

In “Ethnicity and Literary Form,” Werner Sollors calls for a discussion of what constitutes an ethnic writing. When such a discussion is initiated, according to Sollors, “[writers] of national fame or of striking formal accomplishments or international fame are often categorically excluded from the realm of ethnic writing” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 241-42). As these writers are mostly Anglo Americans and their works are labeled American literature, Sollors contends, “[the] literature is often read and evaluated against an elusive concept of authenticity, and the question of who is entitled to interpret the literature is given undue emphasis. The belief is widespread among critics who stress descent at the expense of consent that only biological insiders can understand and explicate the literature of race and ethnicity” (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 11). Because most classic ethnic novels of the early twentieth century are written by immigrants themselves, Sollors suggests that critics who believe that only ethnic writers are capable of producing authentic ethnic narrative¹ often ignore the fact that ethnicity “has been a factor in the choice of many interesting formal patterns” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 237) for non-ethnic writers who put ethnic themes in mainstream forms. This model inevitably fails to take into account the quality and dynamic of authenticity that can be related to literary works falling outside this scope. Sollors thus proposes “a broader and more inclusive definition of ethnic literature” by including “nationally and internationally popular writings by ‘major’ authors and formally intricate and modernist texts” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 243). In this paper, I take a stand similar to that of Sollors and dispute the politics of racial categorization that lend a racial character to the writer’s cultural work and give rise to a belief that authentic racial and ethnic consciousness has to be rendered by ethnic insiders.

In their use of ethnic voices and experiences, Anglo-American writers are often considered incapable of “ethnic” perceptions and “authentic” insights because

¹ “Ethnic narrative” refers to the writing constructed within the contexts of intercultural and the dynamics of transcultural. By making individual choices of form, rhetoric, and content in performing certain aspects of racial identity, ethnic narrative significantly moves beyond the existing discourses on race and perceptions of ethnicity.

they lack insider status. Their rendering of multi-ethnic characters is assumed to be flawed. Their intentions to speak about or represent less privileged persons are suspect and often perceived as reinforcing the oppression of that group. In opposing these views, I question this value judgment that prevents us from approaching *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* as authentic ethnic narratives. So far Cather has been viewed as an American icon, a woman writer, a lesbian, a Midwesterner, or a modernist. Her use of ethnicity in the prairie novels has been framed by critics as feminist perspectives that reveal women as marginalized, repressed and denied social advancement.² Multiculturalists, however, indict her work for reflecting the white racism and Eurocentric biases of her time.³ Her prairie novels that posit the American experience as immigration and as the realization of America's expansive landscape and culture have not yet been considered relevant and important in the American literature of ethnicity.

In exploring Cather's cultural contact and relation to ethnic "others," I interrogate the way in which the synthetic process of ethnic definition based on the idea of descent and cultural heritage has excluded Cather's effort in the constructions of multiethnic characters. By uncovering the quality of ethnic narrativity in terms of her idiosyncratic way of constructing ethnic women's pioneer experiences, this paper argues that Cather's prairie novels can be taken as a distinctive means of expression from an Anglo-American writer who posits immigration as American experience within which the self, ethnic and non-ethnic alike, could be redefined anew. Moreover, Cather's construction of ethnic voices and immigrant experiences contains its own dynamics of authenticity, which can be located in the subtle insights into the ethnic traits and historical reality of

² See Helen Wussow, "Language, Gender, and Ethnicity in Three Fictions by Willa Cather," *Women and Language* 18.1 (1995): 52-55 for a discussion of the connection between gender identity and language, traditional gender roles and women's oppression.

³ For a discussion of Cather's exclusion of Plains Indians and romantic racial portraits of racial others in *My Ántonia*, see Mike Fischer, "Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism," *Mosaic* 23.1(1990): 31-44.

immigration in the second half of the nineteenth century. As closer examination shows that Cather's prairie novels can be used to contend the idea of authenticity practiced in the ethnic literary convention as improper, I suggest that the criterion of "authenticity" is best applied to help us discern the uniqueness of ethnic experiences. It is inappropriate to continue in the belief that authentic ethnic experiences can only derive from writers with ethnic backgrounds. Cather's syncretistic understanding of the homeland and one's roots should be included in the national debate on the ethnic transformation of America.

Writer/Literary Artifact, Culture/Ethnicity, and Authenticity

In "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Invented Tradition," Dell Upton points out three assumptions that have shaped the interpretation of ethnicity: 1) the positivistic notion of ethnicity "described as a catalog of values and practices that can be enumerated and that can be distinguished from the value and practices of other ethnic groups," 2) the stability of ethnic cultures that we imagine "as embodied in an Ur-culture, where memory is defining, experience corrupting," and 3) the material ethnicity as "*invested in the material world* and [which] can be read in it . . . the bearer of culture" (1-2). According to Upton, "As a corollary to our positivistic and static views of ethnicity, we believe that some artifacts are more essentially connected, that they are more *authentic* signs of ethnic culture than others" (2). As a result, the cultural heritage as an authentic sign of ethnicity is an important part of the synthetic process of ethnic definition and can provide stable, visible, and identifiable traits and practices that distinguish one culture from another. This view promotes the idea that only certain members of an ethnic or other minority group can properly write about the authentic experiences of the group and produce credible narratives for a general audience. It inevitably leads us to assume that ethnic writers are the only participants in the creation of American ethnic literature and shapes our understanding of ethnicity as a sign of

otherness.

