

Natural Landscape in Willa Cather's Pioneer Novels: Between Official Pioneering and Folk Vernacular Discourses

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Abstract

According to critics, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), two novels written early on in her career, tend to espouse an overt anthropocentric celebration of the domestication of the land. In keeping with this direction in criticism, Louise Westling comments on Cather's attitude towards the land in these two novels from an ec-feminist perspective saying, "Cather succeeded in many respects as the epic celebrant of western settlement [...] her novels of the land remain part of a male semiotic economy of heroic action" (81). However, a few lines later Westling inadvertently goes on to point out that Cather's "imperialist nostalgia" is challenged by the subtext of women's rituals and domestic values. Yet, she does not believe that this really marks an attempt at subversion by Cather. I believe that as critics, we need here to pause and explore the ramifications of this brief bifurcation in Westling's argument, setting aside the issue of Cather's conscious attempt at subversion, it is my opinion that we can trace in these two early novels a polyphony of natural landscape discourses through this very subtext which at times echoes and at others subverts the official dominant historical discourse of pioneering. Westling's own inadvertent reference to an inherent subtext in Cather's pioneer novels testifies to that. Critics like Michael J. McDowell posit that "the best landscape writers suppress their egos and give voices to the many elements of a landscape" (386). In alignment with this, it is my intention to propose that natural landscape discourses in Cather's pioneer novels display a multi-vocal interplay of conceptions of nature through weaving discourses such as the official pioneering discourse, which promoted the Frontier myth and folk vernacular discourses, which trace actual interactions with the land.

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الطبيعة في الرواية الريادية لدى ويلا كاتر ما بين المعالجة الرسمية والمعالجة الشعبية

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ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث دراسة لمعالجات الطبيعة في روايات ويلا كاتر التي تتناول مرحلة الريادة والتوسع الإقليمي في تاريخ الولايات المتحدة. فهذه الروايات تمثل تفاعلاً بين التصورات المختلفة للطبيعة آنذاك والتي كانت تمثل سياسات الدولة التوسعية الاستعمارية في ذلك الوقت. فمن خلال نسج المعالجة الرسمية التي تشجع على الريادة والتوسع في أراضي الولايات المتحدة والمعالجة الشعبية للطبيعة القائمة على الاحتكاك الحقيقي بين الأشخاص والطبيعة تظهر أمامنا صورة متشابكة الألوان توضح تعقد أوجه النظر عن الطبيعة منذ بداية القرن العشرين عندما كتبت كاتر هذه الروايات. فنقاد الأدب الذين يدرسون الأدب من أوجه نظر بيئية مثل Michael J. McDowell يؤكدون أن أفضل الكُتاب هم الذين يتناولون الطبيعة بشكل يكتمون من خلاله ذاتيتهم معطين صوتاً لعوامل الطبيعة. فهذا البحث يدرس إمكانية تحقيق هذا وكيفية من خلال قراءة نقدية منظورها بيئي لرواياتي ويلا كاتر (1918), My Antonia (1913), O Pioneers).

According to critics, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), two novels written early on in her career, tend to espouse an overt anthropocentric celebration of the domestication of the land. In keeping with this direction in criticism, Louise Westling comments on Cather's attitude towards the land in these two novels from an eco-feminist perspective saying, "Cather succeeded in many respects as the epic celebrant of western settlement [...] her novels of the land remain part of a male semiotic economy of heroic action" (81). However, a few lines later Westling inadvertently goes on to point out that Cather's "imperialist nostalgia" is challenged by the subtext of women's rituals and domestic values. Yet, she does not believe that this really marks an attempt at subversion by Cather. I believe that as critics, we need here to pause and explore the ramifications of this brief bifurcation in Westling's argument, setting aside the issue of Cather's conscious attempt at subversion, it is my opinion that we can trace in these two early novels a polyphony of natural landscape discourses through this very subtext which at times echoes and at others subverts the official dominant historical discourse of pioneering. Westling's own inadvertent reference to an inherent subtext in Cather's pioneer novels testifies to that. Critics like Michael J. McDowell posit that "the best landscape writers suppress their egos and give voices to the many elements of a landscape" (386). In alignment with this, it is my intention to propose that natural landscape discourses in Cather's pioneer novels display a multi-vocal interplay of conceptions of nature through weaving discourses such as the official pioneering discourse, which promoted the Frontier myth and folk vernacular discourses, which trace actual interactions with the land .

The dominant myth shaping how the discourse of pioneering was propagated during Cather's time was the myth of the Frontier which is considered.

