Sven are heightened by the tensions of Caleb's savage beating of Amelia, in response to her decision, finally, not to bend to his will. His discovery of the fire, started by a stray spark from a neighbor's land-clearing work, produces such a sensory overload that Caleb then rushes out of the house "as if he had gone suddenly blind—blind with sight." (346) While Lind and Mark tend to the injured Amelia, Caleb disappears into the night, hoping to plow enough ground to stop the fire, but:

The earth seemed to be playing him a trick [. . . .]now silky reeds were beginning to tangle themselves about Caleb's legs [. . . .]he stepped higher to crush them underfoot. The earth seemed to billow like water. But Caleb paid no heed [. . . .]he bent down and pulled at the reeds in an effort to

jerk his feet free. But the strength in the earth was irresistible [. . . .] he stood upright again and strained with all his might. But the insidious force in the earth drew him in deeper. (350-351)

Ostenso continues the refrain of Caleb's struggle and the inexorable muskeg, a dramatic and climactic moment in the consideration of human life on the prairie. Caleb is too far from the farm house to be heard as he calls for help; "his voice was carried away in the wind and lost in the roar of the burning timber." (351) In a striking reversal of Judith's moment in the grove, Ostenso writes Caleb, in his death scene, with his hair "tossed about uncouthly with the twisting and heaving of his body." (352) And in the end, the patriarch reflects, "he had given his soul to the flax [. . .]the earth was closing ice-cold, tight, tight, about his body [. . .]but the flax would go with him." (352) Not even as he is sucked down into the swamp can Caleb imagine an alternative to his possession and obsessive cultivation of the land. Ostenso's mixing of land and water imagery here allows Caleb's death to become a drowning by land, as, like Melville's Ahab, he is fatally entangled in a web he was accustomed to control. In the

consuming muskeg, Ostenso envisions a land both fluid and non-fluid, imprisoning to the possessor who stumbles into it, yet freeing to those awaiting judgment in the house. Caleb Gare's death in the land he has spent his adult life trying to control is in keeping with the manner of his dealings with every aspect of his life; a different kind of land-based eroticism is modeled by his daughter Judith.

While survival, in many prairie novels, is seen as a matter of negotiating weather and physical hardship, Ostenso presents a scenario in which physical and psychic survival is centered around an individual's ability to negotiate one imperialist personality (in itself a comment on nation-building)—and in which that personality cannot survive itself. This bleak picture is not without an alternative vision, however—an alternative that is centered on a diametrically opposed approach to the land. While both Caleb and Judith have bodily connections with the landscape, Caleb is devoured by the land and Judith appears to take the land within her. Her sexual encounter with Sven takes place offstage, while her encounter with the land itself is prominent in the text; the illegitimate child she carries, then, is as much the result of her connection to her physical surroundings as her intimacy with Sven. Even as Judith is carrying the next generation,

the seductive, over-cultivated flax field becomes the agent of her father's death.

Ostenso's vision of survival includes both Judith, who leaves the farm to live in the city, yet still finds ways to express a life-enhancing connection to the prairie, and Lind and Mark, who leave the land with a romantic understanding of its symbols, their lives together forever informed by the secret of Mark's parentage. In the final chapter of the novel, winter is coming, and the teacher's stay is also coming to an end:

Then Lind heard the honking of the first wild goose, high overhead [. . . .] The wild geese were passing over—passing over the haunts of man in their remote seeking toward the swamps of the south. There was an infinite cold passion in their flight, like the passion of the universe, a proud mystery never to be solved. She knew in her heart that Mark Jordan was like them—that he stood inevitably alone. But because of the human need in him, he had come to her. It warmed her to dwell on the thought. (354-5)

Lind perceives the geese as remote symbols of heroic stature and invests her future husband with that sense of mystery. While the sense of menace around life at the Gares dissipates with Caleb's death, secrecy remains. To the teacher and city-dweller, attempting to find a context for the experiences of a year in this place, both Mark and the geese symbolize self-sufficient solitude and "an endless quest," (356) a romance of the pastoral that enabled her to survive this year on the prairie. And survival strategies do occupy the women in this novel, almost to the exclusion of everything else.

Amelia, for example, makes it her life's work to value Mark Jordan more than her legitimate children, with whom she will now spend the remainder of her days; this decision informs every choice she makes and gives her a reason to go on. In adhering to a set of rules that defined her entire life, Ellen lets the man she loves ride out of her life without a word. Lind has Mark as a souvenir of her prairie life but, kept at arms' length by the Gare women, seems relatively unaffected by the stormy life at the Gares'. Each woman found a way to survive her life with Caleb, and, ultimately, survival is what the geese seek as well. The multiple significance of the wild birds resonates in Ostenso's anti-imperialist vision of life on the prairie.

Both Willa Cather and Martha Ostenso show female characters passionately engaged with the land in ways that are incomprehensible to the men in their lives; Alexandra, with her heart beating beneath the Divide; Thea in the Panther Canyon stream; Judith, flinging herself into the grotto. In these twinned (tripled) moments, Cather's work frames the conversational terms through Alexandra's response to riding along the Divide: "She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun" (*OP*, 71).³⁴ Ostenso's text responds in agreement, "Here was clarity undreamed of, such clarity as the soul should have, in desire and fulfillment." (216)

³⁴ Thea Kronborg's Panther Canyon epiphany works equally well here, of course: "What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?"

Chapter II-

"the least common denominator of nature":

the imaginative space of the prairie

in Cather, Roy, Laurence, Erdrich

HOMESTEADING

Long ago, I settled on this piece of

mind,

clearing a spot for memory, making a

road so that the future could come and

go,

building a house of possibility.

I came across the prairie with only

my wagonload of words, fragile stories

packed in sawdust. I had to learn how

to press a thought like seed into the

ground.

I had to learn to speak with a hammer,

how to hit the nail straight on. When

I took up the reins behind the plow,

I felt the land, threading through me,

stitching me into place.

Joyce Sutphen

The list of works by American and Canadian women writers who have chosen the prairie as their setting is expanding in interesting and exciting ways, as genre boundaries are crossed and reinterpreted through the lenses of body, place, gender, environment, nation and race. Boundaries between categories blur and dissolve, as in the final lines of the poem that opens this chapter. This chapter considers, as a small sample of such texts, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*, Gabrielle Roy's *Street of Riches*, originally published as *Rue Deschambault* in 1955, and *The Road Past Altamont*, originally published as *La Route d'Altamont*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, 1974, Linda Hogan's 1995 novel *Solar Storms* and Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No-Horse*, 2001.

Writers not often grouped together, Willa Cather, Gabrielle Roy, Margaret Laurence, Linda Hogan, and Louise Erdrich produce texts with common interests; their maps of prairie experience are not drawn to conquer or possess but rather, as they articulate Graham Huggan's theories of

literary cartography, they work with "nature's ability not only to deconstruct society's spatial boundaries through its fluidity, but also to completely erase the boundaries,"³⁵ creating communities based on the physical relationships of female bodies to place. All of the texts in this study regard instances of bodily connection as worthy and important landmarks of culture and community. This chapter explores some of those strategies, and continues the process of looking across the U.S./Canada border for commonality in women's western experience.

While the previous chapter noted the difficulty inherent in locating the author of *Wild Geese*, Martha Ostenso, in terms of a national literature, this is not the case with Gabrielle Roy, a major voice in Canadian literature. Roy's novels, notes David Stouck, although written in French, have "quickly been translated into English and have become central to the traditions of Canadian literature in both languages" (144), and indeed the time elapsed between the publication dates of the French and English versions of the novels is quite short, with most of the English translations appearing two years after the original French.

³⁵Melani Bleck. "Linda Hogan's Tribal Imperative: Collapsing Space through 'Living' Tribal Traditions and Space," Studies in American Indian Literature, 11(4), Winter 1999: 23-45 (29).

Gabrielle Roy was born in 1909 in the French-speaking town of St. Boniface, Manitoba, where she was raised. She left Manitoba in 1937 and lived in Paris, London, and Montreal before settling in Quebec, her primary residence until her death in 1983. The youngest of eleven children (eight of whom survived to adulthood), Roy credited her early years in western Canada with important formative power, writing, in "My Manitoba Heritage":

My childhood love is the silent sky of the prairie, fitting the soft, level earth as perfectly as the bell cover on a plate, the sky that could shut one in, but which, by the height of its dome, invites us to take flight, to fly to freedom. (154)

Imprisoning and liberating, both the prairie itself and the little town of St. Boniface appear in Roy's biography and her fiction as oases, set apart from English Canada. The fiction, in fact, values the open prairie as integral to the quality of life on the Rue Deschambault (or any quiet neighborhood street). The view from their house is one of the things most prized by the father in *Street of Riches*, for example, while Mémère in *The Road Past Altamont*

literally cannot live when she is taken away from the prairie.

Roy, as a Franco-Manitoban, was well aware of what it meant to live as a member of a marginalized group. During her school years, for example, there were legislative attempts to eliminate teaching in French,³⁶ and political allies of French-speaking communities, including Wilfrid Laurier, were seen to distance themselves from those groups in order to maintain political connections to Protestant constituencies. This experience (and, perhaps, the memory of her father's work helping immigrants settle in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta) produces in Roy's Manitoba novels a sense of the Rue Deschambault community as one in a constellation of communities--connected, yet each with its own sense of culture--dotting the prairie provinces. And, like many of the other writers included in this study, Roy had a lifelong awareness of the importance of borders and boundaries, telling one interviewer "I have tried to stay always on the borderline, because that's the best place to understand."³⁷

³⁶ See Ricard, pp. 77-81 especially, for a discussion of these policies, changes in curriculum at Académie Saint-Joseph, and effects on French-speaking students.

³⁷ Donald Cameron. "Gabrielle Roy: A Bird in the Prison Window," in *Conversations with Canadian Novelists-2*, qtd. in Clemente and Clemente, 83-84.

In her descriptions of the Manitoba landscape so integral to her imaginative life, Roy's words resonate with Cather's:

From the very start the plain had set about rebuffing them with its flat immensity, naked under the sky, this endless space, this too-vast exaggeration of a land where in winter, they said, it was cold enough to freeze your breath in your throat, and in summer hot enough to put an end to your days. And the people here, the ones who'd been living in this solitude awhile, what strange ones they were!

(qtd in Mitcham 10)³⁸

This description, applicable to any number of Cather's prairie towns as well as those described by other prairie writers, still makes room for the persistence of individual dreams within the harsh reality of daily life. Although "trop vaste et excessif," this is a land where people have

³⁸ In the original: "La plaine, dès le début, avait mystérieusement commencé de les rebuter, cette immensité plate, toujours à découvert, cette étendue sans fin, ce trop vaste et excessif pays où il faisait froid l'hiver, disait-on, à vous geler la haleine dans la bouche, et chaud l'été à en périr. Et les gens donc, depuis peu habitant ces solitudes, quelles bizarres gens ils étaient ! » from « La Vallée Houdou » in *Un Jardin au bout du monde*, Montreal : Beauchemin, 1975, pp. 133-34. (*Garden in the Wind*, Toronto : McClelland & Stewart, 1977, pp 107-108).

indeed chosen to stay. And it is the land to which Roy repeatedly returned in her art.

Although Roy left Manitoba—fled Manitoba, from all accounts—at the age of twenty-eight, the “too-vast exaggeration of a land” remained present in her creative aesthetic throughout her life. A good deal of critical attention has focused on Roy’s Montreal novels, *Bonheur d’occasion* (1945; translated as *The Tin Flute*, 1947) and *Alexandre Chenevert* (1954; translated as *The Cashier*, 1955), but for the purposes of this study I will turn my attention to the Manitoba novels,³⁹ specifically *Street of Riches* and *The Road Past Altamont*, which share a narrator.

Street of Riches, winner of the Governor General’s Award for 1957, is a collection of short stories narrated by Christine, the youngest child of eleven in a Manitoba family with many similarities to Roy’s own. The house Christine describes could be the house Gabrielle’s father, Léon Roy, built for his own large family; the neighborhood children bear remarkable similarities to the neighborhood children with whom Gabrielle played regularly. The eighteen stories that comprise the narrative follow Christine from the age of about four to the brink of adulthood, as she is

³⁹ I have used the English translations of these novels for all quotations.

just about to leave school, treating subjects as varied as the arrival of the first person of color to rent a room (from her mother) in the neighborhood, Christine's troubled relationship with her father, the institutionalization and subsequent death of an older sister, and Christine's discovery of her desire to be a writer. The opening lines of the story "The Voice of the Pools," which deals with this realization, are given over to some local artists:

In the pools not far from our house,
 some evening toward April, began a kind
 of piercing, vibrant music, softly sad
 withal, which lasted almost all summer,
 only to cease whenever the water in
 these pools had been wholly consumed by
 the sun or by the earth. (130)

As long as the water lasts, however, the invisible frogs will sing. Christine listens, wondering whether they are greeting one another, swamp to swamp, after the long winter, or whether they struggled up from the mud "only to stir our hearts for a while with a strange music?" The frogs' song is a marker of place and time for Christine:⁴⁰

"I still hear it, drilling through the spring nights around

⁴⁰ As the song of the coyote is for Frankie Burnaby in Ethel Wilson's *Hetty Dorval*; see chapter III.

our home; never have I heard a stronger summons toward childhood, toward its somewhat savage joys" (130). The "summons toward childhood" reference is deceptive, however, as Roy positions her narrator in the attic of the family home, having "climbed there as though in search of" herself, not a child's activity but entirely appropriate for the sixteen-year-old. Christine leans out of the window of the house her father built, straining

toward the cry of the pools close by
[when] there appeared to me - if one
may say that they appear -those vast,
somber lands which time spreads before
us. Yes, such was the land that lay
stretched in front of me - vast, wholly
mine, yet wholly to be discovered.

(130)

Christine perceives the land of the future as within her control, both in terms of agency and possibility--"somber," yet excitingly open to exploration. The frogs' voices seem to presage a parting as Christine senses that it is time for her to leave home. She feels "at once in the attic and also far away...and so I had the thought of writing" (130-131). Surrounded by her own books in the dusty attic, Christine finds that she wants to "repay" the happiness

they have given her, then, as her conviction grows, she asserts, "I wanted myself to be this beloved book, these living pages held in the hands of some nameless being, woman, child, companion, whom I would keep for myself a few hours"(131). The combination of the song of the frogs and the sense of bodily dislocation transforms Christine from a schoolgirl into an artist, complete with professional goals ("I wanted to have something to say" [131]), and allows her to imagine herself as collapsing boundaries of skin and binding to become one with a book she has written.

Christine does not become a part of the house, or subsumed into a set of domestic interests; she is absorbed into the notion of becoming an artist and the object itself that she wishes to create. Christine's house was open enough to let the voices of the pools in, yet her ability to seek solitude in the attic and simultaneously join the prairie community by leaning out the window toward the pools results in the moment of epiphany. Christine locates herself at the eminently crossable boundaries of house/prairie, Maman's life ethic/song of the frogs, and childhood/adulthood as she positions herself as a fledgling writer:

For this, was it not necessary to come
to the attic, listen for a long, long

while to the intermingling voices...and
 so many things you must untangle? (132)

Christine, like Walt Whitman, imagines a future where she will encounter other readers and writers along her chosen path, where she has "time to withhold myself a little along the road and then to catch up with the others, to rejoin them and to cry joyously, 'Here I am, and here is what I've found for you along the way! . . . Have you waited for me? . . . Aren't you waiting for me? . . . Oh, do wait for me! . . .'" (133).

The Road Past Altamont (1966; originally published as *La Route D'Altamont*, 1965) returns, with an adult Christine as narrator, to the same setting as *Street of Riches*. The four stories that comprise this volume overlap, in part, with the time period of *Street of Riches*, but the voice of the narrator throughout is an adult voice, as Christine remembers her childhood, an important friendship, and her relationships with her mother and her grandmother. An organizing theme of the narrative is the narrator's reactions to the aging and death of two women whose presence in her life is formidable. A counterpart to the coming-of-age novel, a narrative that deals with the generational shift that occurs when parents and grandparents grow old and die shows survivors struggling to

reassess their place in a family and in a community. Margaret Laurence tells this story from the perspective of the aging woman in *The Stone Angel* (1964), while Roy's narrative, voiced by the granddaughter/daughter, is necessarily less introspective, more conscious of the sense of a pattern rent first by absence and then by death.

The overarching concern of *Street of Riches* and *Road Past Altamont*, however, is life on the prairie. The first story in *Road Past Altamont*, "My Almighty Grandmother," begins with six-year-old Christine's visit to her grandmother's home:

The village was small and Grandmother's house stood right at the end of it; the prairie surrounded us on all sides except the east, where a few other little houses could be seen, our companions on what seemed to me a terrifying journey. For in the complete immobility of the prairie, one had the sense of being drawn forward on a sort of voyage across an endless land of everlasting sameness. (7)

Here, as in *My Àntonia*, the child's initial impression is that the prairie is simply too big to comprehend⁴¹ while the "endless land of everlasting sameness" recalls John Bergson's "same lead-colored miles" in *O Pioneers!* Despite Mémère's initial dismay about having to follow her husband to Manitoba, however, what she has accomplished in this place sustains the older woman. As she tells Christine, "I began all over again here in Manitoba what I'd already made back in Quebec, made once for all, I thought, a home" (*Road*, 15). It is not the idea of "voyage" that attracts and holds Christine's grandmother to the prairie landscape, but the idea of "home". Like many women who journeyed west with their families, Christine's grandmother views "home" as a construct; it can be re-made, creating a bridge between the old place and the new through the cherishing of household objects and values. Toward the end of the story, Christine's mother begins to worry about Grandmother continuing to live alone. She repeatedly tries to convince her mother to leave her home, and comes close, on one visit, to winning the day:

⁴¹ David Stouck notes that, in her earlier novel *The Hidden Mountain* (1961), "Gabrielle Roy...reveals her affinity with Willa Cather, an author she admires greatly. There are similarities in the content of their work because they both grew up in the vast, lonely spaces of the prairie. More important, they share a Virgilian perspective on life's brevity, and Cather's example may have helped Gabrielle Roy to find the appropriate forms for her fiction" (159). Too, Stouck compares *Street of Riches* and *The Road Past Altamont* with Cather's ideal "novel démeublée."

The thing that kept gnawing at her, she admitted, was the sense that she had been close to victory over Mémère... "I could have sworn at that moment that if I could just have found the right word... But then a flock of migrating birds passed across the sky, and your grandmother lifted her head. From the threshold she looked ahead of her at the naked prairie about which she has complained so bitterly all her life. . . and yet I wonder if it isn't that same prairie that holds here there so strongly today—her old enemy, or what she believed was her enemy." (19-20)

In language that recalls Cather's Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy*, Christine's mother identifies the symbiotic depth of Mémère's relationship to the home place. Like Myra's hatreds, the grandmother's connection to the prairie is her lifeblood. When Christine's mother finally prevails on Mémère to leave her home and live with them, the old woman rapidly loses her grip on reality, suffers a stroke, and dies.

While Willa Cather, as we have seen, shifts axes of meaning in order to make western mythology accommodate her meditations on westering and new frontiers, Gabrielle Roy's novels of memory identify the persistence of the western landscape as it informs her young female narrator's evolving sense of self. Both efforts belong to a category of writing that critics have begun to theorize under a variety of headings, including naming it a form of decolonialization and beginning with the question "how do colonial inhabitants approach the traditionally imperial territory of writing?"⁴² The answer lies in the approach those colonial inhabitants take to the production of texts, often the deliberate dismantling of expected scripts.

In *O Pioneers!*, while John Bergson, soon to be under the prairie himself, looks out the window and sees "the same land, the same lead-colored miles"(8), his daughter Alexandra has a very different relationship to the land, a feeling that she and the land are connected in ways her less imaginative brothers cannot understand. This is what makes Alexandra's face radiant as she returns to the Divide from the river:

⁴² Conny Steenman-Marcusse, *Re-Writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature*, Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 2001: 7.

Even her talk with the boys had not taken away the feeling that had overwhelmed her when she drove back to the Divide that afternoon. She had never known before how much the country meant to her[...].She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there somewhere.(71)

Alexandra's connection to the land is described in loosely agricultural terms. The typical male pioneer is thus differently gendered in this novel; while John Bergson and his sons Lou and Oscar engage the land and the new economy in various unsatisfying ways, Alexandra, in her respect for the land and her open-minded approach to the land and its needs, comes to a real sense of herself. *O Pioneers!* is a novel often read in terms of "the conflict...around the situation of a woman assuming a male role, the criticism she must face when she does so, and the degree to which she can succeed under trying circumstances" (Fairbanks 171). While this reading can be useful in a consideration of Alexandra and some of Cather's other female protagonists, it is not Alexandra—whose dramatic engagement with cold water looms large in the series of bathing scenes discussed in the previous chapter—who is central to my point. The

work of the character Alexandra serves to set the stage for the complex construction of the character of Marie Shabata.