As ethnic differences began to be studied and celebrated by the sociologists in the 1970s, modern literary critics also took interest in ethnic literature, including the literature of immigration. In “Ethnicity and the Marketplace,” for instance, Thomas J. Ferraro considers ethnic fiction “the novel of cultural mediation” and points out that between the wars the classic ethnic novel was written by and about “the Jews (especially those from the Russian-Polish Pale), the Scandinavians (especially the Norwegians), the Irish, and the Southern Italians” (384). Within its multicultural focus, for instance, Cather’s contemporary, O. E. Rölvaag, is received as an ethnic writer due to his Norwegian immigrant background. In *Giants in the Earth* (1924), he depicts the Norwegian immigrant’s experience of coming to America and adapting to a new culture, and this novel is regarded as a genuine ethnic work. As Raychel Haugrud Reiff writes, Rölvaag “knew from firsthand experience, since he himself had emigrated from Norway in 1896, the happiness and the unhappiness experienced by Norwegian emigrants, and he wanted to write about both sides” (31). The novel is praised by modern critics as an excellent work of art and an accurate portrayal of immigrant life, authentic in the sense of being an accurate historical record of immigration and artistic in Rölvaag’s skillful portrayal of the psychological hardships of pioneering rather than glorification of the westward movement as a romantic epic.

The consequent problem between this notion of what amounts to an ethnic text and the claim for a certain sort of authenticity becomes particularly relevant here. By virtue of her lack of ethnic ancestry and insider status, Cather is viewed as incapable of participating fully in the creation of ethnic narrative. As Frances W. Kaye declares, Cather’s “racism and anti-Semitism make her politics completely antithetical to the multi-cultural, non-hierarchical ideas” (187). Moreover, the assumption that ethnicity can only be practiced by respective ethnic groups leads us to view her constructive gesture as a discursive practice of white racism. Elizabeth Ammons argues that Cather’s subsequent portrayals of ethnic

women “have no text within the text to liberate them, even partially, from the romanticizing and lies imposed upon them” to inscribe their own identities and to tell their own stories (136). In emphasizing Cather’s Anglo-American background, one that only generates racist white sub-consciousness, her act of constructing ethnicity is regarded as her own projection of desires and fetishes on cultural others, representing them not as they are but as images in accordance with “romantic essentialism” and “romantic racism.” The static view that ethnic subjects could hardly be non-ethnic writers’ serious concern devalues Cather’s effort to engage various ethnic cultures and constructions in the prairie novels.

When the image is of a white American superimposed on ethnic others, the white American’s goal is often understood to keep ethnic others “in their place” in order to make the notion of whiteness purer and stronger. However, this response to the Anglo-American operation in representing the ethnic other reveals the critics’ overlooking of the construction of ethnicity as a synthesis and dynamic of imposed and adopted characteristics forged through interrelated cultural traditions. As long as we hail certain authors as ethnic according to color, religion, or country of origin, and as long as certain representations in literature signify otherness and are read as authentic ethnic narratives, we perpetuate a belief that only writers with ethnic backgrounds can properly write about the affairs, experiences, and feeling of their respective groups. As Sollors contends in “A Critique of Pure Pluralism,” “Literary pluralists of our time would like to construct a mosaic of ethnic stories that relies on the supposed permanence, individuality, and homogeneity of each ancestral tradition and has no space for the syncretistic nature of so much of American literary and cultural life” (257). This pluralist literary criticism or approach, while dedicating itself to recovering the integrity of ethnic cultural life and expression, inevitably repeats the essentialist gestures and practices of approach with rigid boundaries that take its categories for granted.

In her 1988 lecture, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison challenged the students of

American culture to rethink not only a pervasive blindness to the Negro presence as the necessary condition to legitimize nativist accounts of America's cultural heritage, but also to reexamine the American canon for the ways in which the presence of African Americans has shaped for white authors the choices, the language, the structure, and the meaning of American identity and literature. She contended that canonical works could engage America's racial dilemma and warned against the defensive impulse to treat black culture as an ethnocentrically closed field and shut it off from the dominant culture, and vice versa. She thus proposed a restoration of the study of canonical works that transgress the color line and an appreciation of their creative manipulation of ethnic cultural sources and racial discourses. Critics as readers should stop trying to convince themselves that great literature is disinterested in the problem of race and ethnicity. Because ethnicity is a boundary-making process within which we seek to understand interracial and interethnic dynamics, Morrison points toward studies of dynamic cultural exchanges among Anglo-American and ethnic traditions and multicultural initiatives in the greatness of American literature.