[t]he longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary [American] culture [...] Its ideological underpinnings are those same 'laws' of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of

Social Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' as a rationale for social order. (Slotkin 15)

The Frontier myth wove together a web of narratives to justify the morally troubling question of Native Americans and how the success of the U.S. economically was dependent on the dispossession of Native lands particularly with increasing industrialization (1800-1890). This myth was not defined by actual geographical information but rather by "illusions, projective fantasies, wild anticipations, extravagant expectations" (Slotkin 11). However, despite its fictive sources the Frontier myth played a central role in shaping discourses of science at the time which utilized Darwinian theories to justify, the gradual commodification of the land. These scientifically influenced discourses represented the official discourses that shaped views of nature in Cather's age. Material success and the actualization of the American Dream were hence pre-eminent components shaping the Frontier myth and the scientific discourses which propagated it. Cather however, challenged this mythic limited and limiting understanding of the relationship to land by relating success in as far as the American dream is concerned to a direct interactive relationship with the land rather than to wealth or status. This is embodied in the endings of these two pioneer novels when the main heroines suffer as a result of not upholding this earlier folk, vernacular relationship. Arguably then, within Cather's understanding of a more cooperative relationship to the land we can trace a proto-ecological stance.

Along these lines, Cather's so-called pioneering novels, cannot be regarded as completely subscribing to the official pioneering discourse because she introduces both official and folk vernacular nature discourses in these novels. The dialogic nature of the intermingling of official and folk vernacular discourses in her early pioneer novels invites an unsettling conclusion regarding her position towards the pioneering project. In other words, Cather in merely introducing these different attitudes towards the land from both official and folk vernacular perspectives implicitly makes a statement about the pioneering agenda and its limiting discourses on nature and environment. The Frontier myth's success lies in its retelling of

narratives about the land so that they become a group of images central to the society that creates them (Slotkin 16). The official pioneering discourse which was shaped by this Frontier myth gave birth to constructed scientifically influenced discourses, like those of Frederic Clements and Henry Gleason, which describe the land from a distance, increasing the alienation of humanity from nature and hence facilitating its commodification.

The Frontier myth is deeply imbricated in a colonialist perspective since it was shaped for a U.S. population with expansionist goals that set aside ecological as well as ethical concerns regarding Native Americans. The resilience of this myth can be traced up to this day through the continual expansion of U.S. boundaries globally as a result of neo-imperialist agendas. It is my opinion though those proto-ecological perspectives, as those proposed by early American writers like Willa Cather in her novels, serve as the beginnings of counter-discourses which further developed to this day uncovering the complexities of hegemonizing discourses. Hegemony is considered to be a multilayered grid of multiple institutions that is always governed by a dynamic process. In its drive to incorporate more elements of resistance in society, hegemony continually makes “slippages” (Said 5). As a discourse of power then the pioneering discourse despite its totalizing tendencies is open to resistance. Mouffe and Laclau argue that hegemony is only a political type of relation resulting from certain configurations of power (139). They argue that it has radical political and theoretical potential because when its openness and “sporadic” nature is stressed, a form of politics can be founded which depends on contingency, ambiguity, social division, and antagonism. Within such an understanding of hegemony, it is not a symbolic unity but rather a site of contestation where different subjects compete. I am not advocating a chaotic relativity here but rather stressing that the complexity of totality be constantly taken into consideration. This complexity can be traced in Cather's intermingling of official scientifically influenced and folk vernacular discourses. Through such a fluid understanding of hegemony, it becomes possible to explore how folk vernacular discourses can

functioned as eco-centred discourses even in the writings of early American writers like Cather.

Through an analysis of the different discourses of nature which Cather introduces, we can trace Cather's denial of anthropocentric dichotomous thinking which severs nature from culture; though an anthropocentric representation of nature in Cather's novels seems inevitable, as McDowell argues, "Every attempt to listen to voices in the landscape or to 'read the book of nature' is necessarily anthropocentric" (372). In Cather's case though, due to the different nature discourses she deals with, we can detect a portrayal of nature which presents human/nature interactions from multifarious perspectives, subversively complicating the pervasive power of official discourses of pioneering.

Accordingly, Cather's polyphonic portrayals of nature may be regarded as cultural constructions, which portray both official and vernacular outlooks. McDowell points to J.B. Jackson's notion of vernacular and official discourses and how it presents a fruitful space for analysis of natural landscape, saying: "Jackson's vernacular landscape is a folk landscape, attuned to the contours of the land and serving local needs. The official landscape, [is a landscape] imposed upon the land without concern for local differences (382). Jackson's perception of official and vernacular discourses is further clarified in his article "The Vernacular Landscape" in which he postulates that vernacular discourse is the discourse of the people living closest to the land, that of the village or rural community, while the official political discourse favors strategic or economic perspectives (69-70). According to this definition, it would seem that all the pioneers living on homesteads in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* would be proponents of a folk vernacular discourse, since these novels trace their direct interactions with the land. Interestingly enough, this is not the case. This does not weaken Jackson's argument in any way but rather raises the question of how the dominant ideology of pioneering promotes its totalizing discourse even amongst those living closest to the land.

In Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* we can trace how the official pioneering discourse shaped and influenced the prevalent scientific perceptions of nature at the time. These scientifically influenced discourses which played a role in furthering the official pioneering agenda of the time sought to bring to the fore the dominant role of the pioneer in relation to the land. Within the official pioneering discourse of her age, Cather dialogically introduces two scientifically influenced perceptions of nature. During the time Cather was studying Botany in college in the late nineteenth century, she was exposed to two prevalent scientific attitudes towards nature at the University of Nebraska whose proponents were Frederic Clements and Henry Gleason. Cheryl C. Swift and John N. Swift point out that Clements was "Cather's classmate at Nebraska in the 1890s" (4). However, Gleason was at odds with Clements and challenged Clementsian theories in articles as early as the 1910s (8).

Swift and Swift discuss the influence of Clements and Gleason's scientific discourses of nature on Cather's novels. They state that while Clements perceived of nature as a space for community where a pioneer has a part to play "in nature's unified, orderly dance toward fulfillment"; Gleason argued that "vegetative change had no necessary direction or teleology [creating a] landscape of accident and coincidence" (5-8). Throughout their analysis Swift and Swift argue that in earlier novels like *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* Clements's sense of holistic community with nature is celebrated while in later novels like *The Professor's House* the second discourse of Gleasonian "landscape of accident and coincidence" overwhelms which eventually lead to her pessimistic attitude towards material progress (8). However, I would argue that traces of the Gleasonian "landscape of accident and coincidence" discourse were present all along, even in Cather's early novels, through descriptions of the wild, untamable land and characters' discomfort with it.

The Gleasonian discourse of prairie land as "landscape of accident and coincidence" can be traced in both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. The unyielding savage nature of the land is brought to the fore early on in *O Pioneers!*:

The great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm [...] wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness. (8)

Within this Gleasonian description of land, we can trace the arguments which justify the official pioneering discourse; we can detect the discomfort of the pioneer with the lack of human marks on a supposedly virgin land. Within this perspective, the land is portrayed as savage, peculiar and uninteruptible in the sense that it seems unchangeable and in need of taming. Pioneering as an official discourse is rooted in - as J.B. Jackson refers to it - “strategic or economic strong points” (69). Along these lines, a natural landscape, which does not easily yield economic success, is categorized as “fierce”, “savage”, “peculiar” and “mournful”. We find this discourse most fully proliferated towards the beginning of the novel with the advent of the pioneering project and it gradually disappears as the novel progresses, and as the pioneering project achieves its seeming success. This same discourse is echoed in the description of John Bergson’s inability to tame the land, which is described in the same terms:

John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods [...] Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man. (*O Pioneers!* 11)

Within this language influenced by Gleasonian assumptions we can trace the sense of resisting volition attributed to the land. The voice of the pioneering project can be found here in the need expressed to make an impression on the land. The idea of struggle between the pioneer and the land is introduced through the description of nature as having a will unyielding to a pioneer’s efforts as it is “wild”, “with ugly moods” and a “genius unfriendly to man”. Bergson as a pioneer experiences the unruliness of nature since it is compared to “a horse that no one knows how to break to harness” (12). Again, this

unruliness is rooted in the lack of economic success, which pioneers were facing in this land.

Moreover, even when the unruliness of wild prairie is partially tamed through the official process of pioneering, this unruliness is portrayed as constantly threatening on the verge of overwhelming the organized gardens of pioneers with its unpredictability. There is always the sense of the instability of the pioneer's position:

That summer the rains had been so many and opportune that it was almost more than Shabata and his men could do [...] the orchard was a neglected wilderness. All sorts of weeds and herbs and flowers had grown up there. (*O Pioneers!* 76)

Even after the land is supposedly tamed by the pioneering project, the discourse which refers to it as a "wild old beast" remains and is referred to nostalgically. Linstrum, after returning to the prairie he had abandoned because of its unruly wildness, expresses a nostalgic preference for it. He describes how the wild prairie haunted his soul forever: "I even think I liked the old country better [...] there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years" (*O Pioneers!* 60). There are a number of possible factors shaping these words. Due to the official pioneering perception of nature merely as a means to acquire economic power through accumulation of wealth, Linstrum's failure in the pioneering project and the selling of his land could lead to such remorseful feelings, especially in the wake of Alexandra's success. Moreover, such rhetoric can also be ascribed to the mere fact that this land represented for him a nostalgic natural landscape of childhood, which could never be retrieved.

In *My Antonia* we can also detect traces of the Gleasonian discourse of "landscape of accident and coincidence". It is Jim, the insidious male narrator of this novel, who voices the official pioneering discourse (whether Gleasonian or Clementsian). The move to masculinize her authorial voice displays Cather's attempt to comment upon the patriarchal nature of the official pioneering

discourse. Despite Westling's arguments here, one can argue that Cather in telling the story of how the west was won/lost had to tell it from the heart of a man because the major perpetrators in the pioneering project were men. This does not necessarily mean however, that she was celebrating the official pioneering discourse of her age, because the novel also narrates the story of Antonia and the land and Antonia as land through a folk vernacular discourse. The Gleasonian discourse can also be traced in several sections in *My Antonia*. The wild, supposedly virgin prairie is portrayed as beyond the bounds of human culture, religion and even God (this of course unfairly discredits the earlier presence of Native Americans). A sense of erasure by the land overwhelms; Jim says, "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be" (*My Antonia* 8). Again the land is portrayed as having an unruly will, which overwhelms humanity as well as more benign components of nature like trees. Jim points out, "The little trees were insignificant against the grass. It seemed as if the grass were about to run over them" (*My Antonia* 12).

