

7-18-2008

Illuminating the Queer Subtext: the Unmentioned Affairs in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

Nora Neill
noralwn@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_theses

Recommended Citation

Neill, Nora, "Illuminating the Queer Subtext: the Unmentioned Affairs in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" (2008). *English Theses*. Paper 41.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

ILLUMINATING THE QUEER SUBTEXT: THE UNMENTIONED AFFAIRS IN WILLA
CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

by

NORA NEILL

Under Direction of Dr. Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

Willa Cather contests the contemporary notion that identification links to a natural or original order. For example, that man equals masculine and femininity comes from an essential connection to woman. Cather deconstructs normativity through her use of character relationships in order to redefine successful interpersonal alliances. Thus, Alexandra, the protagonist of *O Pioneers!* builds a home and friendships that exemplify alternatives to stasis. My readings of *O Pioneers!* display the places in the novel where Cather subtly contests the ideology of naturalization. I make lesbian erotic and queer social interactions visible through a discourse on Cather's symbolism. I favor queer theory as a mode of inquiry that magnifies the power and presence of heteronormativity and I examine Cather's work as a critique of cultural principles that inflict violence against individuals who participate in dissent from conformity.

INDEX WORDS: Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson, Queer Interpretations, Queer Theory

ILLUMINATING THE QUEER SUBTEXT: THE UNMENTIONED AFFAIRS IN WILLA
CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

by

NORA NEILL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

2008

Copyright by
Nora Neill
2008

ILLUMINATING THE QUEER SUBTEXT: THE UNMENTIONED AFFAIRS IN WILLA
CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

by

NORA NEILL

Committee Chair: Audrey Goodman

Committee: Nancy Chase
Mary Hocks

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
August 2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	MAPPING MY FIELDS	1
II.	THE DIVIDE OF DIFFERENCE	13
III.	ALEXANDRA'S DESIRE AND CATHER'S QUEER SYMBOLISM	31
IV.	ALEXANDRA'S UNCONSCIOUS	47
V.	ALEXANDRA AND CARL QUEER THE MARRIAGE PLOT	59
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	66

I. MAPPING MY FIELDS

In the initial pages of *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather describes Alexandra Bergson with exactitude and purpose: “She had a serious, thoughtful face, and her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance, without seeming to see anything, as if she were in trouble” (5). The first glimpse at this complex character (as well as the depth of Cather’s prose) begins a contemplative look at a young woman who denaturalizes the Nebraska landscape for humanity’s service. The subsequent journey follows Alexandra through adulthood and displays the conflict found in a woman who searches to fit an identity mold never fully sufficient. Cather’s commentary on the limits imposed by identification expresses her astute concern with cultural essentialism. Alexandra is a queer figure who is incomprehensible through normative identification categories. She embodies the struggle found in those who cannot reach sublime conformity: a dutiful position that accepts the illusion of a unified self rather than recognizing the forced disparity between the unconscious and the regulations imposed by cultural and symbolic order. I utilize a queer approach to show that Cather dismembers identity through Alexandra’s depiction, the relationships she builds throughout the novel and the meaning Cather’s symbols evoke.

Queer theory attempts to question the culture/nature dichotomy in a way that dismembers the ideological thought process that cultural prescriptions stem from a natural, preexisting order. This paradigm renegotiates identity through arguments that contest conformity and unity. The queer in a text deconstructs societal elements that regulate and prohibit stretched or eliminated confinement. Queer theory reproaches the false notion that social structures (of gender, or sexuality, or law) come from an initial “natural” design. Often, queer theory deconstructs social forces that reproduce essentialized gender identities (and fixed identity categories more

generally) and mandated heterosexuality. Normative enculturation purports the notion that if masculine (as signified through bodily traits) a subject must desire that which it is not (woman). The basis that initiates queer inquiry stems from an epistemological search that analyzes the symbiotic relationship between nature and culture where cultural order relies on supposed “natural” lineage; queer theory disassembles a preexisting order and exposes the absence of a foundational natural order. Annamarie Jagose defines queer theory through a large scope: “Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (3). In the context of literary construction, narrative can support ideological frameworks that reinstate the foundational order’s existence, or question the premise of this definitive claim.

In the case of Willa Cather (1873-1947) the concept of a “natural” heterosexuality plagued her and predominated the cultural atmosphere in which she wrote. Her early letters, in the midst of her college career and romance with Louise Pound, suggest that she subscribed to a heteronormative ideology although she expressed that the prohibition against her desires remained unjust. Her turmoil fluctuated as she matured and maintained lesbian relationships, but her private life and public personae certainly contain disparities. In her will Cather explicitly denied the reprint of her letters and she stipulated against directly quoting her words. Additionally, she sought to destroy the letters that she could. The inaccessibility to a life vastly articulated and explored causes a predicament for scholars and further complicates the biographical study of this author. Perhaps Cather’s mandate indicates that she did not want to become re-presented, or allow the opportunity for static identity to form through the use of

private words. Despite this hindrance, scholars and critics continue to utilize the information available to produce insightful responses to Cather and her writings.

Sharon O'Brien's 1984 article "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" argues that Cather lived as a lesbian, albeit privately. Although O'Brien offers the definitive claim that homosexuality should not necessitate proof or evidence she contradicts this notion throughout her argument. O'Brien thoroughly analyzes Cather's letters to Louise Pound in an effort to show that they had a lesbian relationship. At times O'Brien's piece contains problematic elements (Cather wanted to but could not write about lesbianism, as if that must be a lesbian author's only concern). But, the work serves as a foundational text that prompted a shift in Cather scholarship. O'Brien's study continues to serve an invaluable purpose. Her work sanctions my approach through the preliminary boundaries she crossed.