Old friend Carl Linstrum, on his first return visit to his family's homestead, is out in the fields at sunrise, walking toward the pond, when he notices "Emil, advancing cautiously, with a young woman beside him. They were moving softly, keeping close together, and Carl knew that they expected to find ducks on the pond" (49). They do indeed find ducks; Emil shoots five of them and drops them into Marie's apron:

As she stood looking down at them, her face changed. She took up one of the birds, a ruffled ball of feathers with the blood dripping slowly from its mouth, and looked at the live color that still burned on its plumage. As she let it fall, she cried in distress, "Oh, Emil, why did you?" (49)

Up to this point the scene is a fairly standard one of regret at the transformation of wild things in death, but then Marie reveals a more nuanced ability to be held accountable for her own actions when she continues:

"Ivar's right about wild things. They're too happy to kill. You can tell

just how they felt when they flew up.
 They were scared, but they didn't
 really think anything could hurt them.
 No, we won't do that anymore." (50).

This moment, significantly under the eye of an observer who cannot hear but rather feels "the import" of their conversation, both showcases Emil and Marie's growing intimacy and foreshadows their deaths.⁴³ Carl Linstrum feels "unreasonably mournful" (50) at the sight of the endangered young people, and without being able to hear their words, feels for Emil and Marie the sadness that Marie feels for the now-silent ducks.

Later in the novel, after the news of Amédee's illness reaches her, Marie feels she cannot stay in the house, and wanders through the orchard "like a white night-moth out of the fields" (97). She sits on the stile, considering what her life will be like now that she and Emil have acknowledged both their love and the impasse it produces, then walks across the pasture:

⁴³ Susan J. Rosowski reads the Emil-Marie section of *O Pioneers!* as the place where Cather most clearly "demonstrate[s] her romantic sympathies," arguing that in this interlude in the novel, "Cather explores the idea of estrangement though characters who seek a personal paradise in defiance of their communities" (*Voyage*, 53). This view is not inconsistent with my reading of Emil and Marie's love affair as the means by which Marie is permitted a brief connection with the land on her own terms. By placing the inset story in the context of Cather's Virgilian affinities, Rosowski ensures that Emil and Marie are not simply relegated to the category of tragic melodrama.

She had scarce thought about where she was going when the pond glittered before her, where Emil had shot the ducks. She stopped and looked at it. Yes, there would be a dirty way out of life, if one chose to take it. But she did not want to die. She wanted to live and dream—a hundred years, forever! As long as this sweetness welled up in her heart, as long as her breast could hold this treasure of pain! She felt as the pond must feel when it held the moon like that; when it encircled and swelled with that image of gold. (98)

Marie has been, for the most part, a plaything for the various men who have taken an interest in her—a carefree and charming flirt even as a little girl, an ethnic beauty whose seemingly heedless behavior has landed her in an unhappy marriage to the domineering, egotistical and jealous Frank Shabata. Marie is also represented as Alexandra's only woman friend, another incongruous pairing. While she is described as "sincerely devout" (79) and attentive to elderly neighbors, up to this moment there has been hardly an inkling in the portrayal of Marie that she

might be complex and thoughtful enough to look ahead to her future and consider the advantages, or lack thereof, of refusing to give in to her infatuation with Emil. It is not insignificant that Marie finds herself near "the pond where Emil had shot the ducks" and the location of her own unprecedented empathy with them, nor is her ability, suddenly, to encompass (and glory in, as the choice of the word 'treasure' implies) a seemingly vast sensation of physical and spiritual pain. The choice she is prepared to make preserves some sense of delight in life, a sense of respect for others, and the notion that she has significant agency in terms of her own future. She has come to a place, both literal and figurative, where she can articulate her choice to give up romantic love in order to find a more "perfect love" (102). Marie's assertion "we won't do that anymore" reflects back from the sunrise expedition to shoot ducks to encompass her resolution to live a full life without Emil, barely a day before Frank shoots them both. In her engagement with the water and the moon, Marie finds a truer voice than her earlier life permitted, if only for a moment⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ Within a larger context, the image of the moon in water recurs in *One of Ours*, with Claude in the horse trough experiencing a similar epiphany. These are, of course, only two in a series of important lunar images in Cather's work.

Like some butterflies, Marie has a short time to live after discovering "the treasure of pain," but it nonetheless allows her to "live a day of her new life" (102). Time passes, yet begins again as the pond becomes window, mirror, mother—birthing a new and transformed Marie to live a life in a day. Susan J. Rosowski identifies this moment as part of Cather's process of "finding her way to her version of the West" (*Nation* 77). Water imagery, as noted earlier, is crucial to this vision, allowing a host of Cather's characters rebirth, re-vision, and the ability to re-imagine the language of storytelling.

There are many creative connections between Willa Cather and Margaret Laurence. One, as noted earlier, is their interest in reshaping hierarchical paradigms. Another is their use of water imagery as a rhetorical strategy to claim power from the settled fact of the prairie and of prairie literature. Both, in fact, write women characters who speak and think differently about water, the prairie, and the role of story from the male characters in the same text. The process of finding ways to experience the power of telling is fluid. Time passes and recurs in Margaret Laurence's final novel, *The Diviners*, which opens with this oft-quoted passage:

The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This apparently impossible contradiction, made apparent and possible, still fascinated Morag, even after years of river-watching. (3)

The river, symbolizing time and consciousness and history, moving in two directions at once, extends the transformative power of Marie's epiphany at the pond in Cather's novel. The movement of the water with the current, the movement of the ripples on the surface and their appeal to an artist who works with words frame a novel centrally concerned with the power of language and story. Looking at pebbles, or indeed down at one's toes, at the bottom of a river is enough to convince anyone that things (and people) look different in and through water. Cather's repeated use of pond and stream and horse trough and bathtub engagements with water suggest that she was well aware of the power of water, and Laurence's use of this trope as a driving force in *The Diviners* only makes more explicit the power inherent in giving voice to story.

Laurence's protagonist Morag is a well-established writer with several novels to her credit, yet she constantly reminds herself of the awesome responsibility of choosing words, editing and re-editing her thoughts, and reshaping her very sight. The breeze and the sun physically act on the water yet these moments suggest that experience in words is equally powerful (and may endure longer):

The swallows dipped and spun over the water, a streaking of blue-black wings and bright breastfeathers. How could that color be caught in words? A sort of rosy peach color, but that sounded corny and was also inaccurate. *I used to think words could do anything. Magic. Sorcery. Even miracle. But no, only occasionally (4-5).*

Italicized commentary is frequent throughout the novel, both in short bursts, as in the passage above, and longer sequences, labeled Memorybank Movies. Morag, writer and rememberer, works with a heightened sensitivity to interpretation and representation. Herself often marginalized, orphaned in early childhood and taken in by the town garbage collector and his wife, Morag is startled when she finds herself in the position of marginalizer. And

she often finds herself there in her relationship with Jules Tonnerre, the father of her daughter. His retelling of the Red River Rebellion, his songs, and his reaction to Morag's account of his sister Piquette's death all serve to remind Morag over and over again of the power inherent in telling.

Marie Shabata and Morag Gunn are women whose lives are shaped by their prairie experiences. They and the texts they inhabit are from different eras, bound (or not) by different social, economic, and even political constraints. Reflections on language, of course, are necessarily closer to the surface in Laurence's novel, forced and held there by Morag's vocation. While Marie has few outlets for expression of artistic or creative efforts, Morag has far more freedom to "live and dream" (98). Yet both Cather and Laurence imagine possibility and growth on the prairie, outside the domestic sphere, and motivated by thoughtful and intensely emotional engagements with water.

The Diviners begins, then, with a narrative impossibility: "The river flowed both ways" (3).⁴⁵ The notion that while "the current moved from north to south...the wind usually came from the south, rippling the

⁴⁵ Gayle Greene notes that "Laurence's symbol of time, the river that flows both ways—its current pulling one way and the breeze rippling its surface the other way—suggests a similar interdependence of past and present" (157).

bronze-green water in the opposite direction" provides an organizing image for my reading of the prairie. Although critics have tended to focus on the metaphoric waves of grass, hidden streams and underground rivers carry the power of story in other directions.

Water runs through the prairie, bringing the pioneer with fantasies of recreating Eden, but also creating a new text for the writer:

Morag...made coffee and sat looking out
at the river, which was moving quietly,
its surface wrinkled by the breeze,
each crease of water outlined by the
sun. Naturally the water wasn't
wrinkled or creased at all—wrong words,
implying something unfluid like skin,
something unenduring, prey to age. (4)

Throughout this novel Laurence experiments with form as Morag struggles, through language and linguistic choices, to resolve her notions of belonging, family, home, and history. This experimentation is an important part of her developing creative aesthetic. The work Laurence's texts do in attempting to create a new language and frame of reference for marginalized voices and stories must be recognized along with aspects of writing important to the

novelistic genre (characters, plot, etc.). The Memorybank movies, including Morag's efforts to understand the seemingly inarguable fact of the photographs, show a protagonist working to synthesize seemingly contradictory stories about herself, her family, and the history of her country.

Morag's relationship with Jules Tonnerre produces her daughter, whom she names for Jules' dead sister Piquette (but calls Pique, to distinguish her child from the dead aunt).⁴⁶ Morag's child, born out of wedlock, is a symbol of her freedom from her marriage as well as the creation of her new biological family. Later, Pique struggles to make sense of her own place between two cultures often in conflict with one another, and two (or more) sets of values. In addition, she is faced with the formidable task of trying to come to an understanding of her own place in the framework of stories Morag has built around her life.

In this novel, parent-child relationships play out in multiply complex ways. Piquette Tonnerre's drinking, modeled initially by her father Lazarus, costs her and her children their lives in the fire that also consumes their

⁴⁶ Morag writes her daughter's full name as Piquette Tonnerre Gunn; she is later startled to find an inscription on the back of a photo in Jules' hand identifying his child as Piquette Gunn Tonnerre.

home. Neither Morag's biological mother and father, who succumb to infantile paralysis, nor her foster mother Prin Logan, disabled by obesity (among other issues), are physically able to raise her; her foster father Christie Logan is willing to tell her stories and spend time with Morag, but refuses to take on the trappings of traditional parenting. Morag's husband Brooke refuses to parent a child, preferring instead the power inherent in parenting his wife.

Laurence's Memorybank movies, like Gabrielle Roy's collections of moments from her narrator's past, create a reverse palimpsest against which her protagonist Morag stands out in sharp relief. As Morag tries to decide how to locate herself against a constantly shifting background, the issues she foregrounds center on questions of linguistic power. Interrupted by the telephone call of a fan with an axe to grind, for example, Morag realizes that entering the public domain as a commercially successful writer means that she herself has become a product to be consumed. The power of the words she writes become a weapon to be used against her, as the reader feels free to demand more words, and words of "truth," in response to specific questions.

Words become weapons, in fact, in the earliest pages of the novel as Pique leaves her mother a note announcing her departure to parts unknown. Tellingly, this note is not left on the mantel, or Pique's own pillow, or even on the door of the refrigerator. Rather, the writer's daughter leaves the note stuck into her mother's typewriter,⁴⁷ a moment that would not have the same effect as an e-mail, or inserted comment in a word-processing document. And Pique is not the only person in Morag's life trying to make room in a writer's world for an individual version of a story.

Pique's father, Jules, is a voice for the dispossessed and marginalized as he and Morag re-tell and re-hear bits and pieces of Canadian history absent from their school history text. The first time Morag asks for his version of his family story, she is twelve, and they are both in Grade Six. During their encounter in the Nuisance Grounds, Morag feels compelled to reel off the legend of the Gunns Christie has created for her. She is anxious about this exchange in the middle of the town dump, about which she's heard so many stories from Christie. She is uneasy around Jules (still referred to as Skinner at this point in the narrative) to begin with, and knows only that, despite her

⁴⁷ See Robert Kroetsch, "Sitting Down to Write: A Discourse of Morning" for a detailed meditation on this scene.

outcast status at school, the hierarchy of Manawaka still requires her to feel superior to the Tonnerre family. Jules won't tell her his family legends ("It ain't none of yer business" [73]), at least not yet.

It is not just that Jules' version of history is outside the ken of any history curriculum either he or Morag encountered in school. It is markedly different from any version of the story Morag has heard before. For Christie does have a story about the Troubles, and when Morag asks "Did they fight the halfbreeds and Indians, Christie?" his response is automatic: "Did they ever. Slew them in their dozens, girl. In their scores" (86). But when Morag asks another question, "Were they bad, the breeds and them?", the question snaps the flow of the narrative:

The story is over. Christie's blue
watery eyes look at her, or try to.
"Bad?" He repeats the word as though he
is trying to think what it means. "No,"
he says at last. "They weren't bad.
They were—just there." (86)

Christie's tale is based on the flow of the words and his unquestioning absorption of folklore—always inclined to question hypocrisy in people or structures of authority, still it doesn't occur to Christie to look further into

myth, and Morag's search for judgment, or ethical context, leaves him without a response. It seems to surprise Christie that this medium, like everything else in his life, has to be examined with a critical eye. That interrogation, however, is one of the overarching concerns of this novel. The next time Christie tells the story, Morag has the history textbook version for comparison. Not only has she read the official version of events, she has had her own response to it, which she shares with Christie:

(The book in History said he was nuts but he didn't seem so nuts to me. The Métis were losing the land—it was taken from them. All he wanted was for them to have their rights. The government hanged him for that.)

Métis? Huh?

(Halfbreeds.)

Well, well, hm. Maybe the story didn't go quite like I said. Let's see. (132)

But Morag doesn't want Christie to tell his story any differently ("That's cheating," she tells him). What matters to Morag is to know that there is more to everyone's version of the same events. The process of hearing Jules tell the story occurs over the course of the

novel, moving from their shared status as outsiders in the Manawaka school, to their meeting in the Nuisance Grounds and Jules' assertion that his history is none of her business, through several encounters suggestive of an important and lasting connection between them, including their first sexual encounter. In the aftermath of this intimacy Jules asks,

"could you call me by my real name, eh?" As though it were now necessary to do this. By right. Does she understand what he means? What is he really thinking, in there? But you have to take it on faith, she now sees. You can't ever be sure. (138-139)

Perhaps you can't ever be sure, but it is only after this exchange that Jules will tell Morag the stories, a moment that appears in the narrative as the sentence "Stories for children" (142). It is only after the battle of Dieppe, and the absence of the name Tonnerre from the seemingly endless casualty lists in the newspaper, that Laurence includes Jules' tale in the narrative: "Morag lies awake, thinking of the last time she saw Jules. Wondering if she ever will see him again. If he will survive" (144). Next, under the headings "Skinner's Tale of Lazarus' Tale of Rider

Tonnerre," "Skinner's Tale of Rider Tonnerre and the Prophet," and "Skinner's Tale of Old Jules and the War Out West," the stories Jules told Morag appears in the text. There's also a heading for "Skinner's Tale of Dieppe," followed by a single question mark. These are Skinner's tales, not Jules' tales, suggesting that even at this point in the narrative Morag cannot separate from the hierarchy of small-town Manawaka; as first-time listener, marked in this way as outsider, Morag loses the status gained in sexual intimacy ("could you call me by my real name, eh?"). Using the nickname also emphasizes this Jules Tonnerre's differences from Old Jules, placing the teller of tales squarely in the contemporary moment. And by naming them "tales," Laurence adds Chaucerian resonance; these are not presented as facts with which other versions of the same events can be dismissed.

The tales echo in the narrative when Jules' sister Piquette and her little sons are burned to death in her father's shack. Morag, still living in Manawaka and working for the local paper, is sent to report the story. When she writes that "Piquette's grandfather fought with Riel in Saskatchewan in 1885," her boss "deletes it, saying that many people hereabouts would still consider that Old Jules back then had fought on the wrong side" (161). Morag's

presence at the death scene is one in a list of things Jules comes to resent as their relationship evolves over the course of the novel. Morag's newspaper account of his sister's death relocates her in the camp of the Other, as far as Jules is concerned.⁴⁸ And despite their enduring emotional intimacy, once Morag becomes Other for Jules, it is irrevocable. Even her status as mother of his child (or perhaps, *especially* her status as mother of his child) doesn't alter the fact of her whiteness. He has already given Morag his stories, so, when eighteen-year-old Pique runs away from Morag and comes to find him, Jules gives his daughter his songs.

Laurence's insistence on equally valid, multiple perspectives is inherent in the form of the narrative, and, on another level, in her accounts of Morag's work as a writer and her life as a mother. Morag travels east from Manawaka, first to Winnipeg, then to Toronto and marriage to her English professor. After she begins to write, and re-encounters Jules, she goes west to Vancouver and her writing career, pregnant with Jules' child. She spends time overseas in search of her Celtic roots, but finds this

⁴⁸ "To him, she is now on the other side of the fence. They inhabit the same world no longer" (165).

unsatisfying and returns to the Canadian prairie and home, where the narrative gives every indication she will stay.

Morag's literal journeys reflect her creative and maternal progress in a fairly standard novelistic plot device. What sets this novel apart are Laurence's experiments with form, time, and narrative. The connections Laurence forges among place, story, and the craft of writing are made by divining—not water, but the presence of story in the land itself. Gayle Greene notes that "Laurence's use of 'diviner'...draws on its full range of meanings: water finder, reader of omens, one who has skill in the reading of character and events, seer, soothsayer, prophet," and, I would add to Greene's list of forward-looking occupations, historian and linguistics expert.

One of the things Morag comes to realize after Pique returns home is that telling involves all sorts of different kinds of language. At an evening gathering, Pique sings a song "Louis Riel wrote in prison, before he was hanged" (243) in French, but says resentfully that "I only know how to make the sounds. I don't know what they mean," reminding Morag of all the languages present in her understanding of story:

Christie, telling the old tales in his
only speech, English, with hardly any

trace of a Scots accent, and yet with
 echoes in his voice that went back, and
 back...The lost languages, forever
 lurking somewhere inside the ventricles
 of the hearts of those who had lost
 them. Jules, with two languages lost,
 retaining only broken fragments of both
 French and Cree, and yet speaking
 English as though forever it must be a
 foreign tongue to him. (244)

Reading and interpreting "character and events" is as important in making sense of the past as it is in the work of looking ahead to the future, as Greene continues: "The artist-diviner looks into the 'river of now and then' to fathom life, time, and the passing of generations, and, through her understanding of the past, gains faith in the future" (*Changing* 154). And water, of course, is the reason for and power of divining.

By the end of the novel, Morag has at least become comfortable with a similar notion of her multiple roles and how they work with and against one another. Her own paradox is that as a writer she has been unable to speak for herself; the sense Laurence gives us is that in the creation of the novel begun at the end of *The Diviners*

(ostensibly *The Diviners* itself), Morag is finally ready to do just that. She has begun to understand Jules' and Pique's message that speaking for others is fraught with difficulty, pain, and the perils of misrepresentation. As Smaro Kamboureli notes of Naomi in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Morag's ability to incorporate multiple perspectives in her world view articulates "the double imperative not only to expose the contents of history, but also to change history's shape" (221). The novel presents three characters (Christie, Morag and Jules) exposing the contents of history, and, in the character of Pique as well as in Morag's own books, offers the possibility of altering history's shape. Laurence writes a textual space in which it is not only safe but also appropriate to allow authority to paradox and contradiction, revealing personal narrative as the Other of history.

Articulating this notion makes *The Diviners* a keynote text in the border-crossing community of texts I have proposed. Not only does Laurence merge history, fiction, folklore and myth,⁴⁹ she does so in a way that offers a possible solution to the dilemma posed in the early pages of the study. *The Diviners* answers the question of what one

⁴⁹ And song. One edition of the novel was released with a recording of Jules' songs. See Wes Mantooth's "Margaret Laurence's 'Album' Songs: Divining for Missing Links and Deeper Meanings" for an in-depth discussion of the role of these songs in *The Diviners*.

can write (or tell or sing) when one's story has been written over or erased. Morag's daughter Pique embodies one set of answers; Morag herself writes and writes, hoping to find ways to create other 'containers' for the stories. In this novel, Laurence imagines ways to reach back through the web of a region or country's carefully constructed history and tease an individual or community narrative through to be heard.

The different kinds of work involved in telling are central, too, to Louise Erdrich's 2001 novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Erdrich revisits territory familiar to readers of her earlier novels, *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1989), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), to tell the story of the aged Father Damien through and around the narrative the priest has been composing, in installments addressed to each current Pope, for decades. Father Damien is concerned with the ramifications of preventing an elevation to sainthood of a nun who will also be familiar to long-time Erdrich readers, Sister Leopolda (formerly Pauline Puyat), especially in view of his own long-standing deception, "the most sincere lie a person could ever tell" (61).