Morrison extended her earlier investigation of the cultural working of color *In Playing in the Dark* (1992) by focusing on the presence and the operation of whiteness and blackness in the literature of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986). Instead of approaching these works as universalized, raceless and apolitical, she initiated a racial reading through which she endeavored to illuminate race or Africanist presence as a central focus in these works. For instance, she claims in chapter one that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is Cather's "struggle to address an almost completely buried subject: the interdependent working of power, race, sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence" (20). Sapphira in the novel is portrayed as a troubled, disappointed white woman "confined to the prison of her defeated flesh, whose social pedestal

rests on the sturdy spine of racial degradation” (25) by means of employing “serviceable black bodies for her own purpose of power without risk” (28). This portrayal of Sapphira as invalid and unsound suggests Cather’s refusal to “the sycophancy of white identity” (19). The existence of actual black body or imagined Africanist presence, according to Morrison, enables the white author to refashion the image of whiteness against the nation’s transcendent one.

Morrison’s proposal of initiating politics of race into the artistic and intellectual discussions of a canon of literature emphasizes a continuing dialectic in American life and a synthesis of pluralistic impulses that allows for a concept open to poly-ethnic mixings in American culture. Her framework for discussing Anglo-American authors in terms of their cultural appropriation as well as imitation, parody, and evasion of the African-American presence, is also helpful to view favorably Cather’s evocation of a fictional world with an ethnic presence in her prairie novels that depicts ethnically dynamic cultural heritages. In order to argue that Cather’s prairie novels can be read as ethnic narratives and also contain the dynamics of cultural authenticity, I will explore in the next section how Cather participates in making authentic ethnic narrative through her distinctive constructions of multi-voiced cultural personae and situations that reflect historical reality and yield cross-cultural meanings. It is through her power as an artist to intertwine her tales of ethnic women’s struggle and transformation on the prairies with a commentary on historical reality of immigration that she is able to not only give a multicultural insight into frontier America but also generate an increasing sensitivity to under-heard ethnic voices.

Ethnic Narrativity and Dynamics of Authenticity

Marked as the second phase of her writing career, *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* consistently celebrate the variety of pioneer experiences in late nineteenth century Nebraska. As Cather once revealed, the most important impressions she

received came before she had reached the age of fifteen. In 1883, when Cather was nine years old, she moved with her family from Virginia to Red Cloud, a town in south-central Nebraska's Webster County. Living in Nebraska for the next dozen years, she developed a special attachment to and appreciation for this community. The use of personal memory enabled her to recreate her strongest recollections and endow the Nebraska prairie and the frontier landscape with significance. Portraying a personal reminiscence that was somehow fuller during the years of her childhood, Cather's immigrant pioneers and old times became emblematic of a superior era. What causes Cather to idealize and reconstruct a fictional world based on her own Nebraska childhood, as Barry Chabat points out, is her "disenchantment with American society as it existed in the first years of the twentieth century," and "the physical and social harshness of the earlier period is overridden in the service of her need to find relief" (57). In reminiscing and transcending time, Cather called forth an idealized past to expose not only the inadequacies of modern American society but also reveal an understanding of the people, the land, and her roots.

This process of retrieving and reshaping an American past is in essence a discovery of myth and the founding of a people. Cather's prairie novels are set in the untamed prairie lands where immigrants from eastern and northern Europe invest lives with new meanings and visions. Where the image of the land is very well employed, the fictional world, as a result, is simple, and characters, who personify the complex inhabitants of that world, have left their homeland for the New World and constantly search for ways to attach themselves to the land. As Shelley Saposnik-Noire puts it, Cather's characters "enjoy an interactive, interdependent, and at times a symbiotic relationship to nature" (171). The land, a symbol relevant to Cather's characters, is capable of transcending and transforming human life.

The first three sections of *O Pioneers!* depict the struggles of a Swedish-American family, the Bergsons, during the early years of settlement on the

prairie. Charged by her dying father to take responsibility for the family and the land, Alexandra dedicates herself to the task, cultivating the land, learning its rhythms, and making it flourish. Guided by an Old World belief in the land, Alexandra insists on preserving it and holding onto it even when her brothers, who fear financial failure, despise the land and want to relinquish their homestead for a more promising place. As Cather wrote:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.⁴

Cather affirms that the enduring quality of the pioneer and the value of human union with land will convert the harsh land into a rich country. The land eventually turns out to be the source of Alexandra's strength, spirit and imagination.