From a psychological perspective trees represent refuge for the human psyche while open spaces represent prospect. If either overwhelms the other, human beings become dissatisfied with the environment (Kaplan 38). Along these lines, prairie pioneers like Jim would be prone to experience a sense of being overwhelmed by the land because the flatness of the land promises endless prospect, while the scarcity of trees denies them refuge. The fact that this prairie land seems to lack the necessary refuge leads those who live in it to constantly question its possible subordination to the pioneering project and economic success.

This can be traced in how the necessity for the pioneering project is further developed discursively in extending the hostility of the prairie land to benign members of the natural environment like trees. Jim forges a social bond with the trees to set up a dichotomous relationship between him and the trees in opposition to the unruly prairie land: "Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and

visit them as if they were persons” (21). Hence, the prairie with its overwhelming flatness promises no hope of haven. In a mountainous area or hills terrain there is always hope in the notion that there is another unseen land that could provide haven, on the other side. However, the plains with their barrenness provide no such promise. This is why trees in the prairie plains environment are seen as benign creatures: because they break the barrenness, providing a possible place of refuge. Nancy Easterlin touches on this idea when she discusses the topographical features humans tend to prefer and their psychological effect. She argues that there are certain psychological characteristics which humans seek from the land which supersede topographical features:

Thus, what matters most is the disposition of rolling land, trees, water, cliffs, and animals or other humans in the landscape, suggesting mystery at a distance, the possibility of prospect (a place of visual advantage), and the assurance of refuge (hence, the attraction of somewhat distant clumps of trees). (11-12)

Again here what makes a natural landscape hospitable is related to human constructs of what the land represents: not the actual topographical features of the land, but rather what dispositions these features assume within the human psyche.

The Clementsian scientifically influenced discourse, though different from the Gleasonian, represents yet another human construct imposed upon the land. The Clementsian discourse of natural landscape as space for community is portrayed in both novels; Swift and Swift argue that Cather's “version of Clements's happy organic parable [...] gave her novels's protagonists some signature moments of vegetable affiliation”(6). Alexandra's recycling into the earth in *O Pioneers!* and Jim's pumpkin-consciousness in *My Antonia* are cited as examples. Also, the very last lines of *O Pioneers!* express the natural community discourse of Clements: “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes

of youth!” (159). In here, as Swift and Swift argue, we can trace the Clementsian notion of plant formation as a single organic entity which arises, matures and dies driven through its developmental history by repeated incursions of pioneering species (4). Clements believed that interaction between nature and humanity was always productive since in his view organisms in any natural community develop towards a climatic situation of stabilization. During this progressive climatic development, life-forms with the least requirements are replaced by those which make the greatest demands. Hence, it is perfectly normal for the replacing life form to alter the natural landscape by any means to create acceptable conditions for themselves. This is why Clements’s ecology was an attractive consolation to the immigrant or exile in a new natural landscape (Swift 5). Within the argument of this official pioneering discourse, Alexandra as a “life-form” with great demands seeks to fulfill her natural role in the progressive interaction between humanity and nature, changing the natural landscape in the process. In this sense, Alexandra’s pioneering attempts are seen as an intrinsic component of the ecological system she lives in. This was to become the dominant American ecological paradigm of the first half of the twentieth century (Swift 5). In *My Antonia* Jim’s sense of dissolution within the land echoes this same rhetoric: “I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like pumpkins [...] I was entirely happy [...] at any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (14). Jim’s portrayal of Antonia towards the end of the novel voices this same notion of progressive interaction between humanity and nature as Antonia is described as “a rich mine of life” that brings forth new founders to settle the earth (227).

Both the Clementsian and Gleasonian opposing scientifically influenced discourses are discourses which are shaped to further the official pioneering agenda. They are both representations of the dominant official discourse of Cather’s time, which promotes the pioneering agenda. The official natural landscape as seen in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* is expressed in the interweaving of these dialogical discourses which share the assumptions of the pioneering agenda. The folk vernacular discourse in these novels though functions as a subversive discourse embodied in Ivar and Alexandra’s

relation to the land in *O Pioneers!* and Jake and Otto's relation to their environment in *My Antonia*. The interactions of these characters with the land outline a relationship to the land shaped by direct contact rather than myth.

As previously mentioned, the vernacular discourse as referred to by Jackson describes "a folk landscape attuned to the contours of the land and serving local needs" (382). In *O Pioneers!* traces of a vernacular discourse can be detected through Ivar and Alexandra's relation to the land. We can map out in their interactions with the land an understanding of the local natural landscape and a use of folk knowledge. Though we cannot claim that this vernacular discourse is completely eco-centric, on a continuum vernacular discourse diverges more towards eco-consciousness because it acknowledges the actual workaday environment. However, it also is constructed since it is laden with value systems.