As a basis and launching point O'Brien's article ruptured the now continuous discourse that often grounds itself in queer approaches. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's article "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others" begins to ask the questions that provoke an ongoing study of Cather's queer sensibilities. She connects feminist practices, namely how to read a text in light of oppressive forces, and suggests antihomophobic readings as well. Sedgwick directly questions the meaning of women's names in the context of both gender and sexuality: "Again, a woman's use of a married name makes graphic her subordination as a woman and at the same time her privilege as a presumptive heterosexual" (54). Judith Butler will extend this notion in *Bodies that Matter*, but, here, this maintains importance through Alexandra's character whose name remains her father's. At the close of *O Pioneers!* the heterosexual union based in friendship and safety will occur in the future. Regardless, Cather leaves Alexandra without the signs associated with a married, heterosexual name.

The written presentation of gender and sexuality assumes great import in Sedgwick's theoretical work. Her discourse on homosexuality outlines the tendency to associate gay men with femininity and lesbians with masculinity: "[...] the gender-integrative possibility manifest in the turn-of-the-century topos of inversion [...] but longer-lived in homophobic folklore and 'common sense,' in certain influential formulations of psychoanalysis and psychiatry, and also in many vibrant aspects of current gay and lesbian culture, points to an essential femininity in gay men and/or an essential masculinity in lesbians" (58). Sedgwick observes that this creates a tradition that reestablishes essential binaries. Secondly, Sedgwick highlights and questions the use of gender inversion in relationship to homosexuality to dismantle essentialism. Cather and Sedgwick reach the same end. The femininity present in Alexandra, when with Marie, unnerves the myth Sedgwick delineates as I show that Cather connects lesbian erotic play to the feminine. These characteristics are absent in other areas that describe Alexandra. In concordance with the theoretical notions Sedgwick leads with she reads Cather's story "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament" combined with Cather's life and most specifically her critique of, and entanglement with, Oscar Wilde's career. Sedgwick insists on the importance of Cather's disdain toward Wilde's artistic artificiality (63). Sedgwick, then, argues that Cather reestablishes heterosexuality: Cather defines the essentialist myth in her fiction. For Sedgwick, Cather develops the essentialism that instantiates gender and sexual norms. Cather associates gay men with femininity and lesbians with mannishness. Unlike Sedgwick, I argue that Cather's rejection of essentialism becomes evident through her propensity to reject this construction (making the text queer, rather than mimetically heterosexual).

Sedgwick's focus on language, gender and sexual constructs draws into view a homosexual mythic lineage and relates that history to Catherian characterizations. Judith Butler

derives her argument from Sedgwick's quest to unbind the literary history of gender and homosexual difference. In *Bodies that Matter*, the chapter "'Dangerous Crossing': Willa Cather's Masculine Names" attempts to valorize Cather's use of names. The work Butler focuses on allows my transference from a discussion of patrilineal naming practices in *My Antonia* to *O Pioneers!* (1913). Women's identity becomes defined, in western culture, through name exchange. The passage of the woman from father to husband, signified in the name, represents oppression and identity's concrete reestablishment through patriarchal and heterosexual naming practices. In *O Pioneers!* Cather resists identity solidification in her protagonist, Alexandra, and instead of re-creating identity structures she confuses this tradition; she leaves Alexandra without a name acquired through marriage. Alexandra remains a Bergson. My final chapter discusses Alexandra's marriage to affirm that Cather resists the traditional marriage plot.

The symbolic readings in Butler's argument point to the phallic consequence of the snake found by Jim and Antonia in *My Antonia*. Also, Butler analyzes the carnation that drifts from Paul's lapel in "Paul's Case." Her interpretative techniques represent a critical trope that I extend in my work. The absence of *O Pioneers!* in Butler's critical inquiry offers a moment to consider the symbols embedded in this novel. I read the mulberry tree, geraniums and the yellow stick found in the closet to connect Cather's normative destabilization to items in the narrative. Butler's analysis proves influential as I extend her study to a novel sometimes overlooked in queer readings of Cather. O'Brien, Sedgwick and Butler comprise three central critics who are often referred to when scholars broach sexuality in connection to Willa Cather. They create a space that urges a continued queer discourse on Cather. The innovative perspectives these

authors present cause the theme of sexuality to continue to burgeon and transform in Cather scholarship.

Christopher Nealon builds upon the “[...] historical persistence among lesbians and gay men of an impulse to create vital genealogies [...]” (34). He directly relates this impulse to Sedgwick and Butler. He binds these critics together despite their interpretive differences. In addition, “vital genealogies” ties into Nealon’s argument regarding Cather’s created community and familial alliances. Nealon focuses on homosexual identification in Cather’s texts. He argues that Cather privileges exploratory experiences outside the cultural norm. Intensely drawn to these elements in Cather’s texts, Nealon connects nontraditional feeling and anti-materialistic bonds to moments in *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours* and *The Professor’s House*. Nealon reads each text as an emblem crucial to Cather’s cultural critique and provides examples of characters and scenes that solidify Cather’s heteronormative distaste. Nealon elucidates Cather’s work and highlights overt declarative statements that are concurrent to subtle cultural assessments that cause a complex vacillation in her work: “[...] a combination of self-assertion and hiding, of determination and embarrassment [...]” (10). This fills Cather’s characters with simultaneous rebellion and caution that expands the interpretive potential. Therefore, to understand Cather’s literature necessitates a careful consideration of elements not easily discernable. I find Nealon useful when I turn to familial ties in *O Pioneers!* and his work supports my belief in the foremost pioneer’s queerness.