Over the course of her writing career, Erdrich has made it her practice to revisit her published works in order to cast a character in a different light, shift the emphasis of a story, or, in some cases, introduce competing 'facts' into a family's history. In revising and expanding *Love Medicine* years after its original publication date, for example, Erdrich recasts the relationship of the brothers Nector and Eli Kashpaw and adds additional layers of complexity to the book. Erdrich's avowed rationale for this, expressed in an interview on the website [Atlantic Unbound](#), is that "my characters continue on with me beyond the fact of my own consciousness," their fictional bodies and personalities evolving beyond her initial writing: "I had no idea Father Damien was Agnes when I first wrote about him."⁵⁰ And with the cumulative effect of each text, relationships among Erdrich's characters become more complex and are more intricately entwined. Nanapush is, by this point in the Erdrich oeuvre, firmly ensconced as a trickster figure. Erdrich continues to position Nanapush thus in *Last Report*; as a foil to Father Damien's commitment to faith and community, the role Nanapush plays in this novel emphasizes responsibility to culture and

⁵⁰ Interview, conducted in writing by Katie Bacon, full text available at www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2001-01-17.htm

environment. Nanapush, with his masculine ego and vigorous sexuality, is set in contrast to Father Damien's multi-gendered perspective (and equally vigorous, almost entirely secret sexuality). Julie Barak comments that "Erdrich develops a fluidity of gender identities in her characters by recreating a gender role available to her through her Native American background - that of the berdache, a powerful figure in many precontact aboriginal societies in North America." (51) Barak goes on to explain that berdache status was not equated by most tribes with homosexuality, and that berdaches were "recognized...as especially valuable members of the community"(51), with reputations for economic success, special healing talents, and the like. "Many of Erdrich's characters," Barak writes, "fit, partially or completely, the definition of the berdache"(53), including Father Damien Modeste. Barak also notices connections between berdache figures and tricksters, suggesting that "as liminal figures, [they] serve the same purpose in Erdrich's fiction, working between worlds to raise questions about accepted patterns of thought and action"(59). Father Damien's close relationship with Nanapush in *Last Report* is a perfect example of the effectiveness of this connection.

As an example of women's westering, Father Damien's experiences cross more than a few boundaries. Most of the characters in Erdrich's novels, in fact, fit Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the inhabitants of borderlands just as well as they fit the definition of the berdache: "The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants...the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead" (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 3), but Father Damien encompasses more of them in one body than most fictional characters. The physical demands involved in inhabiting "the hungry expanse of skin that covered the body that housed two beings" (208) are unmistakable as "pain closed like a trap on Agnes and held her tight...her womanness crouched dark within her-clawed, rebellious, sharp of tooth" (209).

The literal body containing so many personae enters the text several times, appearing as if for the first time in each incarnation. The novel opens in 1996 with the ancient priest writing one of his many letters to the Pope and drinking coarse red wine, then abruptly shifts eighty-six years back in time to the moment when, "pale but sturdy, angular, a strong flower, very young, nearly bald" (13), a woman appears in Berndt Vogel's barn door. As she stands there in her nearly transparent dress, asking for

food, the narrative shifts again, to the convent "in the center of the town on the other side of the river" (13), to present Sister Cecilia, formerly Agnes DeWitt, who "not only taught but lived music, existed for those hours when she could be concentrated in her being—which was half music, half divine light, only flesh to the degree she could not admit otherwise" (14).

The convent is possessed by Sister Cecilia's playing, disturbed and threatened by the emotional turmoil produced in all who listened until, in an ecstasy of Chopin, Sister Cecilia divests herself of her habit and veil and walks out. She later describes herself as having been unfaithful to God with her un-embodied lover Chopin. Thus her own body is already twice-named by the time of the appearance in the barn door: "So it was Sister Cecilia, or Agnes DeWitt of rural Wisconsin, who appeared before Berndt Vogel in the cavern of the barn" (17). Agnes stays with Berndt, and, once the piano comes, enters into a passionate connection with man and music.

Father Damien's westering occurs within a multiple gender construct, and occupies at least three different roles: white man, white priest, and white woman. Yet the list of the priest's roles does not end there. He is also a writer, and his letters to the Vatican, included in the

text, offer a glimpse of his professional persona. Father Damien portrays himself as a righter of wrongs, a friend to Nanapush, a friend (and father, on her birth certificate) to Lulu, daughter of Fleur Pillager, a friend to the community in their struggles to avoid being consumed by white society. And in showing Father Damien's explicit choice to live as a priest, rather than a woman, as she does twice in the course of the novel, Erdrich suggests that for this character, at least, what can be accomplished in such a life outweighs the physical pleasure to be gained by leaving the reservation with her lover, to live as the woman Agnes. Father Damien's experience of west is informed by his multiple understandings of self, as Erdrich shows how an outsider on so many levels can come home, more than once.

As is her wont, Erdrich maintains multiple narratives within the text. One thread is Father Damien's long correspondence with whoever happens to be the Pope,⁵¹ his long effort to make sure that his truth about Sister Leopolda (also multiply-identified as the second woman

⁵¹When the novel opens, in a chapter titled "1996," Father Damien is very old, but still in the habit of going to his desk during his lucid period in the evening, where: "he wrote fierce political attacks, reproachful ecclesiastical letters, memoirs of reservation life for history journals, and poetry. He also composed lengthy documents, which he called reports, to send to the Pope—he had in fact addressed every pontiff since he had come to the reservation in 1912." (2)

named Pauline Puyat, and the mother of Marie Lazarre) is revealed before she is canonized. Another narrative thread is Agnes' journey to become Father Damien, in the course of which, as in *Wild Geese*, there is a death by earth. The bank robber who had kidnapped Agnes is forced down into the sucking mud by the pressure of Berndt's corpse above him, an inversion of sexual intimacy (again, as in *Wild Geese*) that results in a literal death.⁵²

Agnes loses some of her memory as a result of the incident, but continues teaching music and operating the farm. Her visit from the first Father Damien Modeste parodies such efforts to console survivors, but acts as a tonic nonetheless, for in her desire to tease this fellow she begins to revive. The missionary life appeals to her; having begun to remember, she is unable now to imagine remaining in her old life. In the subsequent flood, Agnes washes away from the farm, heading north on the lid of her piano in the surging water. From this moment, Agnes is reborn, magically (or miraculously) rescued by an unseen/fantasy lover. And when she comes upon the miserable

⁵² "Inch by inch, with incremental slowness and tiny sucking noises the earth crept over the Actor and into him, first swallowing his heels, back, elbows, and then stopping up his ears, so his body filled with the soupy, rich topsoil. At the last, he could not hear his own scream. Dirt filled his nose and then his tipped up straining mouth. No matter how he spat, the earth kept coming and the mud trickled down his throat. Slowly, infinitely slowly, bronchia by bronchia the earth stopped up each passage of his lungs and packed them tight. The ground absorbed him" (32).

drowned priest, she buries him in her night dress and assumes all the trappings of the priest's life. Her second rescue, her third identity—Agnes DeWitt of rural Wisconsin is now Father Damien Modeste on his way to live among the Ojibwe people.

Agnes' shape-shifting and adaptability make it possible for her to experience new lives—rural Wisconsin, the convent in the Dakotas, life with Berndt, life alone, and life as Father Damien. And the entry of Father Jude Miller into the story establishes Father Damien more specifically as an individual authority on the community, as a disrupter of established thought about another woman, another religious personality.

Erdrich uses a water journey to set Agnes on her final path to becoming Father Damien, and the trope of the water journey is crucial, too, to the plot of Linda Hogan's 1995 *Solar Storms*, set in northern Minnesota and Canada. In this novel, as Melani Bleck notes, Hogan describes the region's "defiance of society's attempt to use maps to spatially chart and label the area in an attempt to understand and measure space"(28). Maps and social conventions, Bleck argues, "seek to bind a dynamic and 'living' Native American culture"(29). "The land refused to be shaped by

the makers of maps"(123), Hogan writes, and Bleck adds "Society's desire to control nature is doomed to fail"(29).

The destructive practice of cartography, in Hogan's literary vocabulary, works both with and against the power of water in *Solar Storms*: not just the power sought by the builders of hydroelectric plants, or the power to move Hogan's characters on journeys, or to produce a woman (Hannah Wing, the protagonist's mother) seemingly out of nowhere, but also the inherently political nature of water in the West (especially when combined with the power of maps). While Erdrich's encroaching white culture focused on timber and control of the land, in Hogan's novel the power to control water use supersedes all else. Her troubled teenage protagonist, Angela Jensen, arrives in the (aptly named) village Adam's Rib considering it a destination of last resort. The process by which she resolves her place in the matrilineal community centers on the part she plays in a community effort to resist the construction of a dam. As she evolves from Angela to Angel, she is able to rescue her baby sister (tellingly, Angel names her Aurora) from her troubled mother's deathbed, as the other women of the community, Bush, the recluse, Agnes Iron, her great-grandmother, and Dora-Rouge, her great-great-grandmother, have rescued her.

When the northern community loses its fight against the dam, change follows quickly. The coming of electricity to the "little house and huts sitting askew on the world" (266) causes Angel to rethink the meaning of light, the implications of its opposite,

the darkness that traveled toward us...a
darkness of words and ideas, wants and
desires. This darkness came in the
guise of laws...part of the fast-moving
darkness was the desire of those who
wanted to control the land, the water,
the rivers that kept running away from
them. (268)

For Angel, who travels north and west to find a community, thinking about light and dark allows her to articulate other conflicts as well. Experiencing journeys by canoe, and train, and plane, participating in a struggle against a corporate entity, coming to a sense of peace about her abuse at the hands of her mother brings Angel to a place where she can express a desire for a Big Mac, or other teenagers, or dancing, yet still lament the passing of a vision. For Angel, hope comes in reframing old terms, in allowing people the freedom to change. She describes

another's new openness to emotional connection as "lack of skin," then continues:

Tears have a purpose. They are what we
carry of ocean, and perhaps we must
become sea, give ourselves to it, if we
are to be transformed. (340)

While all of the texts in this chapter are connected in their sense of the importance of landscape, while most of them work with the trope of water to engage a particular experience of gendered westering, the most important work of grouping these texts by place is their recognition of alternative place-based experience. Looking at Cather, Roy, Laurence, Erdrich and Hogan together shows each of these writers working to understand what it means when communities collide on the land, when survival of every sort becomes a primary concern, when progress and change are decidedly ambiguous and space of every sort is contested. In Christine's double narrative, Marie Shabata's evolution from childhood flirt to thoughtful woman, Morag Gunn's shifting perspectives, Father Damien's Whitmanian containing of multitudes, Angela/Angel's recovery of self, each of these texts shows women layering identities, rather than shedding an old identity with an old place. The power of their bodies, skins, and minds to incorporate new

selves, to learn new ways to see, and to find new words for old stories demonstrate a more complex understanding of place, an alternative version of the vision of freedom inherent in the male frontier paradigm. Rather than rejecting or denying old ways and old selves, these women have reconstituted, connected, and transformed previously constricting paradigms in order to live (or die, in Marie's case), comfortable with the terms they have chosen.

Chapter III -

"A wild cartography of longing":

Wilson, Laurence, and Kishkan

Lately I have come to believe
 In the long-range holiness
 Of certain things repeated:
 The pushing back of bedsheets
 in the morning,
 at night the mute unwinding
 of convivial clocks.

William Kloefkorn, "By Rote"

To go North is to slip out of the
 fastenings of night and day into other
 versions of light and dark.

Robert Kroetsch

Ethel Wilson was born in 1888, making her roughly fifteen years younger than Willa Cather (depending, of course, on which Cather birth date one uses). Although she was born in South Africa, Wilson was raised in British

Columbia and much of her writing is set there. Wilson did not begin publishing until late in life; her first novel, *Hetty Dorval*, was published in 1947. According to David Stouck,⁵³ Wilson, "the author of six novels and several short stories, holds an anomalous place in the history of Canadian literature. Because she lived in the West and because she did not publish until late in life, she was not part of the literary community of her generation. Her ties, if any, were with British writers" (81). Even so, or, better yet, in addition, her work exhibits many of the concerns of other women writers of western literature. Wilson may not have been part of the literary community of her day, but she is certainly part of this particular literary community, and reviewers of her work thought so as well (a promotional blurb from the *San Francisco Chronicle* at the back of *Hetty Dorval* refers to "the singing quality of early Willa Cather" evident in the novel).

Ethel Wilson's *Hetty Dorval* will remind Cather readers of that author's *My Mortal Enemy*. Both texts use the lens of a young girl's narration to frame the life and experiences of a fascinating older woman. Although Cather's Myra Henshawe elopes with Oswald and is not a home wrecker

⁵³ Stouck's critical biography of Wilson is imminent from the University of Toronto Press; I expect it will be very useful as I work to transform the dissertation into book form.

in the same way as Hetty Dorval, her effect on the young narrator Nellie is, initially, much like Hetty's on Frankie. Later in their respective texts, both girls come to see the exotic older women more clearly, and each deals with the former object of her affections in a way that marks her escape from the other's power. Frankie battles Hetty on her own ground—literally, as they share a bed in one of their final scenes together—while Nellie appears, on the surface, to treat Myra with an almost devastating compassion, despite some emotional cost.

Frances (Frankie) Burnaby, the young narrator of Wilson's novel, begins *in medias res*: "The day that Mrs. Dorval's furniture arrived in Lytton, Ernestine and I had gone to the station to see the train come in"(1). The girls have come to observe, not the adults, for, at twelve, "we did not find grown-ups interesting, but were always on the lookout for other children or dogs" (1). The expected arrival of the train and its unexpected disgorging of a large Newfoundland dog and many crates of furniture strike the girls as a cataclysmic event, and indeed, for Frankie, it is. Since it is clear that this may be a momentous event in the life of the town, Frankie and Ernestine watch the entire unloading process despite their discomfort as "the heat of the sun burned down from above, it beat up from the

ground and was reflected from the hot hills" (1). The dog recognizes a woman waiting on the platform to oversee the unloading, a woman Frankie describes with brutal adolescent honesty as "really the kind of woman that you don't notice" (2). The dog's interest in this woman makes her, suddenly, important to the two girls. Frankie and Ernestine are unwilling to give up their privileged position as witnesses and follow the convoy of furniture along the dusty road to the bungalow Mrs. Dorval has rented above the Thompson River until Ernestine's overtures to the dog are rebuffed by the woman.⁵⁴

In quite a brief opening chapter Wilson permits her narrator to spend a good deal of time describing the river:

Perhaps the river was emerald, perhaps
 it was sapphire. It is both. It is
 neither. It is a brilliant river, blue-
 green with lacings of white foam and
 spray as the water hurls itself
 violently along in rapids against
 hidden or projecting rocks, a rapid,
 racing, calling river. (3).

⁵⁴ This produces an oddly jarring moment, as Frankie steps outside the narrative to express present and retrospective sympathy, observing that it was her affection for dogs that got Ernestine killed.

The jewel tones of the river, its clarity and hardness and brilliance, form the centerpiece of the landscape. As Frankie, the observer, backs away from the river, looking upward and outward, her description renders the land as the setting for this jewel of a river, like the inlay of a bracelet:

The hills rise high and lost on each side of the banks[. . . .]In the sunlight the dun-coloured gorges of the blue-green river look yellow and ochreous, and in some places there are outcroppings of rock that are nearly rose red. Large dark and solitary pine trees give landmark and meaning. Here and there in a gully an army of these dark pointed pine trees marches up an ancient waterway of the hill-side, static. (3)

The scale is so dramatic that the solitary trees are required for focus, "landmark and meaning." Frankie's language then shifts to a direct address, questioning the veracity of her observation of those very trees and drawing the reader into the scene:

How do they grow on stone? A figure of man or beast crawling distant across the great folds and crevasses of these sprawling hills would make you stop, look, point with surprise, and question. One is accustomed to their being empty of life. As evening comes on, the hills grow dove grey and purple; they take on a variety of surprising shapes and shades, and the oblique shafts of sunlight disclose new hills and valleys which in daylight merge into one and are not seen. It is the sage-brush that covers nearly everything, that helps to transform everything, and that in the mutations of sunlight and moonlight helps to change the known hills to the unfamiliar. Because the hills are so desolate, strange and still, without movement, the strong brilliant water in headlong motion at their base holds your eyes with its tumult. (3)

As in Cather's work, the sun and moon figure powerfully in this evocation of a landscape so specific Wilson gives us microscopic details ranging from rock to sky. The changing light of night and day are not the only potentially transformative forces;⁵⁵ Frankie mentions the sagebrush as another way the land draws a veil over itself to all but the most discerning reader. Wilson pictures a place framed by rock and earth, a place remarkable for its absence of human or animal movement yet centered around the constant brilliant "tumult" of the river, the only motion in the scene. At the close of the description, the narrative circles back around to the plot, moving back from the wide view to name the title character, her dog, and several material possessions:

If the person in Mrs. Dorval's bungalow feels any fear at this desolate scene, or if the person is subject in solitude to moods of depression or despair, then that person had better take her piano and her dog Sailor and her packing-cases and go by train or by the Cariboo highway to some comfortable town full

⁵⁵ And the effect of the moonlight on Mrs. Dorval is important, too, as a version of this description recurs later in the chapter.

of people. No one can travel by the Thompson River at Lytton; it is too turbulent and too thickly sown with rapids. (3)

Frankie is thus marked as an astute and careful observer, equally attentive to the natural landscape and its effect on those who inhabit it. She imagines its effect on the hypothetical Mrs. Dorval with all the arrogance of the native-born, never contemplating the possibility that the woman might defeat the landscape. The assurance of the native in Frankie's tone, so evident before she meets Mrs. Dorval, is short-lived, as the relationship between the two throws the younger woman off balance for the remainder of the narrative. It is evident, later, that Mrs. Dorval occupies a place in Frankie's life similar to that of the "strong brilliant water in headlong motion[. . .] [that] holds your eyes with its tumult." Hetty Dorval holds Frankie's eyes, too, both literally and figuratively—although rather than being in tumult herself she causes it in others. When Frankie continues her description of the setting she returns to the rivers, with a telling image:

But what gives Lytton its especial character [. . .] is that just beside the town the clear turbulent Thompson River joins the vaster opaque Fraser.

The Fraser River, which begins as a sparkling stream in the far northern mountains, describes a huge curve in northern British Columbia, and, increased in volume by innumerable rills and streams and by large and important tributary rivers, grows in size and reputation and changes its character and colour on its journey south. (6)

Like the Fraser, Mrs. Dorval's reputation, and the magnitude of her presence in Frankie's life, grows and changes character over the course of the novel—at least until Wilson sends her into wartime Vienna, never to be heard from again. Like the Fraser, Mrs. Dorval is difficult to read, dangerous and untrustworthy. The text lingers over the rivers, then, only partly because water is, as she tells the reader, Frankie Burnaby's *genius loci*.⁵⁶ Wilson

⁵⁶ Frankie is privileged, in the terms of the narrative, to have this relationship with place: "The genius loci is an incalculable godling whose presence is felt by many people but certainly not by all. Many experience his presence but who knows his name and all his attributes? I have heard that some people who live on our Canadian prairie, and are therefore used to flat spaces and far horizons, cannot for long endure even the medium-sized mountains of the Pacific coast. Others from the same prairie, however, find on our mountainous shore their true home. There is no rule about it. The thing goes deeper than like or dislike. It is the genius. To some the genius of a place is inimical; to some

spends pages describing the Fraser and its path in microscopic detail, using language that endows that river with distinctly human personality traits and strengthens the link between that river and the title character:

Long before the Fraser reaches Lytton
it has cut its way through different
soils and rocks and has taken to itself
tons of silt, and now moves on, a wide
deceptive flow of sullen opaque and
fawn-coloured water. Evidences of boil
and whirlpool show the river to be
dangerous. (6)

Dangerous indeed, as Frankie has already recounted that her friend Ernestine, at the age of fifteen, is drowned in the Fraser trying to rescue a little dog caught in the current. And the river is not satisfied with human and canine fare, but must absorb other rivers as well:

At Lytton it is refreshed and enlarged
by the blue-green racing urgent
Thompson River. This river in the

it is kind" (55). And Frankie understands the effect on the trajectory of her life: "My genius of place is a god of water. I have lived where two rivers flow together, and beside the brattling noise of China Creek which tumbles past our ranch house and turns our water wheel, and on the shore of the Pacific ocean too—my home is there and I shall go back" (56), unlike Mrs. Dorval, with no *genius loci*, disappearing into an unpleasant fate at the end of the novel.

course of its double journey from north and east spreads itself into lakes and gathers itself together again into a river, until as it approaches Lytton it manifests all its special beauty and brilliance. At the point where the Thompson, flowing rapidly westwards from Kamloops, pours itself into the Fraser, flowing widely and sullenly southwards from the Lillooet country, is the Bridge.(6-7)

The confluence of the muddy river and the clear river is an important scenic landmark for a number of BC writers, and in Wilson's later novel, *Swamp Angel*, the joining of the Thompson and Fraser rivers is a matter of consequence as well.⁵⁷ In addition, this natural phenomenon serves as a metaphor for Hetty Dorval's deceptive, absorbing and absorbed character. The beauty of the scene is by no means irrelevant, as appreciation of beauty figures prominently

⁵⁷ In this novel, the confluence of the rivers is pointed out to the protagonist Maggie by her otherwise taciturn seatmate on the bus from Hope: "There's a kind of a nice thing at Lytton people like to see. Like to see it myself...ever since I was a kid. Maybe you'd have time if the bus stops for lunch...there's two rivers comes in, there's the Fraser from the north and the Thompson from the east and they're two different colours where they join. Fraser's dirty, Thompson's kind of green-blue, nice water. Mightn't be so good now. Depends on how high's the water. Depends on time of year. People tells me there's two great rivers in Europe act like that but I'll bet they're no prettier than the Thompson and the Fraser flowing in together" (57-58).

in Frankie's relationship with Hetty. And it is not just an issue of beauty, but rather an overall concern with appearance, how to read the face of another human as well as the landscape, as is evident at their first meeting. A text does not require a printed page. Frankie and Hetty Dorval have just heard and seen the wild geese flying overhead, a sight which moved them both:

We remained standing there and gazing at the empty sky. Then Mrs. Dorval turned her face on me and I realized all of a sudden that she had another face. This full face was different from the profile I had been studying, and was for the moment animated[. . .]The purity was not there, but there was what I later came to regard as a rather pleasing yet disturbing sensual look, caused I think by the over-fullness of the curved mouth, and by those same rounded high cheekbones which in profile looked so tender. Whatever it was, it is a fact that the side face and the full face gave not the same impression, but that both had a rapt

striking beauty when her eyebrows
showed distress. (15)

Like the Lytton landscape, described in such intimate detail, Mrs. Dorval looks physically different depending on the perspective of the observer. Frankie's linguistic choices, suggesting an obsessive interest in this face, resonate with physical attraction and conflict ("purity," "disturbing sensual look," and "so tender"), yet follow a moment where she was ostensibly "gazing at the empty sky." The disconnect between Mrs. Dorval's "faces" is crucial to Wilson's plot. For example, without having met her (but being well-acquainted with the older woman's reputation), Frankie's parents forbid their daughter's continuing association with Mrs. Dorval. Yet when Frankie and her mother encounter Hetty on board ship as they embark for England, Mrs. Burnaby is flabbergasted at the actual physical appearance of the woman she is accustomed to call "the Menace." And it is the physical that causes so much havoc in this novel—Hetty's scandal, never completely revealed, is by all indications one of illicit sexual connection, although by contemporary standards it is her treatment of others, at all levels, that is reprehensible.