Also knowing that the land is not simply the source of life, Cather depicts the cruel and unforgiving side of nature in *My Ántonia*. The immigrant who wants to thrive on the prairie is not spared the early rigors of homesteading. After arriving in Nebraska, Ántonia's father, who struggles to establish his family on this harsh land, fails and commits suicide. His feelings of isolation and unhappiness are intensified by his memories of his hometown. The raw hardships of prairie life could ravage the body and drain the spirit. The fact that the beloved land can be

⁴ Willa Cather, *Three Novels: O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Ántonia* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1998), 33. All future page references to *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* will appear in this text.

killingly cruel, and the prairie life hard to endure makes an indelible impression on Cather. The absence of community is destructive to Mr. Shimerda as well as to her daughter *Ántonia*. To survive, she has to work like a man on the land to make a living and rely on herself to make material arrangements without the help and support of an extended family.

Formed from the prototypes of the first generation of Swedish and Czech immigrants in the 1860s and 1870s, Cather's heroines are fine young women: sincere, honest, hardworking, modest, and sensitive. They are pioneers who refuse to be defined in terms of traditional gender roles. At the opening of *O Pioneers!* Alexandra's mother is portrayed as the reluctant female immigrant who had "never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth," but she is able "to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings," and this gesture "had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways" (18, 17). Mrs. Bergson demonstrates her ability to "reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible" (18). Her daughter, Alexandra, is described as a "tall, strong girl" who wears "a man's long ulster" (8). Her androgyny is a source of her strength (Wussow 524). Alexandra inherits her father's Old World belief that land is desirable and at the same time is an enigma. With her pioneer spirit and her love for land, she breaks the spell of darkness which enables the transformation of the land in its new life. Characterized as an earth mother, a being closely linked with growing things, Alexandra perceives the land in intimate and passionate terms. Her faith in land eventually yields fruit, and her vision is made real. Cather insists on Alexandra's heroism arising from her ability to work with the land and to have faith in it.

As a Bohemian immigrant and a woman, *Ántonia* knows that she has limited options. Despite the narrowly circumscribed roles for women, she endures the rigors of prairie life, takes chances, and seizes opportunities to respond in a way that ensures her survival and allows her to understand herself. As Sally Peltier Harvey notes, "*Ántonia* is an active participant in her destiny, shaping her own

self-image as she takes on the various roles that her circumstances force upon her” (54). She is capable of action to earn a sense of fulfillment rather than be suffocated by the lonely, depressing, and disheartening prairie life. After her father dies, she boasts, “I can work like mans now . . . I help make this land one good farm” (559). To make a living, she works as a hired hand on others’ farms. She even leaves home to work as a hired girl in Black Hawk for several employers. She has a chance to learn American household customs. She also goes through a disastrous affair with railroad man Larry Donovan, who makes her pregnant and abandons her in Denver. After giving birth to a baby girl, Ántonia returns to Black Hawk and realizes what she needs for fulfillment. She continues to work on the family farm and even finds a husband who is devoted to her and shares her dream. In managing the family farm, Cather’s ethnic women do not hesitate to enter man’s domain and assume man’s roles. Through their own resources, these women achieve self-fulfillment and a female version of the American dream.

Like Alexandra who finds expression in the plants she tends, Ántonia Shimerda, who returns to the prairie, is a changed woman and becomes the powerful embodiment of all the positive values of the land. Cather also sharply contrasts Ántonia, whose humble life affords her some rootedness in the land and a clear sense of self, with Jim Burden, an Anglo whose apparent material success in the East has deprived him of the sense of belonging and self-definition. When Jim revisits Ántonia years later, she says to him: “I’d always be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here” (662). For Ántonia, it is through the land that she is able to develop a strong sense of self and find what she needs for fulfillment. Furthermore, it is on this family farm in the New World where Ántonia preserves the rich traditions and cultural values of her native country. While making America her home and devoting her life to transforming the land, she simultaneously remains faithful to old traditions and holds onto her cultural heritage. Maintaining a strong tie to her native Bohemia, Ántonia invents

a new ethnic identity to pass on to her children. Through *Ántonia*, Cather shows us that there is plenty of opportunity in America for each individual, even an ethnic woman, to accomplish personal goals. “I know what I’ve got to do,” she tells Jim (663). With a clear understanding of what she needs for self-fulfillment, *Ántonia* creates an American dream for herself and her children.

Cather’s ethnic narratives describe the experiences of pioneer immigrant women who take root in the New World and flourish in a land which has been the undoing of other pioneers. Most significantly, Cather’s pioneer women have their own aspirations and resist the dominant frontier myth in order to create their own. In the area of gender, the frontier experience traditionally has the potential to challenge the definition of gender roles within the settlement culture. Susan Armitage and Annette Kolodny, who observe the dynamics of frontier life and analyze the myth of frontier, uncover women’s previously unexamined contributions to the frontier experience. Armitage indicts early historical accounts of “Western exploration and settlement between 1848 and 1880 for focusing on a land settled by white European-American males” (9). In the same manner, Kolodny points out “the persistent pervasiveness of male configuration” in the frontier (4). As the images of pioneer women are peripherally recognized, Cather undermines this social convention of assigning public roles for males and private one for females. In her prairie novels, Cather does not represent the role of women in the world of frontier as fixed and immutable.