In *Willa Cather: Queering America* Marilee Lindemann discusses Cather’s written bodies and characters that represent deviance through physical depictions. Her argument contains a biographical touch that provides an overview of Cather’s employment of the word queer. Usefully, she discusses *O Pioneers!*, but her argument finds that Alexandra reestablishes order

by the close of the novel. Although her readings of Ivar and the integration of identity with body formations prove insightful, in the end, I emerge with an alternative conclusion. Lindemann's criticism draws out the queer in the text and then discovers how it is purged from the plot. I read the queer in the novel as well, but find my entrances through symbolism sometimes in and other times outside the body. This leads to my embrace of the queer in contradistinction to Lindemann who asserts that the novel ends with no cultural contestation.

Jonathan Goldberg's first chapter of *Willa Cather and Others* steps away from the body and into cross identification through names. He negotiates the relationship between Alexandra Bergson and the character Alexander in *Alexander's Bridge*. He combines this with Cather's view on writing. The argument focuses on identity and cross gender representation as well as the layers in Cather's narrative contrivances. Goldberg suggests a divide, a double bind, that creates an unconscious in her texts: "[...] Cather ostensibly attempting to carve out the road of her genius, a path connecting past to future, finds it crossed, not merely by a supposedly false road, but by an unsaid, unconscious, and overwhelming spontaneous force that underlies the two paths that Cather wishes to regard not merely as separate, but as representing a decisive, conscious choice" (11). My inquiry begins with Goldberg's enlightened perspective that beneath *O Pioneers!* surface an underlying meaning fills the text through symbolic, subtle and unconscious movement. Goldberg's argument takes homosexuality and an aversion to heteronormativity as a central element of Cather's text as does Robin Hackett.

Hackett's theory of Sapphic primitivism delivers a sound critique of white women author's racial othering "in order to identify a powerful and benevolent un-raced white self" (7). In connection to this idea, Hackett discusses the relationship between lesbianism and the cultural discourse that surrounds race. Broadly, Hackett describes her work as a piece that contributes to

the “larger discussion about a complex, unstable network of socially constructed and interdependent identity categories, in particular, I participate in the part of this discussion that is focused on the intersecting constructions of race and of sexuality” (15). Cather is one of the several authors Hackett examines. Primarily, Hackett concerns herself with *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, but not before taking a moment to foreground her discussion of sapphic primitivism. She describes the “queer texture” in *O Pioneers!* through the relationship between Alexandra and the land. Hackett contrasts Alexandra’s masculinity to Carl’s “slimness and vulnerability” (129). Finally, Hackett returns to the argument that connects lesbianism to racial figurations to demonstrate that Cather attaches darkness, foreign lands and people to homosexual desire. She does so in order to explore exploited and subjugated women and their sexualities. Hackett argues that conventional constructs represent women of color and lesbians as dangerous. I, further, transfer Hackett’s theory to *O Pioneers!* as I interpret the mulberry tree and its oriental lineage. The tree, in particular a scene between Marie and Alexandra beneath it, epitomizes a place that facilitates freedom (from the confines rampant in western social constructs) to express lesbian (and more specifically, queer) desire.

Although the outlined theorists and critics do not encompass the entirety of Cather scholarship these queer arguments contain the basic influences that guide my work. Each author contributes an element that weaves through my readings. My critical themes include: Cather’s language choices, the ways the central character rejects conformity, Alexandra’s dissent from normativity, and the symbols that indicate “deviant” sexuality. The queer in a text subverts standard assumptions in regards to gender, sexuality, relationships, reproduction and the unified identity myth. Cather plays with these constructs to question their validity, to highlight the ideological strength they maintain and the personal and societal destruction they may cause. I

expand and combine portions from the aforementioned scholarship to overlap and develop these themes and create additional insights into Cather's second novel. I attest that *O Pioneers!* finally becomes a project that portrays the detriments of conformity and I utilize consequential moments in the novel to illuminate the queer undercurrents. My readings of symbols and characters fill in gaps that exist in current scholarship and position *O Pioneers!* in discourses where the novel remained absent.

I begin with the view that, indeed, Cather was a lesbian. I contemplate how this influences her work, or to put this differently: did Cather's position as a "deviant" individual create work that provokes her audience to consider alternatives to binary structures? Directly, my answer is yes, but the subversive remains obscure and perhaps there lies her contention's strength. Leo Bersani aptly claims, in regards to the contemporary visibility of homosexuality, that "Once we [homosexuals] agreed to be seen, we also agreed to being policed" (12). This cultural predicament presented a greater threat in turn of the century America. For sexually and socially "deviant" individuals invisibility and subtle coercive strategies were attractive alternatives to the devastating repercussions (found in legal, social and professional spheres) associated with visible difference. In light of the policing Bersani refers to, I consider the places that conformity and thus heterosexuality become destabilized in *O Pioneers!*. I interpret the moments where Cather renegotiates identity structures. I focus on the fissures in the text to provide an analysis that magnifies the moments where Cather crosses essentialized gender categories and questions naturalized heterosexuality. I disentangle and complicate the text (Barthes 877).

To further this aim I rely on queer theories assertion against stagnant identities. Cather subverts the insistence on static identity and the "policing" that occurs when (normative and

ultimately all) identification becomes mandated. Thus, I read Cather's text as one that *inverts* prohibitory practices as a service against its strength. In accordance with Lindemann, I emphasize that the queer takes place as a "process of making and unmaking, settling and unsettling that operates at times on the surfaces and at times on the deep structures of her fiction" (4). This description of Cather's fictitious practices describes the basis of my project. I further unsettle the narrative aspects that may appear uncomplicated when ingested to reaffirm differential denial.