At the end of the novel, as war looms, Frankie, now nearly nineteen and living in London, meets Molly and Rick

for a celebratory farewell tea before her departure for Paris with a school friend. In the tearoom in Piccadilly "sat a woman in mourning, or at least in black." For Hetty this distinction is important: "The line of her profile was pure and a little sad. The curve of her softly rounded and rather high cheek-bone and the soft hollow beneath, the tilted 'flirt's nose', the rather overfull upper lip—all gave me a faint shock of delight and then of sudden alarm. It was Hetty, in black hat of simplicity and great smartness" (63). Again, Frankie is drawn into the scene through physical attraction, the ever-so-fleeting "shock of delight" in the details of the woman's face. But the moment quickly absorbs Frankie's friends: when "I felt Rick's eyes rest upon her, I felt Molly look at her too, and I thought 'Now I'm for it, let's run!'—when Hetty slowly turned her head and looked up at me, and for a full moment gave us her long, careless, gentle look. I stood there, a girl of nearly nineteen—no, a child of twelve" (64). Another cinematic framing of a crucial scene, complete with a portentous flashback, yet this time Frankie does not respond to the landscape as carefully as she did at home in Lytton. After reluctantly introducing Rick and Molly to Hetty, Frankie removes herself from the scene by leaving for Paris—without warning Rick, although she considers

doing so—feeling distinctly uneasy, but resisting action. Removed from her “place,” Frankie is less decisive, less effective; by failing even to try to warn Rick (although it was clearly already too late), Frankie precipitates the final plot crisis.

Wilson shows her narrator clearly out of her element in the Piccadilly tearoom, environs that could not be in greater contrast to the British Columbia landscape that opens this novel. Frankie cannot compete on Hetty’s level on this stage—and Wilson makes sure her reader notices that Hetty is always performing on a stage. All of Hetty’s movements are designed to be looked upon and admired. Even Frankie’s description of the look Hetty gives them (“her long, careless, gentle look”) belies the meaning of the words themselves: the look is careless because Hetty cares less about others than herself; the look is gentle because Hetty herself is so unquestionably in control of the scene, and because that very gentleness reasserts the power structure by making Frankie feel herself again “a child of twelve.”

Hetty’s position in Frankie’s life—mentor/Menace—depends on both women recognizing the division of power. But this reassertion of control comes shortly before the one moment in the novel when Wilson shows Hetty momentarily

powerless to control a scene and others around her. Frankie has returned from Paris, with mixed feelings of guilt, jealousy, and accountability, to try to exorcise Hetty Dorval from her friends' lives, and goes to Hetty's residence to confront her. Frankie and Hetty's confrontation, and Hetty's angry statement that she has managed fine in her life without a mother, produces the sudden revelation from Mrs. Broom, Hetty's ostensibly devoted servant, that she is indeed Hetty's mother. Hetty reacts to this information first with unflattering doubt, then moves rapidly to disbelief. The discovery of her illegitimacy, and the presence of a secret flesh-and-blood mother (her own servant) in her life after all, would shatter many less-formidable characters. Not so Hetty Dorval, who is only temporarily taken aback by these revelations. Hetty looks past the walls of the room in the same way that she looks past barriers of social convention, carefully calculating the effect of this information on the future she had planned. Mrs. Broom is increasingly infuriated by Hetty's self-centered responses as the scene progresses, and the shift in the power paradigm appears complete when she plays her final card and refuses to name Hetty's father:⁵⁸

⁵⁸Oddly, at this point Frankie finds herself allied with Hetty: "Hetty's

`You'd like to know!' said Mrs. Broom
 with gathered anger and scorn, and the
 words un-dammed and began to flow.
 `You'd like to know who your father is
 and you'll never know! I'll never tell
 you. He done all right by you and it
 was his money you lived by till you was
 twenty-one and after, and it was his
 money edjicated you well, and if I
 loosed you on him now, he and his would
 never know another happy minute from
 you.' (82)

It has been clear throughout the narrative that Mrs. Broom occupies a lower rung on the social ladder, and at this moment of revelation Wilson ensures our notice of this by misspelling "educated." Still, Mrs. Broom's words have the force of the Fraser River, transforming the narrative landscape and, temporarily at least, leaving Hetty Dorval unable to manipulate the action. The flood of genuine emotion is not part of Hetty Dorval's repertoire of power. Wilson uses water imagery to evoke the force of the river, already proven fatal to Frankie's friend Ernestine. While Ernestine thought the river less dangerous than it actually was, Mrs. Broom clearly thinks that her disclosure will be

mind was set on something. She didn't seem to listen. She looked through the room, through the walls, and concentrated on something. `Then who is my father?' she said at last, looking up at Mrs. Broom, and I found myself sorry for Hetty. If there was a side, I was on Hetty's side." (82)

more transformative for Hetty than for herself, misjudging the effect of un-damming her words. Yet it is Mrs. Broom herself who is swept out of Hetty's life by the torrent of emotion, proving that the danger lies not only in the rushing power of words but in human connection. Mothering is clearly fraught with peril in Wilson's works⁵⁹—Frankie's mother, in urging her daughter to keep away from Mrs. Dorval, is ultimately proven right, but for entirely the wrong reasons, thus leaving her daughter vulnerable, with only the flimsy tools of social convention to combat Hetty's power.

While Mrs. Broom stands as an almost elemental force in the novel as a result of Wilson's evocative language, Hetty uses memories of British Columbia to a very different purpose. After leaving her mother in ruins and abandoning Rick like a used tissue, Hetty appears at Frankie's room, asking for shelter for the night: "And so it was that very soon Hetty was sitting up in my bed, dressed in my best night-dress and saying, "You know, Frankie, I liked your mother" (87). Hetty is apparently unaware of the irony inherent in invoking the woman whose values Frankie embraced in setting off the tumultuous scene just concluded, but Frankie is not. Hetty has other irons in the fire when it comes to reasserting control over her life (and Frankie), as she embarks on a long meditation, in its

⁵⁹ The dangers inherent in mother/child (and especially mother/daughter) relationships is especially apparent in *Swamp Angel*.

own way as detailed an evocation of Lytton as Frankie's early descriptions:

"Sometimes when the moon was full I used to saddle Juniper and ride at night down to the Bridge, and across, and up the Lillooet road, and off into the hills. And, Frankie, it was so queer and beautiful and like nothing else. Though there was nothing round you but the hills and the sage, all very still except for the sound of the river, you felt life in everything and in the moon too. All the shapes different at night[. . .]And then the coyotes baying in the hills to the moon—all together, do you remember, Frankie, such queer high yelling as they made, on, and on, and on?" (87-88)

Of course Frankie remembers, and with those memories is transported back to an earlier time when she was still in Hetty's thrall. Listener and teller ascribe very different meanings to the scene. For Frankie, once Hetty's words ("though there was nothing round you but the hills and the sage") are filtered through her own memory,⁶⁰ this scene

⁶⁰ "I remembered the yelling of the coyotes in the hills, and the moon shining on the hills and on the river; the smell of the sage; and the sudden silence as the coyotes stopped for a moment in their singing all together. I remembered the two-coloured rivers. And my home" (88).

evokes the sort of calm sanctuary Cather evokes in the pumpkin patch, in *My Àntonia*, as Jim is left alone when his grandmother walks back to the house:

There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers...Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more.⁶¹

In this moment, Jim first begins to feel a part of this new place, "entirely happy" in the sheltered spot, free to observe "giant grasshoppers," "queer little red bugs," gophers, and grasses. The singing of the wind, like the singing of the coyotes in Wilson's novel, becomes the voice of the place in Jim's memory. Although the memory called up by Hetty Dorval occurs at night, rather than under a warm sun, the effect on Frankie, who loves this place, is no less profound. Moonlight is a powerful medium for

⁶¹ *My Àntonia*, by Willa Cather. (1918) Edited by Charles Mignon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994: 17-18.

revelation in Wilson's novel (Frankie has already commented on its ability to transform the appearance of the terrain) as it is for Claude Wheeler in the horse trough in Cather's *One of Ours*, or Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!* Hetty Dorval clearly intends this telling to work on Frankie like a drug, or, in Frankie's words, a "disturbing magic," compelling her listener to ally herself with Mrs. Dorval and cementing their attachment, yet the effect, ultimately, is not what Mrs. Dorval intended. Frankie's connection to the place is stronger, as it turns out, than her attraction to Mrs. Dorval.

Wilson's use of the word "queer" for both the landscape and the language of the coyotes emphasizes Hetty Dorval's outsider status even as the images themselves transport Frankie through space, as well as time, to her home place. What Frankie remembers of the coyotes is "the sudden silence as the coyotes stopped for a moment in their singing all together," altering Mrs. Dorval's "yelling" to a verb that seems more appropriate in the context of the silence and sounds and scents of the place Frankie thinks of as her home, a verb that makes the coyotes less eerie but no less significant. Mrs. Dorval's evocation of the river and terrain could not be more different from Frankie's micro- and macroscopic observations in the

opening pages of the novel. While it is the same physical place, one observer inhabits the place, noticing, feeling, while the other attempts to manipulate it, separated from the nature of the place by her self-absorbed and materialistic culture of power. Frankie describes both the experience of being in London and Lytton simultaneously and the woman who created that experience as being somehow other-worldly:

What a strange Hetty, after such an evening, calling up this magic—for it was a disturbing magic to me, the genius of my home—and Hetty's smart wrinkly gloves lying on the floor, her little black hat lying there too. I remembered Lytton, and the rivers, and the Bridge, all as real as ever in British Columbia, while we looked at each other in London, yet saw them plainly. (88)

Hetty's hat and gloves are multiply significant, markers of a society to which Frankie cannot belong and a level of income (and therefore fashion) to which she cannot aspire, but also markers of a society that would cast Hetty out in a flash were her past revealed. Hetty's hat and gloves are

on the floor now, and Hetty herself is clad in Frankie's nightgown. Hetty knows that evoking the past, and the memories of their early relationship, will prevent Frankie from shutting her out, although she misjudges the extent of Frankie's vulnerability to her particular charms. The location of their conflict has moved from Lytton to the Piccadilly tearoom, to Hetty's flat, to Frankie's room, becoming ever less public and ever more confined as Hetty invades every aspect of Frankie's life right down to her nightclothes. The battleground thus becomes, literally, a place in which Hetty has a great deal of power—the bed.

Frankie's thoughts turn to her mother as she lies next to Hetty, well aware that the ironies of the situation are too numerous to count. By locating Hetty and Frankie in the same bed, and placing them there as a result of Frankie's wish to take Hetty's place in Rick's bed, the only thing left for Wilson to do is further to blur the boundaries of Frankie-and-Hetty, as she does by clothing Mrs. Dorval in Frankie's best nightgown. The negotiations over sleeping space are by no means original to Wilson, but Frankie, annoyed and tired, soon moves beyond the usual prodding of a bedfellow:

I lay there trying to be as comfortable
as I could in one-third of my own

single bed, and trying to go to sleep. Little by little Hetty relaxed into a spacious S again. I got out of bed, furious, turned back the bed-clothes, woke her and said "HETTY, MOVE OVER," and gave her an almighty smack on her round silken bottom. Hetty was very much surprised and a little plaintive, but very soon we were as we had been before. (89)

Hetty's relaxed S shape recalls the villainous W of the rattlesnake in *My Antonia*, and the temptation inherent in this scene is clear. Moreover, this action is Frankie's most meaningful physical contact with anyone in the novel. Frankie's choice of language shows that she is not immune to the charms of this particular bottom, and that the early attraction to Mrs. Dorval's physical presence has by no means ended. In earlier reveries over Hetty's face, Frankie observes "a rather pleasing yet disturbing sensual look" (15), and in this scene, too, she clearly finds the reality of Hetty's physical presence both pleasingly and disturbingly sensual. Frankie's very sense of self is disturbed, but Wilson has her focus instead on her mounting outrage at the practical aspects of Hetty's invasion:

If I was to get any sleep, either she or I had to get out of that bed and sleep in the chair. I became more injured and enraged. Hetty's pleasant seduction of Richard, her base treatment of her mother, the trouble (and expense, for I had a very small allowance) to which she had put me, all became swallowed up in the magnitude of the fact that Hetty was sleeping in my bed and I was lying on the edge of it, angry and uncomfortable. And I wanted to get to sleep. Hetty asleep was Hetty peaceful so the only thing was to get out and let her have the bed. (89).

Given the trouble Hetty has made for herself in choice of bedfellow in the past, the ways she co-opts the bed of her enemy and is able to fall into a peaceful sleep almost instantly bespeaks a lack of humanity. And Wilson emphasizes her character's lack of sensitivity in the way Mrs. Dorval attempts to use a vision of the coyotes and the moon over Lytton to control Frankie. Frankie's reactions are a jumble of attraction (for she, no less than Rick, has been [repeatedly] seduced by Hetty), indignation, and

dismay, to which she responds with both attack and retreat. Her desire to avoid further conflict is stronger than her desire to share physical comfort or to have the realities of the relationship made any clearer.

With this scene, *Hetty Dorval* and Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* decisively part ways. Wilson brings the relationship between Frankie and Hetty to a much more explicit and intimate level than Cather does with Nellie Birdseye and Myra Henshawe, altering the exchange between the characters in a fundamental way. Hetty's relationship to Frankie is no longer either mentor/Menace but, rather, a parody of her relationship to men, with the bedroom scene a pointed reminder of the situations that both produced Hetty and led to her downfall. The scandal in this bedroom exchange is the manipulation of Frankie's initial admiration of Mrs. Dorval; the last vestiges of her childhood crush apparent in that smack of her "round, silken behind" and her reaction to the way she has been used by the older woman.

Cather uses marriage and its connotations more straightforwardly in her novel, allowing Myra and Oswald's partnership to stand as an example to Nellie rather than offering a participatory experience as in Wilson's novel. When Myra comes back into Nellie's life, it is after a ten-year period during which neither woman has fared especially

well—not an encounter in a posh London tearoom. The Henshawes and Nellie discover that they are living in the same “apartment-hotel, wretchedly built and already falling to pieces” (*MME*, 49). Nellie is able to see the ruin of the great love match, and offer friendship to both Myra and Oswald, both much diminished by illness, poverty, and each other. Nellie’s visits to Myra’s room are largely focused on conversation, about Nellie’s family, Myra’s uncle, poetry, the inconsiderate neighbors, all subjects of importance to both women—but when Nellie turns the conversation to Myra’s relationship with Oswald, she soon finds herself shut out of the room and Myra’s presence. The power dynamic in the novel is unaltered by Myra’s infirmities or the passage of time. Cather allows Nellie power over Myra only in her private criticism of the relationship with Oswald. Even in her most private judgment Nellie tries hard to meet Myra on her own terms, as when Myra asks herself, “Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?” (78). Nellie’s reaction is intensely physical:

I felt my hands grow cold and my forehead grow moist with dread. I had never heard a human voice utter such terrible judgment upon all one hopes

for. As I sat on through the night,
 after Oswald had gone to catch a few
 hours of sleep, I grew calmer; I began
 to understand a little what she meant,
 to sense how it was with her. Violent
 natures like hers sometimes turn
 against themselves ...against themselves
 and all their idolatries. (78)

Alone with Myra, Nellie is able to come to a sense of the older woman that is at once more generous and understanding than anything Myra is able to offer Oswald. Unlike the literal struggle over the bedclothes that Frankie and Hetty engage in, Myra's relationships with Oswald and, later, Nellie are framed as being far removed from the daily physical realities of marriage, an absence that is in sharp contrast to Nellie's reaction to Myra's words. *Hetty Dorval* and *My Mortal Enemy* reflect off one another in ways that cast their differences into sharp relief.

In considering Wilson's style, David Stouck notes that it is, while seemingly simple prose, "full of stylistic quirks—curious repetitions, illogical statements, ellipses, lacunae—which arrest our attention, direct us to something unspoken, covert [. . .]. Wilson gauges in her fiction the many ways by which human contact is broken—though guilt,

shyness, fear, jealousy, hate" (81-82). Unspoken in *Hetty Dorval* is the complication of Frankie's multifaceted attraction to the title character, yet that emotion connects the women over the course of Frankie's girl- and young womanhood. Wilson returns to Frankie's physical awareness of Mrs. Dorval over the course of the entire novel, countering that attraction with Frankie's intense connection to her British Columbia home. Frankie's genius loci is the only thing with the power to break Mrs. Dorval's spell over her. Although relationships between people are also broken in Wilson's 1954 novel *Swamp Angel*, some of the potential divisions Stouck lists above actually serve to forge new connections in the later novel.

It is tempting to imagine Wilson's *Swamp Angel* and Margaret Laurence's 1969 novel *The Fire-Dwellers* as core texts in a course on downtrodden wives. While Wilson's protagonist, Maggie Lloyd, could be seen as the formulaic intelligent woman stifled by an unwise marriage, Nell Severance (formerly Nell Bigley, of the Juggling Bigleys) could be read as a lazy, self-indulgent recluse, and Laurence's Stacey Cameron MacAindra, central voice of *The Fire-Dwellers*, could be read as an inept loser of a housewife, with none of the creative energy or sexual power of many of Laurence's other protagonists. But such casual

readings radically underestimate the power of these characters, both within their respective texts, and as sites of imaginative possibility. Repositioning these novels in the context of women's westering complicates readings of both in productive ways. The new axis of interpretation brings different characters and nuances of plot into view, unsettling the interpretive binary of domesticity/freedom, Robert Kroetsch's house/horse paradigm, and the like, which create misleading boundaries around the alternative visions proposed by Wilson and Laurence's texts. In the process, these texts engage and contest the notion of houses that "reflect the Euroamerican tradition of separating and dividing space...provid[ing] spatial boundaries by creating walls that try to contain space and to keep the wilderness (nature) outside and separate from the inside" (Bleck 31).

In *Swamp Angel*, Nell Severance is engaged in exploring the limits of her power, while in *Fire-Dwellers*, Stacey is engaged in exploring the limits of her powerlessness. It isn't until each woman really engages the notions of house and place that she is able to move forward. As a part of this process, each narrative uses language of landscape to articulate alternative visions of western womanhood, and, within those alternatives, powerful ways to live inside and

outside of the role of mother. Krista Comer notes in *Landscapes of the New West* that "landscape discourse does the cultural work of articulating...the nationalist desires of. . .western female citizen subjects"(205). Broadening our sense of landscape discourse lets us recognize it as an even more powerful rhetorical strategy in these women's texts. When landscape becomes lived space as well as external terrain, it becomes the location of boundary-crossing imaginative strategies embodied in two unconventional mothers, and it is the work of reading their houses as part of, instead of separate from, their landscapes that is crucial in finding new interpretive possibilities in these novels.

It is true that the institution of marriage does not look much better in *Swamp Angel* than in *My Mortal Enemy*, and hate is certainly the initial motivating force for Maggie Lloyd, *Swamp Angel's* protagonist, in her flight from her second husband, Edward Vardoe: "I hate everything he does. He has only to hang up his hat and I despise him. Being near him is awful. I'm unfair to him in my heart always whatever he is doing, but tonight I shall be gone" (17). She puts her carefully arranged plan into action and escapes Vardoe's house, heading out of Vancouver into the woods. But she cannot make this transition immediately.