Cather’s stories of prairie women reflect this unique frontier counterculture: women are not confined to prescribe gender roles. Cather portrays the immigrant women whose pioneer spirits transform the land into a country. Despite all their toil, the Bergsons would have been ruined had it not been for Alexandra’s strong determination and intelligence. Alexandra’s brothers never take their sister’s sacrifice seriously and despise the way Alexandra handles the farm and business. When Oscar said to Alexandra, “The property of a family belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible, and because they do the work;”

Alexandra angrily talks back, “And what about my work?” (78). Alexandra’s childhood friend, Carl, who eventually returns to stay with her and attains only moderate success as a lithographer and gold-seeker in Alaska, fail to share her burdens. Cather’s representation of Alexandra as a successful pioneer woman modifies the public’s image and challenges the devaluation of women pioneers. Ántonia’s situation is not better than Alexandra’s, either. Although her brother and husband, Cuzak, are hard working men, their outlook is limited. It is Ántonia’s strong will that manages to build the farm. As Cuzak said to Jim, “It was a pretty hard job, breaking up this place and making the first crops grow . . . Sometimes I git awful sore on this place and want to quit, but my wife she always say we better stick it out” (686). By celebrating ethnic women’s experience on the prairie, Cather significantly challenges the women’s traditional gender role. As Alexandra said to her brothers, “I certainly didn’t choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree” (79).

Cather thus succeeds in dynamic construction of frontier, a space projected entirely by the feminine desire of the settlement and the representation of immigrant women as successful pioneers. As the open landscape at one time promised equally opportunities for the immigrants who had the vision to make meaningful life there, Cather creates the immigrant version of the American dream but also a female one: she opens opportunities to ethnic women in the New World to achieve self-fulfillment and affirms that their experience and struggle for self-fulfillment would enrich the definition and meaning of the American dream defined by competition and material success. By developing this new rhetoric for the American dream, Cather sees it through the eyes of ethnic women. As women and immigrants, their double marginality does not keep them from success and self-fulfillment in the New World. In Cather’s version of the frontier myth, the margin becomes the center; ethnic women become the central figures who show great vitality. Alexandra and Ántonia are represented as those capable of

adjusting to the New World and appreciating the value of land. Cather's construction of the ethnic narratives inserts immigrant women's insights into the myth of frontier to counter the fantasy of the dominant cultural discourse of pioneer experience, which is mainly made up of Anglo males whose glowing optimism perpetuates the image of the ambitious male settler for the sake of future prosperity. Cather's gender-based textualization is more likely to promote recognition of and assign importance to ethnic women's perspectives of pioneer life.

As the era of initial settlement coincides with the time of Cather's own childhood, her depiction of hardships and struggles faced by the first immigrant settlers provides important insights into her understanding of the significance of immigrants in Nebraska. The young Cather observed her immigrant neighbors whose hardscrabble lives touched her heart and provided her with material to write about. It is in her personal identification with and preference for life in diverse ethnic communities that she grounds her pre-1922 works. The most well-known fact is that Cather based *Ántonia* on a real person, Anie Pavelka, who had an illegitimate child and married happily. She also borrowed the true story of Francis Sadilek's suicide for the account of *Ántonia*'s father's death. The incorporation of incidents from the lives of Anie Pavelka and Francis Sadilek with personal reminiscences and commentary constitute an ethnic sensibility forged through the author's imagining of others in a multicultural setting and constructing of their ethnicity.

In a "Biographical Sketch" written in the third person in 1926, she described herself as an "imaginative child, taken out of the definitely arranged background, and dropped down among struggling immigrants from all over the world, naturally [finding] something to think about" (1). For instance, Alexandra's and *Ántonia*'s love for the land they cultivate is a feeling typical of the Old World. In depicting this bond with the land, Cather deliberately played out frontier immigrants' lives on the bleak, expansive prairie, and in such lives Alexandra and *Ántonia*, who devoted themselves to land, found that the soil offered livelihood and also balm for wounds.

While portraying immigrant characters with sympathy, Cather does not render romantic racial portraits but rather treats ethnic heroines with precision by employing her talent as a journalist. Jaroslav Pepmík notes that Cather is capable of “compar[ing] various aspects of the national characters of the Czechs and the Swedes” (284). Her comparison of Swedish and Czech females in *O Pioneers!* reveals a different emotional treatment from that of Alexandra and Marie. Alexandra, the rational Swede, has never been in love, while Marie Shabata, the vivacious young Bohemian wife of Frank Shabata, is characterized as receptive toward anything that pleases her. Ántonia, also a Czech, shows that same warmth, cheer and friendliness.