Queer theory contemplates and infuses theoretical frameworks that preceded its inception and continues to work with the self, identity and subjectivity. An individual's development, a process that places humans in a position as a subject, constitutes many interpretive avenues throughout psychoanalytic theories. This paradigm makes it possible to continue to read the symbolic, as in language and signs,¹ as an important factor that reproduces binaries that privilege one identifier over another. The discourse that surrounds subjectivity extends to theorize the manner that humans experience identity. The three modes that allow access to the self are reality, the imaginary and the real. The imaginary experience is found in fantasies and images. The real represents an unattainable state beyond consciousness. Often, traumatic events drive individuals to desire to escape the symbolic order and return to a prelinguistic and unified position known as the real. The real and the imaginary exist beyond daily consciousness. The tear from the real that occurs when an infant succumbs to the social order, defined through language, leaves the "I" (moved from infancy to identity) in a position that seeks others'

¹ This begins with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who analyzes the structure of language. He connects social order to the overarching insistence that language contains a natural essence. Saussure's work developed and caused the relationship between language and structure to become a continued topic scholars' consider. The deconstructed relationship between signifiers and the signified reduces the belief that humans have an essentialized heterosexuality. The argument realizes that all constructions (including language) have an absence of naturalness.

approval, rather than basic needs, and inaugurates human emergence into subjectivity. Before identity's containment in language an individual is not subject to the rules, restrictions and meaning that language and subjectivity require.² For Cather, this relates to freedom from the "deviant" and "unnatural" labels that control desires. Alexandra's quest for unity and her experience with the imaginary exhibit her desire to remove from cultural and symbolic order.

The sudden loss of Alexandra's brother Emil (and her companion Marie) causes a trauma in Alexandra's life as well as in her community, and self, identification. In the town of Hanover, Alexandra depends upon her figuration as Emil's sister and surrogate mother as a portion of her static identity. Alexandra's identity shatters when Emil dies unexpectedly. Cather deliberately removes Alexandra from the normative drive to reproduce and challenges the cultural emphasis on the future as represented in the child (Emil encompasses this position for Alexandra). In the final section I utilize Lee Edelman to show that Cather eradicates Alexandra's normative position. Edelman connects queerness to the death drive and contends that normativity depends upon "the Child" to suppress the queer. Queer individuals become socially constructed as a threat against the future's welfare. Because Alexandra loses and also refuses the role as mother she steps outside the prescriptive myth contained in the marriage and nuclear family plot.

The fourth section, "Alexandra's Unconscious: Dreams, Confinement and Trauma," argues the importance of Alexandra's dreams, Emil's and Marie's deaths and her visit to Frank in the penitentiary. The deaths vitally transform Alexandra from menially complacent, relatively willing to perform in accordance with norms, to a woman desperate to escape symbolic and

² In Lacanian terms the "real" is a state of mind that precedes or cannot be contained in language. For Lacan, an infant becomes an "I," a subject, through the "mirror stage." At this point in psychic development the child must recognize the relationship between their image in the mirror, is expected to accept wholeness, and release the fragmented body that could not differentiate itself from her surroundings. The forced interpretation of the subject's image causes the infant to feel alienated from the body and represents the formative move from the chaotic real and into the realm of differentiation grounded in social order (3-9).

social order. Alexandra realizes her normative lack and must consciously reconcile with identity's façade, or, alternatively, return to the real through death. Ultimately, Alexandra compromises because structure affords her safety and the real offers terror, therefore, she chooses to live queerly.

Trauma leads Alexandra to fluctuate between the imaginary state and reality in order to realize the discrepancy between the subject position (and identity) and the real location outside constructed order. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “[...] the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur [...]” (91). The violence and horrific elements that define trauma create responses in the witnesses, or in this case the directly and personally effected characters, that truncate secure feelings. Alexandra initially views her life as one that will remain the same. To her, particular truths seem timelessly evident, but when a trauma occurs stasis becomes eradicated. The plot of *O Pioneers!* culminates in the murder of Emil and Marie. The unforeseen and traumatic event causes Alexandra to reevaluate her life and identity. My reading of the deaths and Alexandra's subsequent response includes a discussion that compiles and interprets trauma, the imaginary, the real and the structure evident in the symbolic order (a structure Alexandra wishes to escape).

The conscious and unconscious states of *O Pioneers!* expose themselves through my readings. The words appear on the page, the symbols and signifiers, but the meaning beneath them represents the unconscious. Similarly, the differentiation between Alexandra's conscious and unconscious self drives the novel's finale. Alexandra's tug between unconscious desire and prohibitory structures causes conflict. She draws towards and then away from the imaginary as she recognizes and then resists her desire to return to the real. In order to comprehend Alexandra the nuances of her being require a varied analysis; I recognize that unconscious and unspoken

emotion infuses her character development. The provocative theoretical workings, represented by queer and psychoanalytic critics, create a basis for dealing with *O Pioneers!*. I focus on the non-normative character Alexandra and the disenfranchisement with identity that her movements in the novel insinuate. The first section delves into the landscape as a primary locale that divides cultural constructs and the “nature” that supposedly guides them. I then deliver a reading that situates Alexandra’s move from a home based on traditional gender models³ to the home she creates based on non-biological ties. Cather’s indictment against normalcy standards positively resonates in *O Pioneers!*. My perspective resists tendencies to insist that Cather maintained one prominent theme, or that her subject matter became displaced due to her inability to overtly discuss lesbian experiences. Rather, I contend that Cather realizes that to actively attribute the labels “deviant” or “unnatural” to humans causes a central, heterosexual, identity to reproduce. Cather thwarts this myth by creating her own. Through imagery and carefully crafted characters Cather debilitates subjugation’s strength.