Wilson's narrative makes it clear that Maggie must acclimatize herself before experiencing freedom. After her stay in the Similkameen cabins—a liminal space between her past in Vancouver and her future—Maggie is able to go forward to her new life:

These days had been for Maggie like the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death. This soul (perhaps, we say) is tired from slavery or from its own folly or just from the journey and from the struggle of departure and arrival, alone, and for a time—or what we used to call time—must stay still, and accustom the ages of the soul and its multiplied senses to something new, which is still fondly familiar. So Maggie, after her slavery, and her journey, and her last effort—made alone—stayed still, and accustomed herself to something new which was still fondly familiar to her. (40)

The repetition of entire phrases, of the long, unrolling sentences, adds to the sense of the cabin, "a safe, small world enclosing her"(34), as a place outside time. Maggie's

journey away from Vancouver and into the woods takes her away from her present and into her imagined future, a life much like the one she thinks she lost with the death of her child and first husband. Wilson does not imagine a simple flight to freedom narrative for Maggie. Her new life at Three Loon Lake, working as cook and silent partner at a lodge run by Haldar and Vera Gunnarson, is not without complication. And there is loss involved in the acquisition of her new life, as she leaves not only the life with Vardoe but her job (representing independent income) and her friendships with Mrs. Severance and her daughter Hilda. As their surname suggests, these women are crucial to Maggie's departure. Although she served the term of her second marriage like a jail sentence (or penance), Maggie's relationships with Nell and Hilda Severance⁶² inform the trajectory of her future as they allowed her to maintain a kernel of hope in desperate times. The memory of her former self sustains her throughout her time with Vardoe, and recovering that self impels her forward through fear of discovery and any number of imagined pitfalls. Maggie renames herself with her first, dead husband's surname,

⁶² Maggie's relationship with the Chinese family that owns the taxicab firm is also key. In Joey, the older son, Maggie observes, "East and West blended in him in a way that seemed familiar to her. Perhaps he was now more Canadian than Chinese. By certain processes he was both" (27). Wilson makes her point that all borders are permeable as her protagonist begins to forge her new identity and career.

discarding the surname Vardoe with the apron she flings aside as she hurries to the waiting taxi, and finds other healing strategies as part of her new life at Three Loon Lake.⁶³

Nell Severance was a juggler and circus performer in her youth. Now, incapacitated by various health issues, she rarely leaves the small house she and Hilda share. The eponymous Swamp Angel is Nell's most treasured possession, "a small nickel-plated revolver, pearl handled" (32). The gun was part of her juggling act—Hilda was not. The gun is a treasured companion, and for the most part Hilda feels that she is not. While the Swamp Angel is the repository of cherished memories for Nell Severance, in Hilda's eyes it almost takes on the role of usurping sibling. Nell, the outsider within, the woman who, in her youth, was unconstrained by any convention, is integral to Maggie's escape, as is the gun (that quintessential western icon). She may be sedentary, but she has the will and the ability to affect the outcome of Maggie's flight, and her influence reaches well beyond the walls of her house. In the days

⁶³ "The water, that element that bears her up and impedes her and cleaves and flies away and falls as only water can, transforms her, because she can swim. If she could not swim, ah...then...it would no doubt kill her and think nothing of it. But, because she can swim, she swims strongly out into the lake, forgetting past and future, thrusting the pleasant water with arms and legs, and then, quite suddenly, she turns on her back and floats. She is contented" (100).

following Maggie's disappearance, it becomes clear that Edward Vardoe is a danger to Maggie. Nell summons him to her presence. Vardoe leaves his office and drives to the Severance house, reluctantly:

The car, it was true, proceeded forwards, and within it was the person of Edward Vardoe, but the person within Edward Vardoe retreated backwards. He did not wish to go to see Mrs. Severance, but something imperious in her letter had made him leave the office early and go through the mechanical motions that took him like fate to Mrs. Severance's door, which was slightly ajar, and into the room. There she sat in her vast accustomed chair. Edward resented a feeling of being reduced by the large calm presence of Mrs. Severance. (46)

The partially opened door separates a powerful animal from her prey. By her very physical presence Nell exerts power over Edward Vardoe, whom Wilson writes as inferior in stature as well as social class. Where he was able to exert power over Maggie, not a spineless woman by any means,

through the marriage bond, here Vardoe has no such conventional relationship to support him. Nell Severance appears as a protective figure—not warmly maternal, but vast and female and, armed as she is with the Swamp Angel, frightening. Nell tells Vardoe what he must do, but it is the hypnotic sight of her tossing the gun in the air, over and over, that convinces him. And Nell sees her work in grander terms than simply looking out for her friend. After Vardoe goes, she tells Hilda: "I'm exhausted I tell you. Saving souls. Very tiring"(49).

Nell Severance has few strong emotional attachments: her long-dead husband and the past they shared, her vaguely ne'er-do-well friend Alberto, Hilda, Maggie Lloyd, and, last but by no means least, the Swamp Angel, the gun that symbolizes so much of her power (and so much of what her daughter Hilda struggles against). Her possession of the gun originates in her public life, her life on the stage, and, like a scent or taste, keeps that time fresh in her memory. But being a gun, it reverberates with other meanings for those she encounters. Nell Severance uses that to her advantage in her dealings with Hilda, and with Edward Vardoe. Those who know her recognize the pearl-handled revolver as an important symbol of another life.

But beyond the public stage, and the stage of her home, the power of the gun works against her.

Over the course of the novel, Nell Severance leaves her house twice. Once is to vacation with Maggie and once, after a long interior discussion, is to "take the air" (78). The "air," in this case, turns out to be far from healthful. Hilda has gone out to the theater, leaving her mother alone. Nell watches her go, fingering the gun in the pocket of her dressing gown and thinking, "I will go out...it's quite nice to be alone...I don't care for humanity, it gets between me and my desires...I'll brush my hair and put my cape over this, and go to the end of the block and back" (78). But even donning a conventional outer shell doesn't protect her from humanity, or its representatives, for as Nell goes slowly and painfully out into the yard her neighbors peer out their windows and say "Look, there's that woman again! Isn't she peculiar!" (78)

This last journey beyond the four walls and into the eye of a larger, hostile community concludes with a public and far too revealing fall, before Nell even reaches the front gate, and signals the end of an era. The gun falls out of her pocket, to the horror of the neighbors, and Nell realizes that she needs to get rid of the gun before the police confiscate it. She writes: "Maggie keep the Angel

safe for me. When I die throw it into the deepest part of your lake" (82). Nell's brief moment of conventional behavior, her failure to recognize her house as legitimate lived terrain, hastens the end of her life. The decision to leave the house and place herself under the scrutiny of the community has momentous consequences, and she finds herself forced to give up her power, her revolver, her icon of independence—the item of which Hilda has been jealous her entire life, and which saved Maggie from Edward Vardoe's pursuit and vengeance. Later, missing it, Nell writes Maggie that there is no object she is as comfortable juggling as her revolver.⁶⁴ The implications of her decision are clear. This old woman cannot, in the eyes of the larger community, be a legitimate possessor of a gun, no matter what its provenance. In order to maintain her independence and her ability to control her own fate, Nell must send the gun to Maggie. It is her most maternal act.

After Nell's death, and in an echo of the scene in which the former juggler playfully tossed the gun into the

⁶⁴ The juggling metaphor is integral to an understanding of Nell Severance's life, as it has come to be for many contemporary mothers. She is a famous juggler from a juggling family, yet when she marries Philip Severance she chooses not to juggle her relationships; they are unquestionably first with one another, to the exclusion of their child. She does not juggle social relationships either, maintaining only a small circle of intensely felt relationships (the afore-mentioned Alberto, Maggie, and, surprisingly, Hilda's husband). The only thing left in her life to juggle is the Angel, and when that is gone Nell feels herself diminished, her professional identity gone for good.

air to frighten Edward Vardoe, Maggie stands up in her boat on Three Loon Lake and throws the gun up into the air:

It made a shining parabola in the air,
turning downwards—turning, turning,
catching the sunlight, hitting the
surface of the lake. (157)

The image of the shining gun describing its final symmetric trajectory in the clear air, as if putting on a last acrobatic show in the sunlight, acknowledges the place the Angel occupied in Nell's life. This last flight is not to frighten or impress, but to counteract the effect of the boring and conventional funeral Hilda arranged for her mother. This is the ceremony Nell Bigley Severance wanted.

* * *

Margaret Laurence's novel about a Vancouver wife and mother of four revises mythic visions of the West; more straightforwardly than the later *Diviners*, yet also less overtly radical in content, *The Fire-Dwellers* fits the model of women's texts that stand the traditional notion of the Western on its head. Like *Swamp Angel*, *Fire-Dwellers* appears to be the story of a woman trapped in her marriage, looking to the terrain beyond the Vancouver city limits for freedom. While both novels investigate relationships in the lives of adult women, neither text limits that

interrogation to the protagonists' relationships with other people. Instead, both look outward to the structures that define daily lives, including relationships with place.

At the center of the novel and Stacey's concern is two-year-old Jen, her fourth child, planned-for, we are told, her husband's delight after the accidental, poorly timed arrival of second son Duncan. Stacey's efforts to get Jen to speak are framed by her own multiple voices as well as the traditional authorities of childrearing. The novel begins with a familiar nursery rhyme (Ladybird Ladybird fly away home) set off like an epigraph,⁶⁵ outside the text, but first person commentary follows:

Crazy rhyme. Got it on the brain this morning. That's from trying to teach Jen a few human words yesterday. Why would anybody want to teach a kid a thing like that, I wouldn't know. (7)

And yet it was Stacey doing the teaching, repeating the words she has understood to be aimed at children—the words that, uttered later in the novel in the voice of her young lover, will send her home to her children, and quash her secret rebellion. Stacey's worry about Jen's silence is

⁶⁵ Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone.

ironic—less than sure of the power of her own voice(s), yet determined that her younger daughter find her own, Stacey herself carries on a comprehensive interior dialogue which Laurence alternates with third person narration throughout the novel.

And while the interior dialogue is important, Stacey is a careful listener to other voices as well. She listened to the trains wailing across the prairie at night, for example, and got herself out. But the seductive urging of the trains becomes the voice of reality, via the train's porter: "*Don't look around, sweetheart, he said. Go to the YWCA. That's what I tell all the prairie girls*" (12). So she arrived in Vancouver, and then, in her terms, stopped: "Nearly twenty years here, and I don't know the place at all or feel at home" (11). Stacey's departure from Manawaka has left her without a sense of belonging to a place. Her discomfort in the city, evident as she observes herself on a city bus, walking the waterfront, on a peace march, mirrors her discomfort in her adult persona. For a time Stacey mistakes the source of this unease, but by the close of the novel she is able to articulate the issues that trouble her:

I was wrong to think of the trap as the
four walls. It's the world. The truth

is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron
for one hell of a long time now.

Although in some ways I'll always be
her, because that's how I started out.

(276)

The Fire-Dwellers' sense of place is centered in Stacey's own dislocation. The city of Vancouver hovered like a mirage for Stacey Cameron, but Stacey MacAindra needs to find a way to live there, day after day, growing older, managing her family. Recognizing that the house is not the trap allows Stacey to begin to understand an internal place; if the house functions as another skin, rather than "a trap," then Stacey can understand her own version of domesticity as an integral part of her westering experience, the lived experience that informs the coastal landscape.

Toward the end of the novel, as Jen acquires speech, Stacey herself voices a new sense of acceptance of the city. As this process unfolds, Stacey is able to find a way to continue to move forward into a new sense of self, into an expanding awareness of her children as individuals and a place of common ground on which she can negotiate a new relationship with her husband Mac, and say: "Temporarily,

they are all more or less okay" (281).⁶⁶ She still listens to the words that surround her, but has achieved a context, a frame of reference. For Stacey, arriving at a sense of peace with the uncertain nature of family life is a major victory, showing her coming to terms with her understanding of a domestic landscape.

Nell Severance thinks that walking outdoors, becoming more conventional, is the thing to do but it undoes her; Stacey MacAindra tries to leave her house for the perceived freedoms of not-home—but instead finds herself inviting her father-in-law to move in, anticipating the arrival of her mother and sister from Manawaka, and resisting her husband's suggestion that they move to a bigger house. It is in the house on Bluejay Crescent that Stacey realizes that she needs to let the city in. Going out makes her understand that the walls of the house are more porous than she thought—it is not a prison or a refuge, but a part of a whole. It is a body that does not contain or protect its contents, but is instead permeable, letting Vancouver itself wash in and out along with the newspaper headlines, radio bulletins, television newscasts, voices of children and neighbors.⁶⁷ For Stacey, the radical act of staying

⁶⁶ Not an insignificant moment for any wife/mother of small children.

⁶⁷ The work of the novel, in Henri Bergson's terms, can thus be described as extending Stacey's "faculties of perceiving" (*Creative*

home, in Terry Tempest Williams' phrase, becomes the only way to understand her west. Pairing Nell's and Stacey's struggles against traditionally defined mothering shows each woman coming to a sense of self in ways that teach us to broaden our definition of landscape while reading women's Wests.

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The last text of this chapter, the novel *Sisters of Grass*, is also the most recently published. British Columbia poet and writer Theresa Kishkan was born in Victoria in 1955 and currently lives with her family on the Sechelt Peninsula. She published six collections of poetry and a novella, *Inishbream* (1999) before *Sisters of Grass* appeared in 2000. Kishkan is comfortable blurring genres, discourses, and images; the text permits story to take shape in a number of media and be conveyed by a range of messengers.

Sisters of Grass makes clear the importance of this text being written by a woman in the west from the opening lines, as the protagonist Anna lies in her blue tent listening to the night. This narrative could not have been written otherwise: "In darkness I hear the stories come

Mind, 160). In coming to a point when she can listen without fear "to the uninterrupted humming of life's depths" (*Creative Mind*, 176), Stacey can move outside traditionally-conceived spaces to inhabit her own west.

down from the Douglas Plateau like a summer herd of cattle, ranging for grass as they move into the valley"(9). Cattle in the East, mostly dairy cows, do not change their status winter or summer. They will move from the barn to the pasture and back to the barn in summer, and hope for quiet uninterrupted days in the barn in winter. The cows Anna hears are western cows. Naming the Douglas Plateau locates Anna, and the cows, and provides an initial image of a physical place.

One of this study's framing questions is: What rhetorical strategies and literary images seem most productive in fashioning new ways to 'see' the West? Theresa Kishkan uses her poet's training to expand the boundaries of her novel beyond the traditional. Kishkan's novel pays detailed attention to the physical landscape, not in cinematic language, like Ethel Wilson's, but in the language of lived experience. Anna's description of her own connection to the region resonates with memory:

We have been to the Douglas Plateau in all seasons, driving up in summer to drink a thermos of coffee after dinner while the children turned cartwheels in the falling light, driving up in winter to see what the groves of cottonwoods

looked like, bare of leaves, the ponds
and small lakes brittle with ice. (11)

Anna knows how to identify the local birds; she knows the names of the native grasses. She has memories of afternoons with her children, of encounters with horses, of seasons passing. She knows the language of the place. Yet she also knows that there is a difference between her status there and Margaret's: "Each morning could begin this way, each evening end with the loons. To have grown up in this air, taking in the dust of this earth with each breath, dust of dried grass, or animal skin, the bodies of collapsing stars" (28). Any novel as focused on grass as this one must have its Whitmanian echoes and indeed Kishkan invokes the poet in the last paragraph of her prologue, quoting from "Song of Myself" as the protagonist, Anna, begins her quest to reconstruct Margaret's life:

I hear the stories coming down from the
high plateau, attended by coyotes and
burrowing owls, the tiny swift shape of
a bat. One might be her story, Margaret
Stuart of Nicola Lake, a gathering of
small details that might make up a
life. Weathers, generations of insects
to riddle the fenceposts, a swatch of

muslin from a favourite gown. The
 grasses are beautiful in moonlight—
 pinegrass, timbergrass, brome grass,
 giant rye. *And now it seems to me the
 beautiful uncut hair of graves.* (12)

The italicizing, would, I think, please Whitman, imagining himself crossing chronological and spatial borders to chime in, serving as chorus in this meditation on the intersections of story and life.⁶⁸ Kishkan's narrative, like Whitman's poetry, is layered with a variety of ways to convey story. Stories grow on the earth in this text; they form herds, like horses, and inhabit treasured artifacts, while the native grasses become both domestic and literary texts. The lived terrain of the Nicola Valley, its high plains landscape contained within the borders of a province commonly thought of as heavily wooded, crisscrossed with rivers, bounded on one side by the Pacific Ocean, becomes the foundation for a relationship between a living woman and one long dead.

Anna's journey of discovery takes her into the realms of archivists, nature writers, time travelers, and explorers. The framing plot of the novel has as its

⁶⁸ "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, ll. 20-21.

protagonist and narrator Anna, who works in a small museum and is curating a long-planned exhibit on community history through textiles ("Mostly this will show the history of the women, although I would be happy to be surprised" [13]), an exhibit that recognizes community through artifacts as well as the range of cultures inhabiting the place. The box Anna investigates in the process of arranging the exhibit was in fact donated to the museum independently, and comes her way, mentioned by a colleague, because Anna's family goes to the Nicola Valley whence the box originated: "So I put aside my regular work, columns of notations and surmises based on external evidence, and took up each item to look at in the clear light of day" (10). Anna feels an immediate connection to the objects in the box, and becomes determined to find out more about Margaret Stuart, the woman who treasured these things:

Each item in the box of her life can be noted and commented on, and yet what a distance between a jacket and its wearer, a little bag of earth and its connection to the human landscape, what distinctions between photographs and memory, the way a place is remembered in all its colours and scents, the feel

of its dust settling into the
lungs.(40)

This connection forms the warp of the narrative, while the (imaginary, partial) reconstruction of Margaret's life forms the weft, producing a novel whose focus is less on plot than on the connections between lives, the formation of meaning, and the effect of place. Margaret's story can be read as a coming-of-age story within the frame of Anna's archival work, and after this revelatory moment in the text, chapters acquire subheadings ("William Stuart: Astoria, 1883–Nicola Valley, 1887," and "Margaret, Nicola Valley, 1904," for example) that announce most of Anna's historical reconstructions, but no similar headings, only a wider-than-usual gap on the page, to signal a return to Anna's own narrative. The literal lacunae bring the reader up short with every chronological transition in a way that mirrors Anna's own sense of being repeatedly jarred by her intense imaginative connection to Margaret Stuart.

The connection is both emotional and linked to actual artifacts. Even early in the narrative Anna, the curator, is beginning to notice that the way she has catalogued items in the past is insufficient for the experience she is having with Margaret's box. Opening the box has expanded Anna's vision and sense of possibility. Kishkan's language,

as Anna is drawn further into her construction of Margaret's life, clarifies with increasing precision the distinctions among the language of museums, the language of landscape, and the language of memory. The work of Franz Boas (integral to my later discussion of *Shadows on the Rock*) plays a part in Kishkan's novel as well; Margaret's love interest, Nicholas Byrne, is a graduate student of Boas at Columbia, and travels to the Nicola Valley as part of his academic work. Nicholas offers Margaret and her grandmother Jackson, a Thompson Indian, a brief explanation of Boas' work, and then comments on the work of museums via a discussion of basket-making. Kishkan, and Anna, let his comments on museums stand without comment:

I've seen some of the Coast Salish baskets in the Smithsonian Institution, and all sorts of other things, too. So many people have no idea about native cultures, and the museums are one way to educate them. Not the best, I'm afraid. The artifacts always look out of place, somehow, even when they try to give them a context. (99)

The narrative itself becomes a commentary on Boas' work, as Anna opens her mind to the ways cultures make meaning. One

donor's tea towels, a quilt that makes Anna cry because "I know I am reading the map of a human heart" (*SG*, 117), Native baskets and baby dresses pour in; as Anna begins to plan the exhibit, the parallel narrative of Margaret's life moves toward her departure from the Nicola Valley. As a photographer, Margaret, too, documents culture and community, and her choice of work conveniently allows her to bridge the twin desires of home place and romantic love. She can marry Nicholas and move to New York, but photography will provide the excuse to return to the place she loves:

Are we remembered by mountains, the
sweet fields of hay? Do we leave the
syllables of our history in the lambent
dawn or on the ruffle of water as it
moves past our feet in the shallows? A
map of our lives might speak of
favourite weather, the whistle of
blackbirds on April mornings, the way
our eyes saw colour, distinguished
cloud forms, the texture of linen in a
hoop of wood, stitched in and out by
wildflowers. Our mark on the map might
be rough trails or roads, open

pastures, a wild cartography of
longing. (202)

In this context, it is easy to see a community of texts, written by women on both sides of the U.S./Canada border, treating issues of western experience in ways that complement and enrich one another. The story of the prairie-dweller's flight to the big city (and in Canadian literature it is frequently Vancouver, via Winnipeg), for example, reverses the notion of "lighting out for the territories", yet suggests that travel, and change, remain a constant in the mythology of the American and Canadian Wests. In Laurence's fiction, Stacey Cameron leaves Manawaka for a vocational course in Winnipeg and then moves on to Vancouver, and Morag Gunn leaves Manawaka for Winnipeg, Vancouver, London, and then a physical and spiritual return to the landscape of home in McConnell's Landing. Theresa Kishkan's Anna travels to a physical place—the Nicola Valley—and an imaginative place—the possible history of Margaret Stuart—in the process of creating a story for Margaret's life and an organizing theme for her own.