In addition to portraying varying extents of ethnic personae and their positive otherness, Cather also includes telling references to Swedish and Czech customs. In *O Pioneers!*, Crazy Ivar, the elderly Norwegian man, is despised because he goes barefoot. Old Mrs. Lee, the mother of Alexandra’s estranged sister-in-law, likes to wash herself in a little wooden tub instead in the stone bathtub (47). Cather portrays in her prairie novels the distinctive qualities of rich folk cultures imported by immigrants from the Old World. Being settlers and pioneers, Alexandra and Ántonia remain faithful and at the same time inventive to their cultural and ethnic heritages. For instance, Alexandra intends to “start an asylum for old-time people” like Crazy Ivar and Mrs. Lee, who no longer “can do all the old things in the old way” (47). This community, decorated with distinctive Old World flavors, exists in Alexandra’s home where she can reinforce the old ways of life she values. As Pepmík praises, Cather “became one of America’s foremost novelists of the frontier and memorably depicted the prairie and the human qualities of the [immigrant] men and women of the frontier” (284). In addition, Alexandra’s sensitivity to maintain the old Swedish tradition is manifested through her faith in the land and acceptance of her people reluctant to give up their native customs. In *My Ántonia*, Jim recalls that the Bohemians “always planted holly-hocks” (673). Ántonia follows her native custom, planting hedges and trees

to hide her house. She recounts old stories to sustain her Bohemian heritage. Like Alexandra, she preserves her cultural heritage through keeping old practices alive and speaking her native language. Cather's ethnic heroines are capable of remaining attached to their cultural heritages, and it is also through Cather's subtle insights and cultural translation that their ethnicities can be reconstructed anew.

Exploring the lives of immigrants on the United States frontier, Cather in *My Ántonia* depicts Nebraska as an ethnic hodgepodge accommodating American-born settlers such as the Burdens and the Harlins with a wide range of European immigrants from Norway, Austria and Russia. In terms of historical reality, Cather's prairie novels do discuss specific historical events and political movements about immigration. After the Homestead Act (1862), immigrants from Western and Northern Europe came to the Great Plains. As Robert W. Cherny in "Nebraska, 1883-1925: Cather's Version and History's" points out, "Her [Cather's] portrait of ethnic diversity on the Great Plains reflects emigration patterns in the 1870s and 1880s, when the opportunity to acquire a farm with a minimum of capital brought people to the plains from throughout Western Canada" (232).⁵ By the onset of the great migration in the 1870s and 1880s through the early 1920s, the newcomers of the second wave of immigration provoked national fascination and curiosity about their folkways, habits, and concerns. In the dominant genre of sociological journalism, the positions of American writers ranged from xenophobia to a pluralist philosophy that accepted the ethnic presence.⁶ As the question of immigration became more vexing, the nation

⁵ Robert W. Cherny, "Nebraska, 1883-1925: Cather's Version and History's," in *Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History*, eds. John J. Murphy, Linda Hunter Adams, and Paul Rawlms (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1990), 232. For background information about immigration in Black Hawk, see also Sally Allen McNall, "Immigrant Background to My Ántonia: 'A Curious Social Situation in Black Hawk,'" in *Approaches to Teaching Cather's My Ántonia*, ed. Susan Rosowski (New York: MLA, 1989), 22-30.

⁶ For contemporary works about cross-cultural interpretation, please see Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872), Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Hutchins Hapgood's *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), and Henry Pratt Fairchild's *The Melting-Pot Mistake* (1926).

responded to the influx of immigrants with a theory of Americanization in which immigrants were urged to give up their native languages and customs in order to assimilate into the culture and become “100% American.” The resentment increased, and the U.S. Congress passed a series of laws that drastically reduced immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and excluded the Chinese and other Asians.

Between 1895 and the publication of her prairie novels, Cather lived in Pittsburgh and New York City where the conditions of urban immigrants could hardly be ignored. She was exposed to the country’s anxiety over the concentration of immigrants in the cities and the debate over the future of the “American way of life” and the role of immigrants in American society. In 1924, Cather noted that the process of Americanization had turned immigrants into replicas of Americans and remarked, “They [Immigrants] have come here to live in the sense that they lived in the Old World, and if they were let alone their lives might turn into the beautiful ways of their homeland.”⁷ She resented assimilationist zeal in American society and the rigid definition and classification of social identities that exacerbated the divisions among classes and races. In her indictment of Americanization and nativism, she endowed immigrant pioneers in her prairie novels with a central role in American society. Portraying ethnic diversity on the great plains, she celebrated the pioneering values and domestication of the land achieved by immigrants. Alexandra’s and Ántonia’s success and survival are ascribed to their preservation of native traditions and cultural identities, in that sacrificing one’s native tradition to accept to the American ways of life can only interfere self-definition. Moreover, Alexandra’s and Ántonia’s acts of mixing their native traditions with their American life exemplify and contribute to the ethnic dynamics of American culture. In

⁷ Rose C. Feld’s interview with Willa Cather, “Restless Such as Ours Does Not Make for Beauty,” *New York Times*, 21 December 1924, in *Willa Cather in Person*, ed. L. Brent Bohlke (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986,) 70.

confronting the issue of Americanization that challenged Nebraska's ethnic communities during the First World War, Cather's prairie novels provide considerable narrative space to the fictional exploration of marginal lives, especially those of the immigrant women whose ethnic heterogeneity could triumph over adversity, enforced assimilation and institutionalization of ethnic identity. These narratives were intended to function as cultural mediators and to exercise cultural power to ease the country's xenophobia.