Crazy Ivar's relation to the land is probably the most ecologically sane vision in *O Pioneers!* Cather's description of Crazy Ivar's relation to the land is an example of her adoption of a folk vernacular discourse through direct contact highlighting what ecocritics like Roger Anderson propose: "[t]he closer one is to nature, the less one imposes private fantasies of control onto life and the more one avoids the artifices of intellectualized culture" (286). Though Crazy Ivar at times seems merely like a Euro-Indian Druid figure that defies any particular label, he expresses the folk knowledge of the land without attempting to submit it to his control. Alexandra acknowledges this and attempts to learn from him about animals and the land. Unlike the other pioneers, he is not obsessed with egotistically forging his mark on the land but rather downplays his ego to live within the land. Anderson comments on the shift from ego-centricism to eco-centricism in one's perception of the land, saying that when we stop imposing clichés onto nature and start seeing it as it really is we become connected to it in new ways language cannot control (289). However, though his reference to connecting to the land in new ways as a means of overcoming the ego-centricity of our language is quite relevant to the shift towards a more eco-centric

discourse such as the vernacular, we cannot absolutely claim that the vernacular discourse itself does not impose its own value systems about nature; the folk vernacular discourse is a discourse, which deviates from the control of the official discourse.

Crazy Ivar's experience of the land displays this more eco-centric discourse. Instead of Clementsian or Gleasonian constructions of the land Ivar's folk vernacular understanding of the land diverges from the projection of the human psyche onto the land and moves towards a more eco-centric vision of the land. As Alexandra and the boys approach Ivar's land we sense a change in the language used by the narrator to describe the land. Instead of a possible pioneer's homestead it is simply land, not a natural community of constructive interaction, nor a resisting wild beast:

In Crazy Ivar's country the grass was short and gray, the draws deeper than they were in the Bergsons's neighborhood, and the land was all broken up into hillocks and clay ridges. The wild flowers disappeared, and only in the bottom of the draws and gullies grew a few of the very toughest and hardest: shoestring, and ironweed, and snow-on-the-mountain. (*O Pioneers!* 19)

Similar to Native American sacred understandings of land, Ivar avoids leaving any marks on the land, instead moving towards a form of eco-consciousness; he builds his sod home so that it is nearly unidentifiable from the surrounding natural environment. Paula Gunn Allen explains Native American perceptions of nature and creatures in relation to the sacred saying, "[f]or the American Indian, the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation makes all things sacred" (244). This is why altering the face of nature is avoided. Moreover, Allen clarifies that the natural state of being is wholeness and unity and any attempt to alter this unity leads to disease. Severing oneself from one's environment by building a house, which distinguishes strict boundaries, would hence seem contrary to the establishment of unity:

(Y)ou could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him. (*O Pioneers!* 19)

The reference to the ways of the coyote, which Ivar upholds, is a reference to the lives of Native Americans on this land. Cather chooses here to refer to them in an indirect manner; yet her acknowledgement of their earlier inhabitation of the land is a subversion of the pioneering official discourse which constructs the land as virgin territory. In this sense, Ivar represents the unofficial vernacular counter-discourse. Native American concepts of unity and wholeness with nature seem to govern a good portion of Ivar's thought. In fact, Ivar is so disconcerted by humanity's tendency to mark nature that he refers to human dwellings as dwellings of litter. He prefers the cleanliness of nature's sod:

He disliked the litter of human dwellings: the broken food, the bits of broken china, the old wash-boilers and tea-kettles thrown into the sunflower patch. He preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild sod. (*O Pioneers!* 20)

Though Alexandra is not educated in this same sense, she is intelligent enough (unlike her brothers) to realize that the knowledge which Ivar holds is of value; she constantly seeks advice from him.

Ivar's lesson about hunting to the boys also echoes a Native American perspective. Similar to the Native American understanding of hunting, he is reluctant to kill and hunt merely for pleasure since he ascribes sacredness to nature so that hunting is done out of necessity not for mere sport. Ivar further develops this idea from a Christian religious perspective, stating that God watches over the birds and counts them as we do cattle. A notion of stewardship over nature and its members is hinted at here. The lines quoted from the bible by Ivar further develop the idea of humanity's stewardship over nature and

how all the members of nature are interconnected. This foregrounds humanity's own interconnection to nature which exists but should not be invasive and restrictive since beasts need the springs, birds need the trees and goats need the high hills and humans need all these creatures to exist. Cather in Ivar's character seems to be marrying similar elements of Native American and Christian culture and though this might seem to some far-fetched it is concurrent with the nature of vernacular discourse, which is a conglomeration of folk knowledge.