The notion of westering, for women writing a North American West, involves more than journey or quest. Each of the texts in this chapter finds a way for the writer to

transform the traditional mythology of the American and Canadian West, rather than allowing herself or her text to be elided, rendered inferior, or marginalized by those paradigms. Frankie Burnaby proves that inhabiting a landscape is ultimately more powerful than trying to manipulate it; Stacey MacAindra collapses the boundary between "out there" and "in here" in her newfound acceptance of the responsibilities inherent in her choice to remain in her home as a wife and mother; Anna meditates on the formation of community through shared place and memory, and learns delight in discovery without possession.

Chapter IV

Canadian connections: Willa Cather and Aritha van Herk

I learned not to fear infinity,
 The far field, the windy cliffs of forever
 The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
 The wheel turning away from itself,
 The sprawl of the wave,
 The on-coming water.

Theodore Roethke, "The Far Field"

Willa Cather's famous first visit to Québec City in 1928, where Edith Lewis's "sudden attack of influenza"⁶⁹ threw her on her own resources for ten days or so, marks her "discovery of France on this continent" (Lewis, 151), and the beginning of an important phase in Cather's Canadian connections⁷⁰. In this chapter her connection to the work of Canadian writer Aritha van Herk takes center stage, with Cather's *A Lost Lady* and her own Canadian novel, *Shadows on the Rock*, participating in the

⁶⁹ *Willa Cather Living*, by Edith Lewis. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953:154.

⁷⁰ Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, published in 1912, is set, in part, in Canada; I expect to include a reading of that novel as I expand this part of my argument.

conversation with van Herk's writing as well. Stage, as it happens, is an apt term to use in placing van Herk's oeuvre, work that is acute, literate, conscious of its place in a variety of literary continuums, and always aware of its power. And van Herk for her part is very conscious of the powerful presence of Willa Cather.

Aritha van Herk was born to Dutch immigrant parents in central Alberta in 1954. She grew up near the town of Edberg (the narrator's hometown in *Places Far From Ellesmere*) and published her first novel, *Judith*, winner of the Seal First Novel Award, in 1978. *The Tent Peg* followed in 1981, *No Fixed Address: an amorous journey*, in 1986, *Places Far From Ellesmere: a geografictione* in 1990, and *Restlessness* in 1999.⁷¹ Her work, whether fiction, ficto-criticism, essay, or short story, never fails to challenge the reader by blurring genre boundaries, merging technology and linguistics and narrative, and playfully dismantling every constricting model van Herk can find. In addition, like Louise Erdrich, van Herk publicly rereads and reconsiders her own work. She also attends conference presentations where others discuss her work, making sure to include herself among the critics as well as among those

⁷¹ van Herk has also published two collections of essays, *A Frozen Tongue*, in 1992, and *In Visible Ink: crypto-frictions* (1991).

who put into practice reflections on craft and language. In the process, she writes and speaks metafiction. In an article on *Places Far From Ellesmere*, a text punningly subtitled "Explorations on Site," van Herk discusses the title of the book itself, asking

why Ellesmere?...Ellesmere not mainland
but Arctic island, not the near arctic,
or the far arctic, but the extreme
arctic, and thus most adamantly a
geography unknown, only possibly
imaginable, although I would argue for
the unimaginability of all arctic
islands. ("Temptation", 134)

It is clear from the very cover of *Place far from Ellesmere* that Aritha van Herk is interested in questioning and reframing issues of "naming and claiming." The cover shows layered images, almost in palimpsest form: a gray-on-white map of western Montana, Idaho, and Washington state reaching north past Peace River and Fort McMurray, the title in gold, a compass point pointing north, and the author's name in blue, a color inset with a collage of maps featuring Ellesmere Island as a woman's body, a small Calgary grid that has crept Arctic-ward, a chunk of Arctic Ocean and the numerals 1, 2, 3, in bold black type.

Although van Herk did not design the cover herself, she actively participated in the process, selecting her publisher in order to be involved in book design,⁷² and she reads the cover in relation to her text as follows:

The seductive gesture of the woman as island image is placed over/above a translucent copy of an indecipherable map of one area of the province of Alberta, with only the compass North sign pretending to orientation. These figurative declensions of imaginary figures speak precisely to the map's temptation and masquerade: where/what is the 'real' here? How can we perceive meaning in such a blatant refusal of representation? ("Temptation," 134)

The twinned terms "translucent" and "indecipherable" begin to answer the very question van Herk poses. The 'real' here will be different depending on the reader's capacity to imagine beyond the temptation of the map, the ability to see *Ellesmere's* cover as representing both the text's

⁷²This was a hallmark of Cather's involvement in the production of her books, in her work with W.T. Benda on the illustrations for *My Antonia*, her choices of illustrations for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and other matters explicit in her correspondence with Ferris Greenslet and Alfred Knopf. See the work of Janis Stout and Charles Mignon, for discussions of this topic in greater detail.

desire and its limits and a reflection of the author's only partially paradoxical assertion that "the only map worth drawing is the map of the unmappable, that map which seeks to chart the unknown and the unknowable" ("Temptation," 134).

The paratextual experience van Herk's epigraphs form in a reader's experience of this text is important, and multi-faceted. There are four epigraphs, of which three—the first three on the page—are identified by (male) author and text. First is Claude Lévi-Strauss, from *Tristes Tropiques*: "Was that what travel meant? An exploration of the deserts of memory, rather than those around me?" As *Places Far From Ellesmere* is constructed as an imaginative journey for the narrator, the meaning or purpose of travel is a central question, as is the question of what it means to be present in a landscape. The word "desert" reappears near the end of *Ellesmere*, making Lévi-Strauss's question into a frame that encloses almost the entire text. Next, a quotation from Michel Foucault, from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

A discursive formation is not,
therefore, an ideal, continuous, smooth
text that runs beneath the multiplicity
of contradictions, and resolves them in

the calm unity of coherent thought; nor is it the surface in which, in a thousand different aspects, a contradiction is reflected that is always in retreat, but everywhere dominant. It is rather a space of multiple dissensions; a set of different oppositions whose levels and roles must be described.

Like Laurence's *River of Now and Then*, the Foucault passage illuminates the contradictory currents of thought that are inherent in this text. Foucault's mathematical language, his description of both space and set, suggest the precision with which van Herk calculates each opportunity to disrupt, to create, in Donna Haraway's phrase, a geometry of difference. *Places far From Ellesmere*, in fact, revels in what a mathematician might term an n -dimensional "space of multiple dissensions". The Foucault epigraph is followed by one from Albert Camus:

There are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet there is a need for them. In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve [wo]men

better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time. But where can one find the solitude necessary to vigour, the deep breath in which the mind collects itself and courage gauges its strength. There remain big cities. Simply, certain conditions are required.

"The Minotaur or The Stop in Oran"

More deserts, more islands. The necessity of solitude. Rules for negotiating society and culture. A reason to go north: to locate "the deep breath in which the mind collects itself." And last, at the bottom of the page and enclosed in brackets, the following:

[In the explorations of memory and place lie unsolved murders; in the multiple dissensions of distance and time, certain conditions prevail. The world admits deserts and islands but no women.]

It is, as van Herk comments, "a quoted unquote from no recognizable expert, invented for the occasion, designed to imply the absence denoted by the bracketed life" ("Temptation," 130). This structure is in keeping with the

shifts from third to second-person through the text, and with the author and narrator's tendencies to present the pronouncements of magisterial male writers, then offer biting, amusing, or ironic rebuttal. It is a warning and a promise, a "conditional" ("Temptation," 130) that prefaces a text intently focused on condition. And it is a way of poking fun at the notion of an epigraph itself, a way simultaneously to construct while playfully dismantling.

In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, van Herk begins to write with more linguistic abandon than in her earlier novels. This text leads the reader from the narrator's (and van Herk's) hometown of Edberg, in central Alberta, to Edmonton and then Calgary, for university, and then north to Ellesmere Island, near Greenland, in the Arctic. The first and most obvious challenge in her texts is to established notions of language, particularly grammar and punctuation but also the occasional invention of boundary-blurring words, and this challenge gets more pronounced in *Ellesmere*. Geoffrey Nunberg, in making a case for considering the linguistics of punctuation, notes that "written language - that is, the system of figural representation that is of particular linguistic interest - is still defined and legitimated by reference to the spoken language" (1) and goes on to suggest the need for study of

"written language as a linguistic system in its own right" (Nunberg, 2). In outlining some objections to such study, Nunberg accepts that spoken language can be, for the most part, reasonably accurately represented in written language and that written language can be read aloud reasonably effectively. He goes on, however:

even if writing is capable of expressing all of the relevant or important features of the spoken language, we are still left with the question of deciding whether there is anything *more* to the written language than the features it shares with speech. (4)

Nunberg argues that the "contrastive" nature of current studies of both written and spoken language precludes the open-mindedness needed to take on the question he poses. He proposes to examine punctuation as a "linguistic subsystem" with the caution that "its systematicity is apt to be obscured if we analyze it contrastively, by reference to the set of spoken-language devices with which it has some functional overlap" (6). Punctuation, according to Nunberg, is not simply a transcription of intonation and

intonational cues, and *Places Far from Ellesmere* proves his point. The first section, entitled 'Edberg: coppice of desire and return,' begins

Home: what you visit and abandon: too
 much forgotten/too much remembered. An
 asylum for your origins, your
 launchings and departures, the
 derivation of your dream geographies.
 Where you invented destinations. Always
 and unrelentingly (home) even after it
 is too late to be or to revert to
 (home), even after it pre/occupies the
 past tense. (13)

With the first four lines of this boundary-blurring narrative the reader already knows she has begun a journey outside traditional and traditionally structured narrative. The two full colons of the first sentence jar the reader with consecutive descriptive stops, while the slash separating "too much forgotten" from "too much remembered" is a textual demonstration of how literally close those concepts can be to one another. The parentheses around the word home serve to enclose the word in the same way that a home itself can be an enclosing space, yet the open top and

bottom allow for the possibility of escape and re-self-definition. The slash in "pre/occupies" ensures that the prefix is not only before but separated from the root of the word, and allows also for dual meaning.

After leading the reader on a mental walk through "the dust that lays itself down on the main street of Edberg" the narrator questions the task of memory and its ability to (re)construct:

do you remember or forget? Or is it all
 an elaborate fabrication, the village
 of Edberg and the farm two miles south
 and two miles east part of a
 puppeteer's gesture pulling the strings
 of source? Even on arrival you are
 scouting out a grave. It still seems
 endless: Edberg. Without a time limit
 or the decency to know when to efface
 itself. Worse, it claims you, insists
 on a reference, influence, empreinte.
 Impossible: somewhere to come
 from/never to run away to.
 Initiation coppice. (15)

A coppice is a small wood that exists for the purpose of being cut periodically. A coppice of desire and return,

then, suggests that each (desire and return) will need to be regularly expunged in order to be renewed. The four chapter titles (Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary, Ellesmere) specifically link place to this idea of renewal while the subtitles (coppice of desire and return, long division, this growing graveyard, woman as island) each suggest multiple possibilities remaining in place. Long division, for example, involves multiplication and organization as well as the idea of separating something into parts of the whole (and not necessarily ending up with whole parts—those nasty fractions!). When a graveyard grows, it is not with a sense of renewal. And “woman as island” stands John Donne on his head.

van Herk’s repeated use of second person (“it claims you,” for example) makes the reader complicit in the task of memory yet leaves her standing outside the circle of shared remembrance. Although the narrator is the only one who comes from this particular Edberg, the line “Impossible: somewhere to come from/never to run away to” has a much more universal resonance, recalling as it does Robert Frost’s “Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in” (“The Death of a Hired Man,” ll. 118-119).

The narrator is allowed to bring only one book on her trip to the Arctic, and there is an extended discussion of the selection process that results in the choice of *Anna Karenin*. In the second section of the Edberg chapter, subtitled TRAINING, Anna Karenina makes her first un/appearance in the text:

if you could manage to ignore the cream cans and tractor parts, the wooden baggage cart, you could imagine (an Anna in black velvet stepping down to take a breath of air on her way to one of the family estates; it is the Edberg platform that nudged and gestured, peering and curious). (16)

Transient, imagined, only present if the tangible cream cans are not, Anna Karenina is in many ways the center of this text, although in the middle of the Edmonton chapter "you have not yet read *Anna Karenin*, but she is waiting to be read, to remind you of what to expect of books, of love affairs and their killings" (50-51). As Karin Beeler notes, "the first three chapters introduce Anna so she becomes part of the narrator's own landscape even before she has read her story.. These early glimpses of Anna help erase conventional temporal boundaries, and thus create a sense

of liberation for the narrator and the character" (231). Tolstoy's tragic heroine draws the narrator, fascinating her, and making her furious at Tolstoy himself for the destiny he writes for Anna. The narrator imagines Ellesmere Island the perfect place on which to write a new fate for Anna: "perhaps you can un/read her, set her free. There on that desert island, between the harebells and the blue dreaming of glaciers" (82). Throughout the text the narrator refers to Anna Karenin (using the Penguin edition's rendering of the title) primarily as Anna, and Asta Mott suggests that "this emphasis on the first name is significant because it gives Anna an identity of her own" (109). In a text resistant to female characters' fates at the hands of their male authors, this emphasis on first name cannot help but recall Mrs. Bentley, the narrator of Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House*, named only through her connection to her husband, and doomed, according to many critics, to a life not much better or more fulfilling than Anna's.

Although the structure of van Herk's text locates Edberg the geographical place as the starting point on the narrator's route to the Arctic, Edberg the textual place becomes the repository for more speculations on the power of memory and language:

Edberg goes on with its falling, one
 molecule at a time: and you too in your
 ache to archive it there to
 read/remember/blame. To unhinge and
 carve with words. A reading act: this
 place of origins, of forbiddens and
 transgressions, of absence and remains.

(39)

While the sentence fragments force the reader to read haltingly, to consider the stops and pay attention to punctuation, the agency and intent in the word "archive" set up the combined acts of "read/remember/blame," all seemingly inextricable from one another in "this place of origins". For van Herk, the slash leads to multiple meanings and multiple readings in a way the hyphen, simply joining two words, cannot. In "read/remember/blame," for instance, the act of reading the place moves into remembering, and mapping one's memories of an evolving self against a shifting landscape. The three words are literally so close together that there is no space between them, no time passing between the reading of "read" and "remember," no distance between "remember" and "blame." The evolving self and its hurts and resentments focus the blame, allow the words "forbiddens and transgressions," almost biblical

in their resonance with sin, to follow so closely on "origins." And as any writer knows, words are powerful tools to "carve" this place into a particular graven image:

Edberg: this place, this village and
its environs. A fiction of
geography/geography of fiction: coming
together in people and landscape and
the harboured designations of fickle
memory. Invented: textual: un/read: the
hieroglyphic secrets of the past. Come
home.

Enough's enough. Come home. (40)

The reiteration of "come home," despite the pervasive sense of parody and fun in this text, does more than evoke Spielberg's E.T. pointing a crooked finger at the sky and croaking "Home! Home!" The notion of "home," the structure and grammar of this work suggest, is as much a fiction as all the rest. Where is "home" for the narrator, who has produced a road map of experience, a rooftop carrier, as it were, of places and landscapes lived along the way, but never culminating in the appearance of a community to join? Where is "home" for Anna Karenina, whose author wrote her into a spot where the only place of repose was between the train and the tracks? Where is "home" for the reader,

addressed throughout as "you" and thus drawn, like Walt Whitman's readers of the future, ever more closely into the narrator's field of vision? All of this hearkens back to Northrop Frye's question "Where is here?" and the negotiations with this question performed by each of the texts previously discussed in this study.

A "fiction of geography" is a designation it is almost impossible for a literal-minded reader to comprehend, taught as we are to believe that maps and globes and geographical renderings, however inflected with imperialist thinking or patriarchal paradigm, represent some approximation of fact: rocks, mountains, rivers, boundaries. But rocks and mountains, rivers and political/social/cultural boundaries are not immutable. Any geographer active in the profession over the past decade could certainly attest to that; any environmentalist, or for that matter most tourists, will assert that landscape is not only mutable but constantly so, shifting and changing in response to a variety of stimuli, natural and otherwise. Indeed, as Kent Ryden notes,

Ecologists have come to recognize
change, disturbance, and
unpredictability as intrinsic to
natural landscape, not as anomalous and

somehow alien to natural processes, and
 to attempt to account for it and
 understand it in their work.

(*Landscape*, 31)

Arachne herself functions as a disturbance of natural landscape in *No Fixed Address*; in *Ellesmere* the narrator's presence begins to alter her surroundings as her narrative becomes "a book masquerading as a map, or more accurately, a map masquerading as a book" ("Temptation," 129). Mapping allows us to find our way but never allows us to assert the kind of knowledge of a place that (as Edward Abbey might say) only comes from getting out of your car and taking the time to notice details.

Landscapes and characters may resist certain readings, but Aritha van Herk's landscapes, as in this moment in *Places Far from Ellesmere*, help the reader map a new activity, a way of seeing and learning and reading that isn't possible in Calgary, Edmonton, Edberg:

reading is a new act here, not
 introverted and possessive but
 exploratory, the text a new body of
 self, the self a new reading of
 place...this undiscovered place: the
 farthest of all possible reaches, this

island paradise, this un/written
northern novel, this desert un/kingdom.

(113)

The words "desert" and "island," recurring from the epigraphs, enclose the narrative and set up a final interpretive task for the reader. The narrator makes it clear, again, that what the mapping in this text has produced is another fiction, a "novel"—a word meaning both new and not-history. Reading is embodied ("the text a new body of self") while the body itself becomes text; the narrator has traveled to this place yet it is still "undiscovered"; the "paradise" is still a "desert." The narrator left Edberg for Edmonton, Edmonton for Calgary, and Calgary for Ellesmere Island on her journey of discovery. In each case, leaving made it possible for the narrator to write her imaginative return, another connection to Cather, Laurence, Wilson and Roy. Her final stop, this island in the Arctic, serves to connect her even more closely to writing and written women. Yet here in "the farthest of all possible reaches," although the narrator is present with her companions the place itself remains "undiscovered" while, significantly, that word is left whole and "un/written" and "un/kingdom" are both split by backslashes. This suggests that "un/written" and

"un/kingdom" belong to categories that are both "introverted and possessive," that disrupting them forces the reader to reconsider—to think about their counterparts "written" and "kingdom" as being equally present.

As Mott notes, this text forces the reader into a different position vis-à-vis the text, a way of reading "which, for the reader, becomes a simultaneous exploration of fictional characters and the self." While the narrator envisions this place as a different kind of "island paradise," the reader is forced to replace images of tropical palms waving in gentle breezes with "The clothed lake, waterskin, sometimes a solid coat of ice, sometimes in rags and tatters, sometimes only wisps, faint promises of ice returning" (112). However, Mott continues,

Places Far From Ellesmere reproduces the image of the North as a blank space, one available for an escape and a new mythology. Van Herk carelessly erases First Nations' presence in the North. (109)

This is a problem for Mott because, if she is correct in her reading of the text, then while

male explorers, fur traders, explorers and some twentieth-century writers constructed the North as a topos of

blankness suitable for description of adventures, escape, survival or death...van Herk reinscribes the same attitude camouflaged under a different set of concepts. . .By appropriating the Arctic space for the subversion of literary conventions and textual constraints and the liberation from gender assumptions, van Herk is caught in an emptying practice which often accompanies colonial desire. (109)

This reading of *Ellesmere*, especially the word "erased," overlooks the fact that this particular oversight seems unlikely, if not impossible, for a reader and writer as astute and alert to margins as van Herk. The watery lens employed by other women writers in this study has certainly been transformed, in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, into icy possibility. True, the temptation to see the Arctic as an unwritten page is familiar from the writings of other explorers and it would be easy to make the mistake of reading van Herk as occupying the same position. It is important to note, however, that both writer and narrator in this text draw a distinction between lived experience and imaginative possibility. The farthest reaches of the

Arctic serve as a site that produces enough mental space for reflection, visions of alternatives. Returning to van Herk's text and the matter of "erasing First Nations' presence":

Resolute barks, its babies cry, the
bingo machine in the hall rattles. The
village still, as if snow needs to
come, as if waiting for its winter when
dogs and snowmobiles can roar to life.
Furs cast over railings, sleeping bags
wilt on the stony ground. Stones, here
are stones. This village, trying to
hold its own against the airport, odds
enormous and re/settled. The airport
presuming only women and carvings. (84-
85)

Far from being an erasure of First Nations' people, the text indicates instant, specific recognition of their contemporary issues and the struggle to *resist* erasure. The visual images of the village with the uneasy tension of "furs cast over railings" as if to try to cover up elements of unnatural built landscape, solidify opposition to the encroaching, "presuming," marginalizing airport. Van Herk goes on to comment on the work of some who were interested

in replacing First Nations culture with their own set of values:

American missionaries here to teach
 Sunday school—Christian Bible school?—
 to Inuit children. You are unforgivably
 profane in light of what you read as
 pure stupidity, but their faces
 register blindness, a bland compliance
 with their calling. The Inuit children
 of Resolute need American Christian
 fundamentalist missionaries? Jesus and
 Anna Karenina save them. (85-86)

van Herk's awareness of other cultures and their presence in her imaginative landscape is the motivation behind the narrator's insistence on multiple interpretive possibilities and on the notion that her own journey is yet another fiction. It is worth imagining a place where lives can be rewritten, the narrator suggests, even if the reality of such a place is already resonant with history and experience, even if others imagining their own kind of rewriting must be punningly but emphatically cursed.