In the historical study of the American myth of the frontier, Joseph R. Urgo argues that "frontier study allows the historical observer to enter a realm where history is erased and people are moving into potentiality" (43). In other words, the manner in which a place and its people are portrayed in literature depends on a complex relationship between the cultural values and the reality perceived by the author who interprets the facts and renders the truth. In the case of Cather, her speaking for and about ethnic others often causes literary critics to question its validity. Especially in *My Ántonia*, the author's memory is filtered through that of Jim Burden. The issue of Jim's speaking about and as Ántonia, especially when the speaker is part of the dominant group and the other is part of the marginalized group, brings up the complicated problem of literary policing.

In "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Linda Alcoff lists two sources that have been recognized as a problem in speaking for others. The first source, according to Alcoff, recognizes that "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location. In other words, a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an [epistemologically] significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech" (6-7). The second source acknowledges that "certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous" and have caused an "increasing or reinforcing [of] the oppression" (7). Furthermore, the issue of speaking for or about others also involves the crisis of representation. Alcoff notes:

I [as speaker or author] am participating in the construction of their subject-positions. This act of representation cannot be understood as founded on an act of discovery wherein I discover their true selves and then simply relate my discovery. . . such representations are in every case mediated and the product of interpretation (which is connected to the claim that a speaker's location has [epistemological salience). And it is precisely because of the mediated character of all representations that some persons have rejected on political as well as epistemic grounds the legitimacy of speaking for others (9).

The connection between speaking for and about others and the problem of representation that Alcoff proposes is valuable because she demonstrates that speaking in these ways are options available to us. However, she adds that the practices we engage in cannot be explicated as "simple acts of discovery" (10) and "the results of autonomous individual choice[s]" (11). Instead, Alcoff argues "the options available to us are socially constructed," and each agency is "a product of a mediating force," within which "what is emphasized, noticed, and how it is understood will be affected [by] the location of both speaker and hearer, but the truth or value or epistemic status will also be affected" (12-13).

In the case of Cather, her speaking and writing about prairie women have been received with critical ambivalence. Her rendering of the lives of immigrant frontier women is praised when Cather is regarded as a prairie woman writer herself who published stories about the frontier to undermine the stereotype of pioneer women. However, Cather's privileged position and political beliefs are held against her, and she is considered unqualified to speak for or about ethnic women. In his assessment of Cather's use of Jim to tell Ántonia's story, David Laird argues that Cather's use of a surrogate "casts her in the role of ventriloquist . . . The result is to foreground the inadequacies, the limitations of the

explicit narrative” (249). Cather’s acting as a ventriloquist for ethnic woman’s experience, in Laird’s view, reinforces male dominance and Jim’s construction of *Ántonia* an exploitive act: “Jim’s project is illustrative of the process; he seeks to author himself, to affirm his existence, in the fiction he creates about *Ántonia* . . . Thus the novel [disturbs] a range of complacencies about roles assigned to [ethnic] women in the self-serving, self-dramatizing stories men construct for themselves” to reassert their existence (248).

It is my contention that Cather, who lets Jim take control of telling, does not fail to tell *Ántonia*’s story. The process of telling allows Jim to embrace *Ántonia*’s distinctiveness and to include her in his redefinition of existence to allow a fuller experience of the present to emerge. In his union with *Ántonia*, Jim embodies what Glen A. Love calls, “a significant modern,” one capable of identifying with positive values of pioneering that derive from the “western country and its representative figures, like *Ántonia*, from the wider world” (146). The employment of this strategy, while illustrating how *Ántonia*’s story is embraced by Anglo-Americans like Jim, may also exert an influence on readers. Cather opens the novel with an introduction with an encounter with Jim:

During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak of her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one’s brain. I had lost sight of her altogether, but Jim had found her again after long years, had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him, and out of his busy life had set apart time enough to enjoy that friendship. His mind was full of her that day. He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her. (494)

Here Cather positions herself in the narrative as a listener who wants to renew her acquaintance with Ántonia, the unmodified and essential Western core of selfhood that has been forgotten by mainstream America. Jim's account of Ántonia allows Cather and readers like her to know and appreciate Ántonia, whose heroic qualities underscore distinct concepts what constitutes success in individual lives and in the history of the country. This discursive practice involves not only the text or utterance but its position within a social space to include the person involved in, acted upon, and affected by the words. In their artistic effort to speak of and write about the story of Ántonia, Jim and Cather, in Love's words, reveal "the heretofore unrealized significance of the voiceless ones to a wider audience, which is itself graced by this sympathetic enlargement of its understanding" (148).