II. THE DIVIDE OF DIFFERENCE

Initially, my quest revolves around Cather’s writing style and Alexandra’s character development. To expand on the first point I delineate Cather’s aesthetic and her affective prose. Cather constructs the narrative in order to facilitate substantial depth, rather than surface details. She refuses to explicitly expose what lies beneath the general plot. I propose that Cather intentionally delivers the novel in a way that subtly contends cultural efforts that naturalize heterosexual relationships as well as the assumptive families and communities that stem from this ideology. First, I discuss the purposeful setting and the transference that moves the landscape from wild to tame and implies that an effort must be exerted to naturalize what is not

³ Although her father necessarily (and a bit begrudgingly) diverges from the norm when he passes the farm’s management to Alexandra rather than one of his sons.

natural at all. Alexandra reveals to Carl that the land (rather than humans) induced its own success: “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” (79), but quite obviously people motivated the change. The land analogously associates to naturalized heterosexuality. In both cases, human power must overcome obstacles to dominate the elements (in humanity or terrain) it fears. Cather’s prose is complicated, although the text may (at times) appear simplistic, and provocative. I travel with Alexandra through her childhood experience to expose Cather’s move away from tradition and into an experimental realm that challenges the heterosexual family dynamic. To facilitate a queer reading I, first, concentrate on the methods Cather uses to split the text. Cather’s strategy exposes the reciprocal relationship between queer and normative experiences.

From the onset of *O Pioneers!* Cather makes two interpretations possible. The stories are divided: one represents normative gender, family and society, and another, less readily available, questions the “nature” of American societal organization. The landscape’s depiction, a renowned aspect of Cather’s fiction, immediately questions binary language and social structures. Cather opens the novel by describing the “little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland” (3). Hanover is a place dependent upon the farmers’ success. The farming enterprise is meant to domesticate and cultivate land to produce a livable locale in terms that indicate “civility.” The town’s portrait marks Cather’s repeated twos, and signifies alternatives to unity: “On either side of this road straggled *two* uneven rows of wooden buildings; the general merchandise stores, the *two* banks, the drug store, the feed store, the saloon, the post-office. The board sidewalks were gray with trampled snow, but at *two* o’clock in the afternoon the shopkeepers, having come back from dinner, were keeping well behind their

frosty windows” (3, italics added). The characters have a choice of which side of buildings to enter, and similarly the reader may understand the narrative in accordance with convention, or as a text that crosses boundaries. The presence of this striking duality, specifically between the unmitigated land and the capital structures, represents Cather’s invitation to consider the novel as a construct that challenges social limits.

Interestingly, Jonathan Goldberg connects Cather’s analysis of writing to the unconscious in her texts. *Willa Cather and Others* begins as Goldberg announces the importance Cather places on divided paths. He argues that, in Cather’s work, the unconscious elements implicitly expand the characters. Goldberg stresses that Cather refutes her contemporary’s inclination to contrive character and plot development. For Cather, this falsity exposes the theoretical underpinnings at a detriment to the writing’s power. “The Novel Demeuble” begins with the proclamation that “The novel, for a long while, has been overfurnished” (43). The failure found in excess, a trope Cather sees in her contemporary’s work, facilitates the development of her own aesthetic: “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there – that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself” (50).

These words drive Goldberg’s argument and my own readings.

Goldberg demarcates Cather’s critique of Katherine Mansfield’s writing and argues that Cather’s response portrays the rhetorical methods she values:

Cather singles out for praise in Mansfield precisely what she avows as her own domain, and in a way that further torpedoes the line between external and internal, superficial and unconscious that supposedly divides her first two novels. Mansfield is a master of the

‘double life,’ Cather writes, showing in her most accomplished stories that what lies ‘underneath’ and is ‘secret and passionate and intense...stamps the faces and gives character.’ No surface without depths. Life, as Cather characterizes it in this paradigm, represents a double tug, away from social relationships and their claims toward this secret self and yet toward others as where and how the secret life is lived to the extent that it can—for it cannot be fully (8-9).

The dichotomy magnified in Cather’s commentary hinges on her belief that *Alexander’s Bridge* (her first novel) bent to traditional formulas while *O Pioneers!* captures the character’s private stories, specifically, the characters forced into a “double life.” The double life includes a conscious and culturally recognizable self (or plot) and an unconscious, socially withdrawn, existence only fully available through the writer’s capabilities. Cather’s essays on writing, and Goldberg’s analysis, express the principles that drive her work. The depth and unconscious becomes visible in Alexandra who is at once only an outline, but through Cather’s suggestive language emotional and theoretical expansion occurs. Cather provides her audience with the profundity necessary to step inside Alexandra’s created unconscious, and consequently the turmoil brought on by restrictive social forces (and for Cather those imposed by contemporary writers, critics and readers). I take the initial basis provided by Cather to breathe an infinite number of transformations into the primary character.

Cather’s “The Novel Demeuble” continues to suggest the value she places on the implicit rather than the explicitly stated in a text: “How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre [...] leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little [...]” (51). The

characters, the setting and Cather's narrative development each align with, what she describes as, heightened writing: writers should experiment with form and also provide the words necessary to transcend the language to create interior, personal, meaning. This objective, outlined by Cather in her nonfiction essays, encompasses Goldberg's belief in Cather's "double tug." She expresses a need to abide by convention, but desires to test the structures that remain in place. Cather's commentary, and Goldberg's reading, suggests that *O Pioneers!* achieves the success she praises. In the third section I return to the concept of "old patterns," the conventions Cather throws out, when Marie and Alexandra search for literal patterns, but cannot find them. Their conversation and the metaphors Cather uses become valuable over the actual item the women look for: the implicit replaces the full disclosure evident in old patterns.