Cather seems to set up Ivar's folk vernacular relation to the land, which Alexandra partially shares, as an alternative discourse in the novel to the dominant scientifically inflected discourse which supports the pioneering agenda. Within the vernacular discourse of the land, folk knowledge is shared so that humans can live within nature, rather than deface it to suit human needs. As a result of this, Alexandra studies the Nebraska environment and decides to plant sweet potatoes. She does not impose a crop, which is alien to the environment but rather introduces one which thrives in the local environment. She plants the sweet potatoes realizing that they "thrived in the weather that was fatal to everything else" (*O Pioneers!* 25). Though it is Alexandra who best understands Ivar translating his folk knowledge to others, a change in her attitude takes place in the novel and it is this change which ultimately leads to her downfall. She eventually adopts the pioneering, dominant, ego-centric outlook towards the land when she says, "That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it" (36).

This transformation takes place when her brothers begin convincing her to sell the land. Her new commodifying perspective of the land becomes evident in her description of it: "The thing to do is to sell our cattle and what little old corn we have, and buy the Linstrum place [...] raise every dollar we can, and buy every acre we can" (34-35). However, Alexandra pays the price for this official economical outlook that she assumes: "We pay a high rent too, though we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff" (*O Pioneers* 63). We can trace here the negative psychological effect that conforming to the official discourse can incur. Commodification of the land leads to the

commodification of people as their minds stiffen, thinking only of gain and loss in material terms. The relationship between human and land becomes one of economy rather than communion. Land becomes useful only in so far as it provides economic success which is an attitude that many eco-critics regard as responsible for the ecological disasters we currently face everyday. From this springs an ego-centric pride in success in defiling the face of the land: "There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail [...] Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors" (42-43). The success of the dominant discourse in transforming the face of the land is summarized in the description of the land as being "individual," not common and communal, "trim" not wild and "detail(ed)". The image of control over nature is further developed as the whole out doors is subjected to Alexandra's control. However, Alexandra still retains traces of the folk vernacular discourse when she offers Ivar a home after he loses his land.

Alexandra invites Ivar to live on her farm, but as a representative of a minor subversive discourse everyone wishes to institutionalize him. When the pioneers were in the early stages of pioneering, Ivar was a much sought after physician figure. Gradually though his folk vernacular ways threaten the hegemony of their society, so he is dubbed a threat that should be contained. Ivar sums up the reasons for people's antagonism towards him saying,

[T]he way here is for all to do alike. I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions [in the old country] there were many like me [...] but here, if a man is different in his feet or in his head, they put him in the asylum. (*O Pioneers!* 47)

Ivar above argues that a society's success in achieving hegemony, through propagating its Frontier myth, is rooted in the extraction of all individuals who deviate from the norm. In Ivar's case, due to his marginal status as a representative of the folk vernacular discourse, he must be suppressed by the dominant pioneering narrative. Taking this

argument a bit further we can deduce that what is bothersome about Ivar to others is rooted in his different perspective of the land. In a sense, by confining him they would be erasing a counter-narrative challenging their grand pioneering project. Ivar is a reminder of the wildness and disorder of the earlier natural landscape, which has been tamed and marked. Any reminder of the chaotic disorder of the past is unacceptable and must be erased. Along these lines, the portrayal of Ivar in the homesteading society may be seen as a comment by Cather on the rejection by her society of any counter-narrative which takes its roots in anything like a Native American discourse. Ivar says, "That is the way; they built the asylum for people who are different, and they will not even let us live in the holes with the badgers" (48).

Through Cather's portrayal of Alexandra's success in taming the land, an inherent awareness of the workings of the above-mentioned rivaling official and folk discourses displays itself. Alexandra's success derives from an awareness of the official scientifically influenced Clementsian pioneering discourse, which invites humanity to unite with the land and the Gleasonian discourse, which demonizes the land, as well as the folk vernacular discourse represented by individuals like Ivar who live close to the land. In the following words she seems to merge all three discourses:

The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still. (*O Pioneers!* 59)

The Clementsian perception of a pioneer's role in nature's scheme is evident in Alexandra's reference to the need to know how to work the land in order for it to start producing. In this sense, it seems that she is referring to nature's "inherent orderly dance" which humans need to study in order for them to dominate. The Gleasonian concept of vegetative change, having no necessary direction in a natural landscape of accident and coincidence, displays itself in the fact that the land became big and rich contrary to all expectations. The folk

vernacular perspective is found in the ascription of private volition to the land through which it can choose to be fruitful or not. Moreover, the notion of the land as having its little joke is quite interesting because it echoes Joseph Meeker's perception of the importance of being aware of the comic inclinations at the heart of nature. Along these lines, nature is a Raven-like figure in which humanity's survival depends on its adaptation to its limitations comically rather than tragically, which echoes the lines, "[T]he land did it. It had its little joke" (168). Meeker goes on to state:

Comedy illustrates that survival depends upon man's ability to change himself rather than his environment, and upon his ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting him. (169)

Alexandra is aware of this inherent comic inclination within nature and uses it to her benefit; her conquering of the land is not merely the fruit of heroic pioneering and harsh field work (though we can glean traces of this also) but rather, like the raven figure, she scavenges knowledge from different sources, forming her own unique form of success (if we can call it that). She mostly makes her fortune by making use of both official and vernacular discourses; she commodifies the land but also makes use of folk knowledge.