Traditionally, ethnic literature demands particular attention to the history and becomes a product of a historical location of an ethnic group. Cather's prairie novels, however, deal specifically with the perceptions and constructions of the different marginalized groups. Besides the Swedish and the Bohemian groups, her ethnic heroines are depicted to come in contact with members from other ethnic groups. In portraying their otherness, she does reject the dominant discourse of assimilation that often delimits the culture of the social margin. As Sally Allen McNall notes, "In Cather's day it was rare for any member of the dominant culture (and she was that) to see immigrants as subjects, as people acting in their own behalf. Her ability to do so is significant" (22).⁸ Cather's prairie novels startlingly evoke pioneer experiences, which are not only American but also ethnic.

⁸ See Robert W. Cherny, "Nebraska, 1883-1925: Cather's Vision and History's," in *Willia Cather: Family, Community, and History*, eds. John J. Murphy, Linda Hunter Adams, and Paul Rawlms (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1990), 229-251. As Cherny points out, "Webster County did not have concentrations of immigrants as high as in eastern parts of the state. Only 13 percent of the total population of that country were foreign born in 1890, and nearly all of them came from just four groups: German comprised about 5 percent of the country's population; immigrants from the British Empire (Great Britain, Ireland, Canada) were nearly as numerous, with 4.5 percent; Scandinavians — Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes — accounted for under 2 percent; Czechs constituted about 1 percent" (233).

The relevance of Cather's America is its continuation of and progression within a narrative that posits the "American experience" as one of late-nineteenth century immigration to the United States and early twentieth-century accommodation to a landscape and culture in which the self could be defined anew (Carlin 5). Her work has its power to define reality and to alter or even broaden our perception and knowledge about the American West in relation to the history of immigration. In addition, Cather makes no pretense to conform to the familiar images of frontier life made up of ambitious Anglo heroes. Her multiple presentations of positive images of ethnic women undermine the image of "the reluctant female immigrant" who fears and distrusts the land and embraces no pioneer spirit.⁹ As Sharon O'Brien also suggests, "Cather did not limit herself to telling a conventional female narrative. Alexandra Bergson's taming of the wild land embodies the history of her [ethnic] culture" (74). Cather's prairie novels can be read as ethnic narratives, in that the author makes possible an imaginative invention of the ethnic subject beyond the limits of the historical representations and gives voice to a text muted by dominant historical referents.

While representing the question of immigration without oversimplification and making the figures of ethnic women into mythic heroines, Cather with her vivifying imagination transforms the raw materials she takes from her own environment. Her portrayals of ethnic women's pioneer experiences in Nebraska in the 1880s preserve their quintessential ethnic integrity and their aspirations of living a fuller life in the New World. In her revision of ethnic women's lives on the prairie, Cather translates the lives of immigrant women who take root on the

⁹ See Annette Atkins, "Women on the Farming Frontier: The View from Fiction," *Midwest Review* 3 (1981): 1-10. According to Atkins, "Historians have portrayed pioneer women as stereotypes . . . According to the commonly accepted view, women did not want to go west, but if familial responsibilities forced them to move, they carried in their hearts the eastern notions of culture, religion, and education. Upon their arrival in the forsaken West, they found themselves outnumbered by men. They craved the company of women, but could find few. Facing hard times, women urged giving up. Unable to persuade their men to turn back, women faced a prairie existence that broke them in spirit and body" (1).

frontier into sympathetic images that at the same time reflect her attitude toward immigrants and ethnic cultures. Yi-Fu Tuan claims, “an aim of literary art is to present possible modes of experience;” the novelist, he argues, with “accuracy and subtlety . . . has drawn the intricate web of feelings, action, and interactions of particular world. Such accuracy is one of relationships in context rather than isolated facts” (200). This context, as Ann Moseley also argued, is the idea of cultural pluralism that Cather sides with and incorporates in her prairie novels to express the image of “a symphony of culture, of a New World Symphony,” within which “each separate culture [could] be an integral and inseparable facet of American civilization without losing its own inviolable integrity” (11).

My approach to Cather’s prairie novels as ethnic narratives might seem unorthodox to readers who find Cather’s rhetorical representation of immigrant characters and the interpretive pattern of the historical West exploitative and manipulative. However, as Cather demonstrates in her prairie novels, she is capable of such “ethnic” perceptions and “authentic” insights, which enable her to construct believable ethnic figures and to have their ethnicities invented anew in the New World. In her depiction of immigrant women’s struggle to survive in a foreign land while they insist on keeping their native traditions, Cather’s narrative also carries an implicit interrogation of not only the condition of a country whose modern life is contaminated by materialism but also the hostility towards immigrants and devaluation of their cultural heritages. In her unconventional representation of life on the frontier, Cather recognizes exceptions and transforms the ethnic women’s pioneer experiences she knows into unique and extraordinary ethnic narratives.

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