The land provides a space to step away from material and social constructions (the tradition she hopes to escape). At particular moments, places and emblems in the landscape represent locations away from cultural expectation. The land corresponds to both human cultivation and cultural transgression. *O Pioneers!* first section "The Wild Land" at once sets the stage for transformation and insinuates future development. Hanover's population desires to make the land tame: to denaturalize and familiarize the plains for consumptive purposes, capital gain and cultural order. The persistent problems in the Nebraskan divide stem from the chaos and disorder found in the landscape: "Its Genius was unfriendly to man" (14). The effort to domesticate is two fold. The land and the community must yield to the force of human boundary setting, but as the novel progresses the structural troubles come to light through Cather's characterization and narrative. The novel's central predicament arises through the notion that the land and the human population must abide by the laws of "nature." The order must appear intuitive.

Representative of social order, Alexandra's family enacts traditional masculine and feminine duties. The father, John Bergson, runs the land and farm along with his children. Mrs. Bergson cares for the household and, thus, domestic responsibilities: "[...] he had married a good housewife" (19). Mrs. Bergson, in accordance with the cultural standards at the turn of the century, implements stringent morals and "household order." The father attempts to work the land while the mother cares for indoor (domestic) arenas, but ultimately the goals remain the same: to instill rules that keep the land and its inhabitants in line. Although Mr. Bergson upholds cultural expectations based on essentialized gender, in the event of his death, he awards the management of the Bergson farm to his daughter:

In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days. He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice [...] he had to accept the situation as it was, and to be thankful that there was one among his children to whom he could entrust the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land (16).

The entire novel hinges on this risk and creates a divide: some never break with tradition while others attain "greater livability" based on a willingness to disregard propriety (Butler, *Undoing Gender*). Later, I concentrate on Mr. Bergson's normative sentiments (conveyed through Alexandra), but now I turn to the mother's importance relative to Alexandra and her growth beyond normative alliances and into queer zones.

Mrs. Bergson finds comfort in normative life; she puts forth effort to protect identifiers that stagnate progress, and she reproves signs that express normative disdain. The mother reproduces essentialized gender categories and restricts, when she can, individual freedom from

the social norms that stifle cultural “deviance:” “[...] Mrs. Bergson, and her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways” (19). She fears that her failure to ostracize (and condemn) figures such as Mrs. Lee and Ivar will unravel the comfort she finds in strictly regulated behavior. Her discomfort arises from threats to her own belief in identity categories that birth from heterosexual (and patriarchal) myths. In Monique Wittig’s words: “These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (25). Mrs. Bergson facilitates this mentality through her power as a normative conformer. The individuals that surround her must express themselves through her standard requirements (here Wittig’s heterosexuality can interchange with normativity). Cather depicts Alexandra’s childhood in order to develop a contrast between normative familial arrangements and the one Alexandra creates as an adult. Lou and Oscar serve a similar, but expanded, function.

At the onset of the novel Mrs. Bergson disdains that which Alexandra will later protect: dissent from cultural expectation. This break is found in the sign of the feet. Both Mrs. Lee and Ivar, immigrants and outsiders, prefer bare feet. Initially, Mrs. Bergson sets the tone for the community’s disavowal of this behavior: “Once when Mrs. Bergson, on her way to Norway Creek, stopped to see old Mrs. Lee, the old woman hid in the haymow ‘for fear Mis’ Bergson would catch her barefoot’” (20). The only punishment Mrs. Bergson promises resides in disapproval. Her character immediately ascertains the power embedded in social constructs of right and wrong and the fear that develops from this condemnation. The mother, in Cathy Caruth’s Freudian analysis, allegorizes the need to substantiate the origin myth: “The mother thus represents the necessity that ties the theory of the individual to the story of primal history,”

she continues with the mother's importance relative to the law, "[...] it is in the place of the mother that we must seek the law that governs the 'guilty' theory, the law of the law" (109). Here, the mother figure perpetually instills guilt, for bare feet or *other* oddities, to affirm her lawful power. This ties to her belief in identity; she denies "that our understanding of ourselves as coherent, unified, and self-determining subjects is an effect of those representational codes commonly used to describe the self and through which, consequently, identity comes to be understood" (Jagose 78). Rather than corroborating with this theoretically queer approach to identity Mrs. Bergson refuses relational dependencies and, instead, relies on her ability to punish difference. She does not permit a lack of guilt because she believes internalized remorse, fed by her actions, produces an order that reifies her sense that structures build from a "primal" center. To recreate comfort proliferates identity's autonomy, and Cather connects this (settled) ideal to Mrs. Bergson: "[...] there was something comfortable about her; perhaps it was her own love of comfort" (19). The beliefs held by Mrs. Bergson reflect traditional values; therefore, the comfort in her character lies in specified principles of righteous living.