In *My Antonia* the vernacular folk discourse is upheld mostly by Otto and Jake and is absorbed to a certain degree by Antonia; as peasant-like figures their interactions with the land simulate the nonintellectual manner with which the peasant knows the land which Bakhtin praises in his discussions of the carnivalesque (25). When Cather introduces the experiences of land through the pains and struggles of workers like Otto, Jake and Antonia we begin to trouble the official discourse used to describe the land, which is mostly propagated by Jim. This folk vernacular mode of knowing the land becomes "a way to resist the abstract, intellectual, official reality that a social hierarchy always creates for its own ends" (McDowell 381). When Cather introduces the experiences of land through the pains and struggles of workers like Otto, Jake and Antonia we begin to question

the official discourse used to describe the land, which is mostly propagated by Jim.

Jake and Otto live their lives in direct physical contact with the world unlike Jim's grandparents. The troubles of Jim's grandparents' in taming the land are referred to fleetingly; they are set up on the farm as if its establishment was never a trouble for them. Because, they have "proven up" on their land they use an official pioneering discourse to describe it, distancing themselves from it. They are incapable of understanding the troubles of the Shimeradas. Jim's grandmother criticizes them for lacking common "horse-sense" (52). Anderson deals with the implications of distancing characters from the natural landscape:

As culture's power to shape nature grew physically, so did its power to define and prescribe the utility of the surrounding physical environment. The distance between knower and known was still growing, creating an even greater alienation of experienter from experience [...] that direct physical contact with the world is far more important than the political, economic, or social usage society might apply to that world. (*My Antonia* 297)

To counteract the seeming unity of the official pioneering discourse Cather introduces the folk vernacular discourse of direct physical contact with the land, which is less ego-centric. The official discourse of pioneering displays a kind of ego-centric fascination with one's accomplishments; the folk vernacular discourse dwells more on the everyday details of character's interactions with their environments bringing to the fore a more eco-centric relation to the land.

Jake and Otto's interactions with the land represent a folk vernacular discourse, rooted in the details of characters' direct interactions with the land. Unlike the subversive workings of Crazy Ivar's folk vernacular discourse in *O Pioneers!* Jake and Otto subordinate themselves to the official discourse of pioneering, furthering its purposes through their work on the homestead. Yet as

proponents of a folk vernacular culture their way of life can be interpreted as being “ruled by tradition and custom, entirely remote from the larger world of politics and law; a way of life where identity is derived not from permanent possession of land but from membership in a group or super-family” (Jackson, *Discovering* 149). Jim describes Jake and Otto: “Yet they were the sort of men who never get on somehow, or do anything but work hard for a dollar or two a day” (*My Antonia* 45). They were never owners and they never will be owners because they are proud of the complementary role they play in Jim and his grandparents’s “super-family”. They were always “ready to work overtime and meet emergencies. It was a matter of pride with them not to spare themselves” (*My Antonia* 45). They also bring to Jim’s family a sense of folk tradition and custom. Jake brings in the cedar tree for Christmas and Otto decorates it with colored religious figures his mother sends him from Austria. The whole traditional Christmas scene with the intricate touches of cotton wool for snow and pocket mirror for a frozen lake is set up by these supposedly rough workers. When it comes to the traditional rituals of death, Otto is the only one who knows how to build a coffin. He comments on the usefulness of this kind of folk knowledge: “It’s a handy thing to know [...] So few folks does know how to make a good tight box that’ll turn water” (*My Antonia* 71 *sic*).

Otto and Jake’s “workaday” folk vernacular lives are not all that different from Antonia’s. Her interactions with the land defy romanticized ego-centric representations of the celebratory pioneering achievements. Her arms and neck are burned “as brown as a sailor’s” from farm work (*My Antonia* 79). Her arms swell with muscles from the harsh labor: “She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm” (*My Antonia* 89). Jim describes the change in her, saying: “Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure [...] Whenever I saw her (she was) sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest (were) dust-plastered” (*My Antonia* 81). Her life on the homestead is not one of ease and Jim does not comprehend this folk vernacular nature of her experience. Jim asks Antonia why she tries to imitate Ambrosch’s gruff manners and concentrates all her attention on working the land. Antonia explains, “If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be

hard for us” (My Antonia 90). This folk vernacular life with its proximity to the land and its hard work masculinizes her in the eyes of Jim and his grandmother. Also, living the folk vernacular life leaves Antonia no leisure to shape the land into the official discourse. This echoes Alexandra’s notion of how the land hardens one’s intellect. Both Alexandra and Antonia’s lives are described in a vernacular discourse detached from a more intellectually inflected depiction of the land.