In *Places Far from Ellesmere* Aritha van Herk is engaged in the task of writing women into and onto the landscape of western (northern) Canadian fictions. The

merging of genres and utilization of additional grammars allows van Herk to produce fictional structures that literally look different from the traditional novel, memoir, history, and map; narratives where the act of "looking different" is an integral part of the work of the text.

The answer to van Herk's own question, "why Ellesmere?", seems to be that this place "beyond the lip of known Canada" ("Temptation," 134) is enough outside an inscribed cartography to become a place of writerly possibility. The expanse of ice, deceptively like and emphatically unlike a blank page, is instantly attractive to van Herk in the paradoxes it embodies, and her interest in finding such places of possibility is evident in the earlier novels as well. The eponymous Judith reinvents herself on a pig farm, while *The Tent Peg's* J.L. has to travel farther afield in her quest for meaning; *No Fixed Address: an amorous journey* foreshadows *Places Far From Ellesmere* in its focus on maps and their relation to experience.

Arachne Manteia, the picara protagonist of *No Fixed Address*, is a traveling saleswoman representing a women's underwear company. The Arachne of classical myth was a weaver who dared challenge the goddess Athena to a weaving

competition. In one version of the myth, Athena was so outraged by the perfection of Arachne's work (and the weaver's pride) that she tore the other woman's fabric to shreds and turned Arachne herself into a spider. van Herk is well aware of the mythic connotations of her character's name, using imagery of weaving and webs throughout the novel, and naming Arachne's sole woman friend "Thena." As Karin Beeler notes in the foreword to the 1998 reprint edition, however, "Arachne's activity is not presented in the context of the traditional image of weaving; instead she breaks away from the limitations...by weaving herself into the Canadian landscape"(ii).

Arnold Davidson says of *Judith* and *The Tent Peg* that each "playfully dismantles its quest plot into disparate sections the reader must fit together" (110)—this is equally true of *No Fixed Address* published in 1986, and van Herk's later works as well. The disparate sections of *No Fixed Address*, organized chronologically in terms of the frame plot, leave the reader struggling to identify the crucial parts of Arachne's history as an unnamed researcher learns each tidbit.

Arachne grows up essentially unparented (she refers to her childhood in Vancouver as "gasping" and "squalid" (*NFA*, 229). Her father is an essentially benign but uninterested

figure with yet another resonant name, Toto Manteia. Her mother, Lanie, has no interest in mothering, and does everything she can to avoid the possibility. When her luck runs out and she gets pregnant, "she ignored the child inside her" (63), and, when Arachne was a month old, gets a waitressing job, leaving the baby alone in the apartment all day long, day after day. When Arachne is a little older, Lanie routinely locks her in the backyard when she goes out. Yet her presence in the adult Arachne's life both insists on their relationship and denies it,⁷³ as they remain connected but deliberately emotionally remote from one another. The third adult presence in Arachne's life is Gabriel Greenberg, a wealthy stranger who visits Lanie regularly to have his fortune told, whom Dorothy Jones describes as "the mysterious visitor who effectively names [Arachne] and bequeaths her the car so necessary to fulfill her potential" ("Temples," 428). The narrator describes Gabriel as "the one Arachne smiled for" (67), a habitual watcher who steps into a quasi-parenting role only once, when the infant Arachne is sick. Gabriel takes the baby out

⁷³ Deborah Keahey notes that "though van Herk spends considerable time developing the circumstances of Arachne's childhood as clues to her psychology, we are given very little authorial commentary or introspection regarding her present psychological state. Arachne's emotional response to events is frequently undeveloped, and sudden shifts and apparent contradictions in character are often left unexplained" (144).

of the house, leaving Lanie behind, and drives around until she stops crying and falls asleep. The rhythm of the car soothes the ailing child, her earliest experience of the security of a car on the move.

Driving, and Gabriel's Mercedes, become central to Arachne's evolving sense of the world and its boundaries. When he buys the car, "Lanie gushed about the new car, went on to Toto for days. As if the car finally let her know how well off Gabriel was, as if he were identified at last" (62). When Arachne is a sullen, outcast teenager, Gabriel dies, and leaves her the car in his will. The 1959 Mercedes 300 marks Arachne too—it signifies her separation, finally, from Lanie and Toto, both in terms of Gabriel's recognition of her status in his life, and in the literal potential for flight it provides. The car sets her apart from the rest of the world in the eyes of her mechanic George, and it is a powerful aphrodisiac for her and her soon-to-be lover Thomas as

Along the Similkameen they travel a
 black plunger of secret elation, safe
 in an oak and leather incubator,
 pleated map pockets and the white
 punctuated liner above, the oval back
 window receding their past, the big

high tires urging a suspension of
 everything they know and trust. (76)

After Thomas leaves his maps on Arachne's bus, and they make one another's acquaintance, it is the car that motivates their drive across the mountains to Calgary. The drive is the beginning of their relationship ("It is the car. How else can they account for their behavior?" [78]); it is a matter of note for every observer as Arachne goes on her sales rounds, and even the young Mountie who stops her for speeding is interested in the antique vehicle. Arachne moves to Calgary almost on a whim, abandoning one bus-driving job for another, setting in motion a loving relationship with Thomas and, later, a career as a traveling lingerie saleswoman. Having made the first move away from Vancouver, Arachne finds that she is filled with desire to travel: "How can she explain her inordinate lust to drive, to cover road miles, to use up gas? There is no map for longing:" (138) Yet literal maps, rolled up in cardboard tubes and complete with the Geodetic Survey logo, road maps, framed maps hanging on the wall, piles of maps curling on the floor on Thomas' study are important in this text. As Kent Ryden notes, "maps, like landscapes themselves, represent an inextricable blending of the earth's non-human surface with the transforming force of

human thought and action. Dependent on nature, they remain irreducibly cultural" (97). In their own ways, both Arachne and Thomas work to blend their notions of the landscape with thought and action.

Arachne first meets Thomas when he leaves a cardboard tube of maps on the bus she's driving, as previously noted, and it is that object that initially draws her to him. Thomas is a cartographer, and Arachne is a traveler. His maps become her textbooks:

From Calgary roads spider over the prairie. Arachne pores over Thomas' maps, the lines enticing her to quest beyond the city's radius. She gets into the car and sets the bonnet toward the sun. She is learning travel, the pace and progression of journey, the multifarious seduction of movement. She returns to Thomas vibrating at a pitch that he can take into his hands and drink. (132)

Traveling west and north on sales calls, reversing her whimsical flight from Vancouver, Arachne thinks over and over again that Thomas has saved her. In fact, she brings him a gift beyond price: the lived experience of his maps.

Like Thoreau, it seems, Thomas knows "that the really interesting things in the landscape happened beneath and between the mapped and mappable features, in the woods and on the short cuts between one measured boundary and another" (Ryden, 105), yet he cannot experience those things except through Arachne. The 'real' for Thomas is embodied in Arachne's periodic departures and returns:

He is the author of those maps but he
has never known their ultimate
affirmation, the consummation of the
pact between traveler and traveled. He
only draws them; she traces them for
him, leaving the pen-line of her
passing. (132)

Arachne's travels mirror the experience of desire and consummation for Thomas, completing an unfinished experience for the cartographer, while Arachne herself continues to search for completion, her own version of reality, beyond mappable roads and beyond the end of the novel. Arachne and Thomas are lovers literally under and over and through his maps.

The word "amorous" resonates from van Herk's subtitle in *No Fixed Address* back into an historical continuum of women writing about the west, toward Willa Cather's *A Lost*

Lady, suggesting that the strategy Cather uses in developing Marian Forrester as a character resurfaces, reimagined, in *No Fixed Address*. While Cather's characters in this novel are constrained by the very fact of the railroads—Sweet Water is a town created as a result of the railroad and "so much greyer today" (*LL*, 3), van Herk can work with the postmodern imagery of maps to give her characters an opportunity to try to cross tracks, remake lives, and create alternatives. In contrast to Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*, van Herk writes Arachne, whom we first meet, albeit indirectly, through an italicized, second person address to an unnamed researcher (or the reader) following a title page inscribed Notebook on a Missing Person; "You discover in your search that the fashionable woman's shape has always been in a state of constant change (italics in the original)" (2). This lecture continues for a page and a half, concluding

"All that has changed and now, if we wear satin and lace we do so desirous of the proper consequences. We have forgotten our imprisonment, relegated underwear to the casual and unimportant...No art, no novel, no catalogue of infamy has considered the

*effect of underwear on the lives of
petty rogues."* (3)⁷⁴

While Marian Forrester is not precisely a petty rogue, she has a lot in common with van Herk's protagonist. Arachne Manteia and Marian Forrester are both intensely sexual, sensual characters. Both have a man who keeps them tethered to a particular kind of respectable life/passable domesticity, with their reputations not quite free of smirch. Both characters have a companion in the novel who serves as interpretive lens—for Arachne it is her only friend, Thena; for Marian Forrester, it is Niel Herbert, who looks back on his first glimpse of her with pride "that at the first moment he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known" (*LL*, 33), and Thena speaks of Arachne's difference—to the reader? to the unknown researcher?—with pride and defiance.

The novel begins with the fact of Arachne's absence, and her first literal appearance in the novel is at a moment when she leaves the paved road for the marginal shoulder. She's thinking about her professional life, running comfortably through her knowledge of people and selling techniques and product—a product she refuses to use:

⁷⁴ Italics in the original.

Although she might sell them, she cannot go around wearing bikini panties patterned with alligators. Ladies' Comfort cannot afford aberrance, so she must be dead ordinary. Still, it is fortunate no one ever checks. On principle, adamantly refusing to be her own best advertisement, Arachne wears nothing at all. (6)

She is not a character willing to be contained in the way that Marian Forrester is contained; she will not be constrained by her clothes and she will not live in a house like Marian's (for whom four walls are indeed part of the trap). Arachne finds the trappings of domesticity entirely foreign, as the experience of dining with Thomas' family attests; her experiences of being left alone in the apartment as an infant and locked in the yard as a toddler force her to live outside the concepts of house and home (and the wearing of underwear). For Arachne, the second skin that mediates her experience of the west is a machine, a 1959 Mercedes 300, to be precise. Marian Forrester's house, on the other hand, is "encircled by porches, too narrow for comfort" (*LL*,4), and not only is she contained within it, the house is not an easily accessible abode:

to approach Captain Forrester's property, you had first to get over a wide, sandy creek which flowed along the eastern edge of the town. Crossing this by the footbridge or the ford, you entered the Captain's private lane bordered by Lombardy poplars, with wide meadows lying on either side. Just at the foot of the hill on which the house sat, one crossed a second creek by the stout wooden road-bridge. (4-5)

(Sketch it—what does this map look like?) It's a process to get to the house, and, clearly, a process to leave as well. Cather's language describing Marian gives the impression of a woman with a particular kind of power over the men who control her life (and others' lives, as is shown in the scene when Captain Forrester goes into bankruptcy to protect small investors), yet the visual rendering of her situation shows Marian enclosed by her house, caught in the web of property. Arachne, on the other hand, begins her efforts to leave home by climbing fences at the age of three, and continues in this mode throughout her adult life.

While Cather's narrative maps the town of Sweet Water as an anchoring point on a continental web of railroad tracks, and Marian herself at the center of another web, in van Herk's novel the maps work as alternative stories, windows of possibility for Arachne created by Thomas but brought to reality by her travels. It is only when she sees Thomas' maps that Arachne finds a way beyond both the constraints of the life she was born into and the artistic pain represented by the concert pianist Basilisk: "So Arachne is not wrong to credit Thomas with saving her. Only she knows how narrowly she has escaped, how closely the past treads on her heels, how with one stumble it can catch up with her" (80). She lives in Thomas' house without changing it at all: "He likes that, the way she took on his surroundings without rearranging one chair or cupboard" (*NFA*, 90). Instead of making a home, infusing her surroundings with grace and charm, Arachne is able to reverse a feminine ideal, to live in Thomas' home without altering his domestic space or creating her own.

Marlene Goldman argues that, although "the text's subversive casting of a female picaresque character destabilizes certain narrative stereotypes...this reversal does not prevent the text from maintaining significant links with traditional discourses" (Verduyn, 35). One of

the traditional discourses with which van Herk fortunately maintains connections is the historical discourse of women writers writing the West, which lets us see Arachne as Marian's descendant. Goldman continues, "For example, when she enters the North, Arachne behaves like any other westerner. Searching for a frontier that can be colonized, she is both fearful and hopeful" (Verduyn, 35). By the end of the novel (or the beginning, since this has happened by the time the reader encounters the text) Arachne is looking for the edge of story, the place where the maps run out.

She arrives in Calgary eager to belong to the land:

Field, Lake Louise, Banff, Canmore. As
 the mountains drop behind them and they
 level down, the sky fills with prairie,
 the immutable shape of the plain spread
 out like an embodied mirage. There is
 nothing Arachne can say, she is caught
 between her surprise and a sudden
 wrench to be part of this undulating
 plate of land...Arachne is willing to
 acknowledge the truth, but she is
 unwilling to face the consequences
 (80).

And yet it is the consequences of her relationship with the old artist Josef, a relationship that Dorothy Jones links

to the Demeter/Persephone myth, that push her north. Their initial encounter, over an exposed skull at Chief Crowfoot's grave, is full of hostility, yet ends in amicable distrust. Still, it gives no hint of Josef's impact on Arachne's Calgary life. Their on and off relationship gets both of them in trouble with Josef's daughter; distrustful of Arachne, she cannot understand the other woman's desire to spend time with the old man. It is as a result of the trip when Arachne 'springs' Josef from the nursing home and takes him on her sales routes that she ends up in jail for kidnapping. When Thomas posts her bail, Arachne "gets into the Mercedes and drives west along the Trans-Canada highway" (198). As she gets further west she begins to feel that she has made a mistake, should have headed east, but she keeps going:

Most cars turn back at Port Alberni.

The highway changes, becomes tight and unnerving, vehicles are rammed against granite cliffs, plunged into depths of lakes; the road taunts and misleads deliberately. (238)

This time, her trip west is undertaken in flight, not, as in earlier Calgary days, as a way to map her love for travel and Thomas simultaneously. As a result, her

relationship with the road shifts, both in terms of her experience on the road and her response to it—this is no longer a seduction but an adversarial, almost hostile stance. For the first time, Arachne is making her own map, but she cannot entirely choose her path:

This is the edge; not end but edge, the border, the brink, the selvage of the world. She can no longer go west. She is going north now but that will end soon; she has retraced her steps into this ultimate impasse and reached not frontier but ocean, only inevitable water. (239)

Although she thinks that “perhaps she will be able to find a place to settle in, to colonize,” her next thought is not what it might mean to be the colonizer but instead “what has she to offer a raw place?” (248). The answer turns out not to be maps but underwear—as the unnamed researcher follows Arachne north in a rented truck:

A few miles up the road a flash of color makes you slam on your brakes. You slide out and step into the ditch, bend to retrieve it, The panties are gray with dust but their scarlet

invitation has not faded, Ladies'
 Comfort. Another few miles and you find
 a peach pair, then a turquoise, then
 sunshine yellow. Each time you stop,
 shake the dust from their silky surface
 and toss them on the seat beside you.
 There is no end to the panties; there
 will be no end to this road. (260)

Arachne keeps going, the underwear keeps going, the reader/researcher keeps going. In an interview with Christl Verduyn in 1999, van Herk offered her own reading of the end of the novel: "At the end of *No Fixed Address*, when Arachne disappears off the edge of the mappable world, what she's doing is saying: the map cannot contain me; the rules, the way life is laid out, cannot keep me; the narrative isn't going to confine me. And she can come back when she chooses" (Verduyn, 22).

Cather imagines no such escape for Marian—she is bounded and confined by other people's stories about her. Niel Herbert sees the end of Marian's life in *Sweet Water* as a disappointment: "Niel felt tonight that the right man could save her, even now. She was still her indomitable self, going through her old part,--but only the stagehands were left to listen to her" (LL, 143). In the end he leaves

"with weary contempt for her in his heart"(145). Mrs. Forrester goes south—not west, or north—when she leaves Sweetwater, ending her days in Buenos Aires, leaving behind a lifetime of attention for Captain Forrester's grave, and the "warm wave of feeling"(150) Niel Herbert and his boyhood acquaintance Ed Elliott share in their posthumous discussion of her fate. Both women leave their stories resonating among members of their communities; although Marian Forrester is dead and Arachne Manteia, according to her friend Thena, certainly is not, their respective absences from their stories at the ends of both novels call particular attention to the way each is read by others—including the reader. Arachne had opportunities that Marian Forrester, written in a different historical moment, could not have imagined. Both trace their amorous journeys across Wests (and norths) bounded by railroads, convention, the edges of maps.

As we arrive at an understanding of Graham Huggan's description of literary cartography as a means of exploring "territorial strategies that are implicitly or explicitly associated with maps" (31), and as a strategy for writing a women's west, specific actions associated with the writing of that (those) west(s) come to the fore in each text. For Cather, the maps inform the building of the railroad, which affects the growth and health of towns like Sweet Water; the maps provide a frame of reference for Ivy Peters'

acquisitive approach to Marian Forrester, her land, and lifestyle. Marian was indeed caught in a web, and, as it turned out, Ivy was the predatory arachnid. For van Herk, maps are one possible window to text and landscape, offering a visual experience of their joining. Marlene Goldman argues that

The connections between women's experience of the politics of gender and Canada's colonial inheritance are forged on the basis of women's sense of having been defined and controlled by patriarchal culture, just as the nation was defined and controlled through traditional, imperial practices of mapping. Similar practices of naming and claiming have been employed, either covertly or overtly, to construct and maintain both national and gendered identities; this may help explain women writers' interest in images of exploration and cartography. (13)

Goldman's point is broadly applicable to women's writing about western experience, especially in view of Huggan's hypothesis that the postcolonial experience of cartography

informs a literary experience of maps. As previously noted, Canada's colonial inheritance is different from the colonial past of the United States.⁷⁵ Yet both American and Canadian women share experiences of "having been defined and controlled through patriarchal culture" in ways that bear striking resemblance to the way the developing nations were explored, conquered, mapped and named; those experiences inform the evolution of women's western writing, of their literary cartography.

* * *

Cather's 1931 novel *Shadows on the Rock*, one of her least-studied works, is set in seventeenth-century Quebec City. (It is a novel whose setting resonates for van Herk, as I will show in my discussion of her performance "Cather in Ecstasy.") Richard Millington argues that the work of Franz Boas and his students⁷⁶ in the early twentieth century illuminates Cather's fiction in the way it "identifie[s] 'culture' as the central arena of meaning-making, suggesting new kinds of interest in daily life, more capacious notions of imaginativeness, more pointed

⁷⁵ Instead of having explorers and then families of settlers moving west, encountering Native Americans, and being supported in their effort to own and control the land by government forces, the Canadian West saw the Royal Canadian Mounted Police move west first, negotiating with the fur companies, battling the First Nations people, and achieving a measure of control before settlers moved west.

⁷⁶ The same Franz Boas and students, who made an appearance in Theresa Kishkan's *Sisters of Grass*—see chapter III.

criticisms of orthodox American culture" ("Where is Cather's Quebec?", 25).⁷⁷ One way Cather does this is the development of the narrative of the bath over the body of her work, but it is not the only approach she uses. Bodily concerns are central to other Cather narratives, suggesting productive connections among physical experiences, sense of place, and evolution of culture. For example, by focusing on the ways tiny moments of daily life bring the heart of the old [home/land/culture] along, Cather demonstrates how those small rituals and artifacts form a bridge that allows the pioneer to feel comfortable embarking on the mental move to the new land. This philosophy is paramount in *Shadows on the Rock*.

Shadows makes explicit Cather's Canadian connections and the imaginative link she perceived between the settling of Quebec and westward expansion in the United States. Cather figures Quebec City as an imaginative space in which the work of bridging old civilization and new is

⁷⁷ Millington aims, through this essay, to suggest a new avenue for Cather studies. By placing Cather's fiction in "a place [he] ... call[s] 'anthropological,' an imaginative terrain delimited by a crucial development in American intellectual history, the emergence, in the early twentieth century, of a new understanding of culture as a category of human experience," (23) he convincingly links Boasian methodologies to strategies in Cather's work. Millington articulates the core of Boas's theory thus: "rather than representing what 'civilized' European nations have and 'primitive' peoples lack, *culture* refers, more descriptively and objectively, to the interconnected and particular ways distinct communities construct meanings for the individual lives that unfold within them" (24).

accomplished by twelve-year-old Cécile. The pre-adolescent girl is devoted to family and church, marked by her interest in story and the European sensibilities she inherited from her mother. At the beginning of the novel, in her "short skirt and a sailor's jersey, with her brown hair shingled like a boy's" (9) Cécile occupies an androgynous pre-sexuality, yet by the end of the novel she serves as the metaphorical mother of the new Canada.