Cather sketches Alexandra's and her brothers' childhoods (specifically, the youngest, Emil) and depicts the forces that develop fear and conformity. The mother's behavior and the actions Lou and Oscar expect portray a willingness to punish those who live outside the norm. The eldest Bergson sons maintain normative standards while Alexandra considers the positive possibilities when an individual abstains from expectation. In contrast to Alexandra, Lou and Oscar "[...] hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains. Even Lou, who was more elastic than his older brother, disliked to do anything different from their neighbors. He felt that it made them conspicuous and gave people a chance to talk about them" (30). Alexandra recognizes her brothers' inclination to live in stasis, but continues to work towards change: "I

was talking about that with the smart young man who is raising a new kind of clover. He says the right thing is usually just what everybody don't do" (46). The subsequent success of Alexandra's farming methods acknowledges that what is perceived as normal, right, and natural may benefit from alterations and new perspectives. The general community, including Lou and Oscar, blindly accepts rituals that permit and control standards that exclude divergent actions and cause dominant ideology to continue, successful or not. Societal traits that prohibit difference instill stagnant practices and oppose variants in human experiences. Particular characters succumb to, as Jagose details, the ideal of a unified and real self: "[...] one always things of one's *self* as existing outside all representational frames, and as somehow marking a point of undeniable realness" (78). Contra Lou and Oscar, Ivar recognizes his deviant position relative to the norms reproduced by those outside him, therefore, he represents queer life.

The relationship between Alexandra and Ivar, cast against Lou and Oscar's reaction to the "crazy" man, indicates Alexandra and Ivar's wisdom in comparison to Lou and Oscar's rigid conformity. Carl, Alexandra and her brothers travel to visit Ivar. As the group voyages to Ivar's home on the outskirts of the inhabited land Lou and Oscar prompt Emil to fear Ivar. Once again, the mother becomes the "moral" gatekeeper. Emil reinforces the jests the brothers direct at Ivar, and states that: "Mother thinks he must have done something awful wicked" (22). Ivar's choice to refuse social normativity causes the members of the prairie community to question his history, and the implications of his social positioning literally on "civility's" outskirts. Contrary to Lou and Oscar's response to difference Alexandra recognizes Ivar's strength and teaches Emil to view him from a perspective of acceptance: "Some days his mind is cloudy, like. But if you can get him on a clear day, you can learn a great deal from him" (23). Alexandra acknowledges the capabilities Ivar possesses while Lou mocks him: "Whoever heard of him talking sense, anyhow.

I'd rather have ducks for supper than Crazy Ivar's tongue" (24). By demonizing Ivar Lou retains power and passes this influence through the patrilineal line via Emil. Cather complicates this seemingly normative privilege by valorizing Ivar in the only child's eyes, and through Alexandra's voice of contradiction against Lou's sentiments.

A bumpy path leads to the tucked away cave Ivar inhabits: "The road to Ivar's homestead was a very poor one. He had settled in the rough country across the county line [...] The Bergson wagon lurched along over the rough hummocks and grass banks, followed the bottom of winding draws, or skirted the margin of wide lagoons [...]" (23). Symbolically, the road to Ivar's proves difficult because it represents the path unsanctioned by the masses. Distinct difference, according to Goldberg, epitomizes Cather's belief in the attributes that create a successful novel: "These are, after all, the very terms in which she marks her first novel as failed—for attempting to accommodate herself to the ways of the world" (7). Contrarily, the second novel triumphs through Cather's refusal to abide by restrictions as she disintegrates boundaries through marginalized characters. For Cather, then, the act of writing makes social renegotiation possible.

The first time Alexandra interacts with Ivar, the queerest man around, occurs because she seeks his guidance. The people that populate Hanover view Ivar as insurmountably insane; they make his difference pathology to maintain his subservience. Cather enacts what Michel Foucault deems, in his discourse on nineteenth-century sexuality, the power over sexual relations through language and institutions, specifically, as applied to homosexuality and categorized as "interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul" (43). Foucault interpolates the dual dynamic that forces homosexual individuals to an identifiable type that necessitates surveillance: "The medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report, and family controls may have

the over-all and apparent objective of saying no to all wayward or unproductive sexualities, but the fact is that they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power” (45). The dual results of pleasure and power come from a ritual where players constantly find pleasure in the chase or evasion, and power in the perpetuated scandal. The players include: “parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts,” and they all participate in circularly reinforced discovery and concealment (45). The characters, not unlike Foucault’s players, engage in the pleasure/power dynamic with assorted outcomes. Ivar and Alexandra must avoid the asylum: pleasure found in their escape. Lou and Oscar attempt to institutionalize Ivar causing pleasure and power to form from escapades that resist and control. Mrs. Bergson, the family manager, demonizes Ivar: pleasure (she “brings to light” his wicked history) and power (that “questions”) thus derive from the participatory thrill.

Ivar’s presence facilitates the difference that permeates the novel. His placement as “crazy” allows normal constructs to take shape. Ostensibly, Oscar and Lou view themselves as that which Ivar is not, namely sane. If Ivar is strange, queer, tempted and crazy then Lou and Oscar (representative of the communities normative sentiments) can assume they lack these traits. Ivar’s characteristics validate their sanity, heterosexuality, restraint and normalcy: the privileged oppositional terms. Ivar allows the pleasure/power dynamic to mark the emergent hierarchy that favors Lou and Oscar’s adjectives. Therefore, it serves importance that Cather positions this particular framework at the novel’s start; she lays binaries and yet tests the typical understanding they serve to represent. In *O Pioneers!* crazy does not equal bad and normal does not equate valid. The proof of Ivar’s superior identity concept resurfaces throughout the novel, and hints at the lack found in Lou and Oscar that affects their erasure by the novel’s close.

While Ivar is wise, Lou and Oscar represent the masses of followers who fear, delight in and reinstate a stifling order: “[...] Oscar’s [face] is thick and dull. For all his dullness, however, Oscar makes more money than his brother, which adds to Lou’s sharpness and uneasiness and tempts him to make a show. The trouble with Lou is that he is tricky [...] as Ivar says, he has not a fox’s face for nothing” (67).