Moreover, the corollary of economics is also at play here since Cather introduces how economics plays a role in the ways characters envision the land. Jim and his grandparents are more financially stable because they have “proven up” on their land, which leaves them at leisure to construct narratives about it. Antonia and her family however, have no time for Jim’s grand land narratives because they are too busy living within it and hence describe it more along the terms of a vernacular discourse, which deviates from ego-centricism towards a kind of eco-centricism. Yet, this folk vernacular discourse of Antonia still mingles with the official discourse of pioneering, since Antonia says: “My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him [...] I help make this land one good farm” (80). Here economic perspectives also drive Antonia. Her everyday interactions in the land echo this official discourse: “Jim, you ask Jake how much he ploughed today. I don’t want that Jake get more done in one day than me” (My Antonia 79). In addition to this, Antonia is portrayed as reluctant to refer to the land in mythic terms. When Otto, Jim and she wonder about the prairie dogs and their drinking habits despite the far distance from any sources of water, Otto tries to convince them that the dog-towns could go down two hundred feet. She is not convinced and prefers the more reasonable explanation related to lapping up the dew in early morning. In this intermingling of discourses, dominant and folk vernacular discourses interact, affecting one another .

In contrasting Antonia’s experience with the land and Jim’s experience with the land one wonders if Cather is making a statement about how folk vernacular and official discourses emerge and develop, affecting people’s lives in the process. If Antonia’s family had been affluent farmers, would she have been distanced from vernacular interactions with the land like Jim? Jim’s grandmother underlines the possibilities she believes Antonia could have achieved, “Things would have been very different for poor Antonia if her father had lived” (My

Antonia 100.(

Jim, though he is raised on a farm is always drawn aside from the real interaction with the land carried out by Otto and Jake. Jim observes all those struggling on the land around him and is at leisure to ego-centrally describe the land because he is distanced. This distance further increases when his grandparents move to Black Hawk and he goes off to school. There is always a layer shielding him from the folk vernacular experience of the land, which Otto, Jake and Antonia experience. This results in the celebratory pioneering discourse he uses in describing the land. In a sense, he is like a writer attempting to compile the story of a nature he never experienced fully. One wonders here if Cather, through introducing this variety of discourses, is implicitly questioning the idealization of the pioneering discourse in contrast to the harshness of folk vernacular reality .

Both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* end with a mock celebration of the pioneering narrative. In *O Pioneers!* a reference is made to the fortunate country that will “receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn” (159). Despite the dialogism between dominant official and folk vernacular discourses throughout the novel, Cather chooses to end on this note. Though at first glance it might seem celebratory, upon closer examination we see that it is not. Alexandra does not achieve her dream; she does not marry out of love. We sense her marriage will be a kind of companionship, not a spiritual union between two equals. Within such a framework, she as a disheartened subject, who has not acquired her dream, will be the fertilizer of future crops. She directly refers to this when she says, “remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it, with the best we have.” (158). This makes one wonder about the viability and success of the future “shining eyes of youth” since the phrase “the best we have” echoes a rather pessimistic tone (159).(

In *My Antonia* Cather ends the novel with Jim amidst “the long red grass of early times” (237). Within this natural landscape he feels at peace in contrast to “the curious depression” he experiences in towns (*My Antonia* 237). He surveys the accomplishments of the pioneering discourse embodied in the highways and yearns for the old roads romanticizing the land he actually never interacted with. Finally, he ends with a nostalgic description of the road that brought him to the prairie. He reminisces about choices and destinies connected with that

road. By choosing to end her novel with this road chronotope or highly charged inconclusive liminal space Cather again ends on a rather gloomy note hinting at her discomfort with the pioneering agenda and how it was propagated through myths like the Frontier myth .

We cannot hence simply categorize Cather as an “epic celebrant” of the pioneering narrative, as Westling chooses. All attempts to describe our environment are colored to some degree by “human value system(s)” as McDowell refers to them (386). Though Cather’s works cannot be seen as revolutionary in the sense of propagating a completely pro-ecological agenda, we can trace in her works an awareness of the complexities of the discourses, which dealt with nature in her age. There seems to be in her pioneer novels an inherent recognition of dialogic, value-laden official scientifically influenced perceptions of nature like those of Gleason and Clements and an engagement with them. There is also recognition of attempts to suppress folk vernacular marginal discourses whether through social constrictions as in Ivar’s case or, as in Jake and Otto’s case, personal choice (they choose to live their lives as wanderers working close to the land). Due to the proximity of the folk vernacular discourse to the “workaday spaces,” it deviates more towards an eco-centric perception of nature. However, we must always remind ourselves that “impersonal, seemingly objective representations of reality are usually the product of our dominant ideology [...] Purely visual and journalistically objective descriptions of the landscape deny the truth of our nonstop bodily interaction with our environment” (McDowell 386-387). In these pioneer novels we witness the dominant and marginal discourses interacting with one another on the stage of the Great Plains. Complexities of land/human relations are brought to the fore. Cather raises several questions for us to ponder. How do humans ascribe values to the land? In what ways does the dominant pioneering ideology affect the nature discourses of a society? What constitutes dominant and marginal discourses? In troubling all these issues regarding nature/human relationships Cather’s early pioneer novels propel us to a more nuanced understanding of the means through which human values are ascribed to natural landscape.

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