The novel opens, however, with Cécile's father, Euclide Auclair, watching the last ships of the season sail away down the St. Lawrence on the first leg of their journey back to France. Auclair, standing on Cap Diamant long past the moment when the last sail disappeared from view, is positioned as looking backward toward Europe and the past. His perspective on his surroundings, too, marks him as outsider:

behind the town, the forest stretched
no living man knew how far. That was
the dead, sealed world of the vegetable
kingdom, an uncharted continent choked
with interlocking trees, living, dead,
half-dead...The forest was suffocation,
annihilation; there European man was
quickly swallowed up in silence,

distance, mould, black mud, and the
stinging swarms of insect life that
bred in it. (6-7)

Auclair perceives himself as cut off from the world in Quebec; the unknown continent is frightening, even fatal, to "European man," to whom silence and black mud are equivalent terrors. The concentric borders of wild vegetable Otherness seem isolating, uncrossable boundaries that separate Auclair from Europe/civilization.

In contrast, when Cécile is recuperating from a cold and fever, she lies in bed while

her mind roamed about the town and was
dreamily conscious of its activities
and of the lives of her friends; of the
dripping grey roofs and spires, the
lighted windows along the crooked
streets, the great grey river choked
with ice and frozen snow, the never-
ending merciless forest beyond. All
these things seemed to her like layers
and layers of shelter, with this one
flickering, shadowy room at the core.
(157-158)

To Cécile, the forest, while still described as "merciless" yet is part of the expanding ring of concentric circles she understands as shelter, or home. When Cécile imagines the forest she does not feel harmful intent emanating from it, as her father does. To the Frenchman, the continent is malevolent, while his Canadian daughter experiences it as protective (still, each imagines him or herself at the center).

Cécile herself is protective—of her mother's hopes and expectations, of her father's delight in a well-run household, of little Jacques, essentially motherless despite the (excessively) physical presence of the woman who gave birth to him. 'Toinette Gaux, also known as *La Grenouille*, or the frog, is, in Auclair's phrasing, "quite irreclaimable...as pretty and worthless a girl as ever made eyes at the sailors in any seaport town in France" (50); her son is forced out of her bed to make way for temporary sexual partners and roams the streets poorly shod and hungry. Yet Jacques' mother is proud: "Je suis mère, vous savez! The care of my son is my affair" (88). And she does not consider herself insignificant in terms of the settling of French Canada, saying to Auclair,

"The Governor is our protector, he owes us something. And the King owes

something to the children of those poor creatures, like my mother, whom he sent out here under false pretences." (89)

'Toinette's pride and sense of history (skewed, as is so often the case with such historical awareness, for her own benefit) are indications of the depths of Cather's vision of the complex nature of the evolving civilization on the Rock. Jacques' mother is necessary, to the novel and to French Canada. A society whose womenfolk are entirely represented by Cécile, Jeanne Le Ber, and the cobbler's mother, the pious Madame Pommier, hasn't sufficient edge to survive, an edge as necessary to a community as to the individual (witness, in *My Àntonia*, Mr. Shimerda, who lacks the adaptive carapace necessary for survival). Without 'Toinette, there would be no Jacques. Without Jacques, Madame Pommier would not have been in a position to encourage Cécile to accept his gift of the toy beaver for the crèche: "Our Lord died for Canada as well as for the world over there, and the beaver is our very special animal" (111). And without this gift, Jacques would not occupy the position of moral victory, again in the words of Madame Pommier:

"See, madame," Madame Pommier was whispering to Madame Pigeon, 'we have a

bad woman amongst us, and one of her clients makes a toy for her son, and he gives it to the Holy Child for a birthday present.' (112)

Cécile's position vis-à-vis Jacques and his mother is more complicated than it initially appears when she first brings him home to "wash his face" (51) and feed him: "when he came to their house to play, they endeavored to give him some sort of bringing-up, though it was difficult, because his mother was fiercely jealous" (51). Jacques is already "a very decent little fellow," (51) exhibiting honesty, efforts at cleanliness, and solid affection for Cécile and her father, so the "bringing-up" Cécile attempts to inflict on Jacques reaches beyond an attempt to influence core values. 'Toinette rightly suspects that the Auclairs teach Jacques that her ways and her life choices are wrong, yet she, like Cécile, is the mother of the Canada of the future.

Although it is her father who serves as apothecary, Cécile too is a healer, and her relationship with Jacques is a prelude and transition to her assumption of the role, in the epilogue, of mother to "four little boys, the Canadians of the future." (278) Cécile, whose dead mother is ever-present in her memory, is not permitted to mother

Jacques, who has a biological mother physically present in his life. (Too, the class differences between Jacques and Cécile are evident to both children, though they never explicitly discuss them. Jacques' sentiments about Cécile's cup make clear his stance about the gulf between them.⁷⁸) Ultimately it is Euclide Auclair (father, rather than mother) who 'inherits' Jacques when Cécile assumes her role as mother of Canada's future and produces her four boys.

The father of Cécile's little boys is Pierre Charron, whom Auclair's romantic vision casts in the role of "the free Frenchman of the great forests" (171-172). Auclair seems unbothered by Charron's ready consumption of drink, women, and guns—indeed, both the narrator and Pierre make a point of Charron's admirable restraint while in his mother's town, Montréal. Pierre Charron is also the former fiancé of Jeanne Le Ber, one of the many powerful female characters⁷⁹ in this novel who plays out her role off stage, as it were.

⁷⁸ "More than the shop with all the white jars and mysterious implements, more than the carpet and curtains and the red sofa, that cup fixed Cécile as born to security and privileges...more than once Cécile had suggested that he drink his chocolate from it, and she would use another. But he shook his head, unable to explain. That was not at all what her cup meant to him. Indeed, Cécile could not know what it meant to him; she was too fortunate" (87-88).

⁷⁹ Like Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin, for example, or, in several brief appearances, Cécile's Aunt Clothilde, or, posthumously, Madame Auclair herself.

Jeanne Le Ber's story is an example of how stories of women's empowerment and ability to choose the direction of their lives can be powerfully misread. In discussing her with Auclair, Pierre Charron begins by complaining that the Sisters of the Congregation owe him for the loss of Jeanne Le Ber's dowry, then disavows his bitterness over the money and asserts "but I care about defeat" (177). To Charron, the solitary religious life would be appropriate for "plenty of girls, ugly, poor, stupid, awkward, who are made for such a life" but not for Jeanne, with all her advantages, who should have been "a happy mother" and hostess and is now worse than dead (177-178), her body enclosed within walls of her own choosing, on her own terms.

As Charron describes Jeanne's trajectory from greeting guests at her father's table to her solitary trips to church on a cold winter's night, a different picture begins to emerge behind his words. Here in this new country there are not yet new roles for intelligent women—Jeanne's choices were limited to home and church. There was no forum in which Jeanne could give voice to her suffering; instead she chose to embrace it, and take on the suffering of others as well. She did not have good options, but she made her own choice, despite—or perhaps because of—the cost.

Nonetheless, it is a choice Pierre Charron cannot understand, and thus describes in tragic terms, describing her voice as "harsh and hollow, like an old crow's—terrible to hear" (180) and noting that her face "was like a stone face; it had been through every sorrow" (182). The narrative seems to support Jeanne's right to choose this life, yet Cather presents Jeanne's story in Pierre's words, concluding the story of their midnight encounter in the church "No man was ever more miserable than I was that night" (183). Pierre's self-absorption remains unshaken in the face of this story of great self-denial; he may be the new free Frenchman but he has little interest in the development of the new free Frenchwoman.

Jeanne's religious fervor is a vocation Cécile does not share, as is made clear early in the novel, both by the narrator and by Mother Juschereau; Cécile's choices are made in the context of loyalty to her mother and loyalty to her new country. For Cécile the importance of religion is in its link to her mother and to France, and in the stories. "N'expliquez pas!" (39) she begs Mother Juschereau at the end of a story about Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin, and her desire to preserve the narrative for its own sake, rather than its moral lesson, reconfirms Cécile's lack of vocation for the Reverend Mother. Cécile wants to

absorb the story, to listen to the words, and to make her own meaning; she is not interested in receiving pre-fabricated, pre-contextualized meaning from the lips of another. In Boasian terms, she is making her own meaning and working to develop a new cultural community.

For Cather, the Canadian experience of making a new world "on the Rock" is comparable to the work of westering; the notion of the seventeenth-century frontier similar in imaginative terms to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century imaginative investment in the mythology of the west.

Shadows on the Rock demonstrates Cather's interest in civilization-building and the preservation of multiple levels of story-telling. Through Cécile, Jeanne Le Ber, and Pierre Charron, Cather recenters traditional ideas about living full lives in radically new conditions, and skews the romantic visions of those rooted too firmly in the past. The world had broken in two a decade before; new stories provided a motivation to see it whole again, through fresh eyes.

While new stories motivate the act of revisioning, the work itself occurred in Cather's careful skewing of preconceived notions. Nebraska wasn't a fashionable location? Too bad; the prairie where she grew up contained stories she wanted to tell about the evolving America in

which she lived. Women weren't supposed to have agency in their lives? Too bad; she did, and her characters would as well. Bodies were supposed to be decently clothed and never discussed? Too bad again; Cather had no such notions about the necessity of excluding the physical from her work.

Cather's bodies get dirty and sweaty, they ache with longing or weariness or pain, they bleed and suppurate and starve. (True, they should wash off all the nasty fluids. And it is always important to sleep on clean bed linens.⁸⁰) The "leaky, messy" bodies geographer Robyn Longhurst longs to find in the work of her professional colleagues are here in Cather's novels—perhaps not as graphically in more contemporary works, but present, and demanding attention. Cather's bodies show that attention to the physical is absolutely essential in the creation of new cultures.

Cécile's post-Île d'Orléans epiphany is one such example:

These coppers, big and little, these
brooms and clouts and brushes, were
tools; and with them one made, not

⁸⁰ When Cécile goes with Pierre Charron to visit his friend Harnois the smith, on l'Île d'Orléans, she is most dismayed by the habits of the smith's four daughters: "When they kicked off their moccasins, they did not stop to wash their legs, which were splashed with the mud of the marsh and bloody from mosquito bites. One candle did not give much light, but Cécile saw that they must have gone to bed unwashed for many nights in these same sheets. The case on the bolster, too, was ruffled and dirty. She felt that she could not possibly lie down in that bed" (191). Readying themselves for the day, the family "all wiped their faces on the same towel," and Madame Harnois "got breakfast in her night-cap because she had not taken time to arrange her hair" (193).

shoes or cabinet-work, but life itself.
 One made a climate within a climate;
 one made the days,--the complexion, the
 special flavour, the special happiness
 of each day as it passed; one made
 life. (198)

The physical comforts Cécile enables (for herself and others) through her mastery of these tools and the skills her mother imparted are integral to her vision of home; the sensual pleasures of food, clean linens, and hot bath water are essential to "life itself." Willa Cather's Québec strongly resembles Willa Cather's West; both offer glimpses of Cather's understanding of the processes of nation- and civilization-building.

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Willa Cather figures as large in Aritha van Herk's imagination as Arachne Manteia, or any of her fictional protagonists, as is evident from the unpublished performance piece "Cather in Ecstasy," the plenary address cited in the introduction. Van Herk is fond of epigraphs, and there are two epigraphs in Cather's words to the unpublished text of the performance. The first is an excerpt from Cather's 1894 review of *Lady Windermere's Fan*:

As a rule even wicked novels and plays allow their most 'realistic' characters passions—that is not considered a virtue as yet and may be used without bringing the charge of prudishness against a playwright.⁸¹

Van Herk's second epigraph is from an 1895 piece in the Journal, also from *The World and the Parish*:

Learned literary women have such an unfortunate tendency to instruct the world. They must learn abandon. (147)

In an important paratextual event, van Herk, the author of the performance centered around an imagined Willa Cather whom van Herk herself will perform, invokes the words of the actual Willa Cather. The epigraphs focus attention on bodies and passions; the dizzying revolution of author/authored is a reminder of a community of texts. As van Herk performs her own learned, literary Willa Cather enjoying an afternoon in Quebec City, the continuum formed by the texts in this study becomes explicit. Van Herk's invocation of Cather serves to validate and move forward from the earlier author's creative aesthetic, acknowledging

⁸¹ A review of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Journal, June 5, 1894, from *The World and the Parish*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1970: 91.

shared concerns and intellectual curiosity. And from an academic standpoint, there is ample reason for van Herk to respond in this way to the task of delivering a plenary address to the International Cather Seminar. It is also abundantly clear from the text that the exercise provided an opportunity for the kind of intellectual linguistic play so characteristic of van Herk's texts.

Choosing to pair Cather's interest in the body with her own interest in the way a body is (un)covered, van Herk begins with a discourse on hats. "The hat," van Herk declares, "is a naively iniquitous but desperately serious gesture toward the notion of apparel, bodily apparel which we measure far more seriously than the lambent communications of skin." And from the unrolling of her first descriptive sentence ("it is practical ornamentation, a froth of brim and blossom, a pragmatic sunscreen, a porkpie of pudding, a frill of fan, and a steadily regardful brim, even, note, a confederate bill and a bent felt runnel"), it is clear that van Herk the author has paid careful attention to photographic representations of Cather as well as to the vagaries of Cather criticism.⁸²

⁸² "while critics conduct exquisitely nuanced inquisitions on the nature of shadows, and while Cather biographers make subtle declensions through the juxtaposition of the thumb-printed photographs they choose to imbed in the heart of their reconstructed autobiographies (see again O'Brien, Lee, and Woodress)" third page of unpagged text.

The setting for this excursion, the narrator informs the audience, is "a marvellously dated period piece of a milliner's shop," upon which Willa Cather "has descended," and where she "is filling that fictional space as thoroughly as if she were one of Professor St. Peter's daughters out on a shopping spree." As van Herk imagines Cather ordering the milliner's clerk about decisively, the narrator notices that the rooms inside the shop are "rather like hat-boxes within hat-boxes, or stories within stories, leading deeper and deeper into the recess of the old building in which the shop is housed." Just as Willa Cather has donned the straw hat with the grosgrain ribbon (which "you have, your narrator can confidentially assert, seen ... in a photograph presumably taken during Willa Cather's second year at the University of Nebraska"), Godfrey St. Peter, complete with bathing cap, makes his stumbling entrance, declaring, "I am a solitary playing in the waters of history, in search of ecstasy...where are the boys? I want Tom Outland." "Keep looking," the fictional Willa Cather tells him, and his movement out of the main shop produces a change of scene. Narrator, clerk, and Cather follow St. Peter into

the bandbox room, which is
astonishingly phalanxed with the

indignant torsos of hundreds of
 dressmaker dummies, wired and
 soldierly, elbowing one another with
 imaginary elbows, a gang rumbling the
 female body in a shrouded performance
 awaiting the completion of exactly the
 right hat.

The crowd of headless female torsos (and where would one put 'exactly the right hat' on such a figure?), framed in such combative terms ("phalanxed," "indignant," "soldierly," "elbowing," "a gang"), appears to take St. Peter to task for his own attitude to women and their bodies, preferring, as he does, the company of Augusta's dressmaker dummy to the women in his family. Yet this is the room where the fictional Willa Cather chooses to leave the doubly fictional St. Peter "to the embrace of [masturbatory] oblivion," saying to the horrified narrator, "you should never be surprised by the things an author intends to do in a fiction."

A number of well-known Cather characters drop into this millinery shop: Niel Herbert trails along in Marian Forrester's wake, the bishop and Cécile make an appearance, the ghost of Claude Wheeler slips in "without the bell over the door tinkling," and the last visitor is Thea Kronborg,

who "sweeps rather like a prow into the profusion of hats...looks around her haughtily and states 'The bathroom please.'"

The assembled crowd follows along as the milliner's clerk leads Thea through several rooms to

an elegant bathroom, well-appointed,
large as a bedroom, gleamingly clean.
In the middle of the room is a huge
claw-footed tub, already filled with
foamy water.

Thea puts her up, sheds her clothing and "steps out to begin her Swedish movements," saying "When I am a natural creature again, I like myself best". She locks the door, and embarks on one of her famous baths. The crowd in the hallway "listen[s] to her sliding into the tub, splashing and tumbling. . .using the brushes and sponges and soaps like toys. . .singing and playing in the water. . .they are perfectly aware, of course, what she is doing in that bathtub where no one can 'get at her.'" The huge tub in the middle of the room, enclosed within a series of rooms in the milliner's shop, is a reminder of the significance of the bath in Cather's work. It also signifies a choice on van Herk's part. Instead of recreating the Panther Canyon scene, van Herk chose to reimagine Thea's indoor bath in her hotel, the artist's freedom from all the responsibilities of performance (and performance as business). Although the continuity of the millinery shop

interior was, in part, defined by the performance aspect of the piece (and the fact that the seminar itself was in Quebec City), it is not the unconfined outdoor setting of Thea's revelation about Art that van Herk wants to foreground in this moment. In continuing to dwell on the solitary sexual lives of Cather's characters, van Herk both suggests the importance of body-centered readings and recognizes the potential inherent in her own presence on the scene as performer, that of being amused by the reaction of a possibly conservative audience.⁸³

The narrator of the piece experiences a range of emotions, again, in ways van Herk might have expected to see reflected in her audience that day in Quebec City. The narrator is "shocked" by Cather's dismissal of St. Peter, she is amazed by Marian Forrester who "although she is dressed in so many layers of clothing," gives the appearance of being en déshabille. Most importantly, the narrator "is not certain if she is being teased or lectured" by Cather herself in a discussion of what Jeanne Le Ber gains by becoming a recluse. And when the narrator delivers herself of a self-assured speech, asserting that, rather than being in Quebec,

We are with Spanish Johnny outside a
stage door after a performance, holding
our hats crushed in our hand and

⁸³ And there is certainly no question that some members of this particular audience were offended, as van Herk surely expected.

wearing the smile of the audience,
 post-*extasi*, pleasure, wearing that
 smile 'which embraces the stream of
 life,' caught as we are by Cather's
 accomplishment, her declaration of art
 as the self-induced orgasmic moment,
 having learned to take pleasure in
 pleasure, without its analytical
 headgear and encumbrances

the assembled group turns to Cather "as if to ask her if the narrator is right, but she has vanished, and all that remains is her shadow on the millinery shop floor." For all the orthodontic imagery, the critics' post-orgasmic sense of getting it right is evanescent. The fictional author saw her opportunity and made her escape, leaving her shadow (her texts) behind even when there is no corporeal body to create such an object.

Like so many things that make us laugh, or squirm, there is much for Cather scholars to hear in "Cather in Ecstasy." Not least of the messages resonating in this text/performance is the very real sense that Willa Cather is alive and well, skewering pomposity and deflecting would-be interpreters of her life and work. And there is much to notice in this performance piece for scholars of western women's writing. Through her "Willa Cather," van Herk takes on issues ranging from the craft of writing to the significance of hats to her audience's inevitable

discomfort with the appearance of "leaky" bodies, both in text and performance.

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The versions of women's westering mapped by the writers in this study cover a range of experiences, fictional and otherwise. In finding languages and forms that have room for myriad alternative visions, these writers have blurred boundaries, mixed genres, and collapsed established notions of time and space, gender and narrative. In doing so, Cather, Laurence, van Herk, et al have written a community of texts plotted on a new set of axes of meaning. Here images of domesticity can be read as limitless, instead of limiting, as they collapse, become porous, and help to shape a women's west; here a new set of stories about the West begins to take shape.

Rather than dividing texts into national literatures or, within that category, into regional literatures bounded by nation, this study has brought together women's texts connected by common interests in bodies, experimentation with language and form, issues of story-telling and voice, and engaged in negotiating the demands of a mythic west. The lived experience of westering women pervades these

texts, whose recognition of the great fact of the body grounds each one in a physical reality. Admitting the fact of the body, too, precludes the preservation of those mythological structures that accompany given spaces, allowing this group of texts to create an imaginative space in which images of containing structures (maps and bodies, houses and even cars) escape their definitions to deliver on the promise of possibility inherent in new places for women writers. Texts from the borderland created by the line separating the western United States from western Canada are evidence of the range of possibility inherent in reading a liminal space.⁸⁴ These texts form one vision of a "wild cartography of longing," a "shaped infinity"⁸⁵ to write home.

⁸⁴ I look forward to further explorations into the topic along other, equally important borders, which will certainly involve the Southwest, and the United States/Mexico border. Looking south will certainly involve drawing on the criticism of José David Saldívar and Gloria Anzaldúa and examining the works of Mary Austin, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Terry Tempest Williams, among others.

⁸⁵ Robert Kroetsch, "Driving Accidental West":

1	2
the shaped infinity	accelerate, the swan
to hammer home	sing, or eloquent as
help, and the wild geese	antelope, the crisp
heading south	rejoinder of the duck's
and every way and	quack to the deer's
which, confuse	leap, and, even then

the fall of light
the fatal peen

how, and the commonest
crow or sparrow

speak the pale
or sensing moon

even, a static dream
twitter and acquit

the kill, wait, for
and the nasty snow

fall, fall, and for
tonight, only, dream

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