The development of Ivar’s character exposes his extreme differences from the other community members. Physically, he separates himself from the people who live in the nearest town (to avoid unnamed temptations) but his distinction extends beyond this initial anomaly. As the Bergson’s, with Carl Linstrum in tow, approach Ivar’s “cave” they discuss his refusal to allow guns near him. The masculine youth converses about their disappointment in not taking the opportunity to kill birds. Instead, Ivar nurtures and appreciates animals and prohibits weapons from entering his property. Overtly, Ivar’s behavior stems from his religious convictions; his practices exist outside institutionalized domains: “He had a peculiar religion of his own and could not get on with any of the denominations” (25). Ivar lives beyond typical, socially organized interactions, and yet, his proximity to open land profoundly connects him to nature. Cather refutes a natural order, that society evolves based on an original human experience that develops from natural direction, and depicts Ivar to contradict this predominant opinion. His character remains the closest to the land, but cultural standards deem him “unnatural.” Cather inverts the typical acceptance of natural and unnatural categories; she highlights the construction of natural human experience. The natural is not found in culture, and Ivar’s character produces this understanding through his close connection to nature. He is positioned as an outsider in a culture that distances itself from nature, but claims to live naturally.

Through a queering of Ivar Cather exposes individual relegations to a secondary position when characters fail to abide by the growing mandates of Americanization.

Marilee Lindemann contends that the word queer holds important implications. Specifically, this assertion connects to Cather's personal letters, but the connotations transfer from the personal to Cather's use of "queer" in her fiction. Throughout *O Pioneers!* Ivar's description includes the word queer to imply that his behavior and lifestyle are strange or odd, or as Lindemann suggests this word usage resolutely holds the power of "calling into being the very thing it wishes to outlaw and calling into question the security of its own foundations" (18). Thus, when utilized by characters that epitomize normative assumptions Cather undermines the power these characters wish to maintain. Lou uses queer terminology to position himself as powerful relative to Ivar's queerness, and he evokes cultural and medical beliefs to sanction his claims: "I saw the superintendent at the asylum, and I was telling him about Ivar's symptoms. He says Ivar's case is one of the most dangerous kind, and it's a wonder he hasn't done something violent before this" (68). The deductions available through Cather's word selection allow meaning to take shape; she questions the meaning of danger and violence. The word queer, in early twentieth century terms, denoted unorthodox behavior and contained allusions to homosexuality. "Queer" indicated the negativity associated with homosexuality, as an entity in need of containment, and power demanded language constructions that would represent the degradation of individuals named as such. Those individuals labeled as queer pose a threat to "stable" status quo expectations. Ivar enters the subjugated group through various moments that composite his character development, and his queerness suggests the importance of Alexandra's pairing with him.

In contrast to Alexandra, Lou and Oscar physically deny difference through their refusal to enter Ivar's home: "They would not come in, but sat in the shade of the bank outside while Alexandra and Ivar talked about the birds and about his housekeeping, and why he never ate meat, fish or salt" (29). Emil and Alexandra react to Ivar openly. Alexandra looks for advice and conversation, and Emil responds as a curious young child. Emil opens himself to the possibilities of living through individualized terms: "He thought a cave a very superior kind of house" (28). Physically distanced from Ivar's home, Lou and Oscar refuse to respect the difference found in Ivar. Thus, they become the emblem of patriarchy, heterosexuality, conformity, and represent the normative position in Cather's burgeoning deconstruction of prioritized binaries. Ivar disregards normative expectations while Lou and Oscar continue to instill social laws. As the narrative progresses Lou and Oscar marry, have children and Lou volunteers for the governmental law designed to keep people in line. Ivar and Alexandra do not reproduce and become a family based on mutual interest rather than biological or sexual ties.

Cather exemplifies the tragedy that occurs when restrictions remain severe, lack flexibility and privilege human experiences that conform to "norms." The prohibition against change begins with Mrs. Bergson and continues in the patriarchal law reproduced by the eldest Bergson sons. Judith Butler's analysis of lawful structures in relationship to patriarchal lineage profoundly connects to names and identity formations: "The name as patronym does not only bear the law, but institutes the law. Insofar as the name secures and structures the subject named, it appears to wield the power of subjectivation: producing a subject on the basis of prohibition, a set of laws that differentiates subjects through the compulsory legislation of sexed social positionalities" (154). Butler magnifies patriarchal language structures that serve to deny women's equality, and stresses the establishment of gender difference through name

transference. My interpretation shifts from the texts Butler focuses on (*My Antonia*, “Paul’s Case” and “Tommy, the Unsentimental”) to *O Pioneers!*. In connection with Butler’s language critique, Alexandra never displaces the original patriarchy that would enable her commodity to occur. Her identity destabilizes through irregular non-transference. She keeps the Bergson name and the acquirement of the patronym Linstrum remains possible in the future, but not yet a symbolic exchange. Alexandra replaces the patriarchal position in the family: she transcends her fixture as a feminine object subjected to mandatory passage through patriarchal and heterosexual naming practices. Hence, she builds a home based outside the possessive patriarchal practices that the name perpetuates.

Alexandra creates a home that includes people outside biological or heterosexual relationships. She obtains this specific freedom through her financial affluence and independence. Christopher Nealon claims that Cather resists familial structures based on heterosexual unions and instead formulates relationships and characters that defy customary practices: “We find variations of this difficult emotion throughout Cather’s fiction, especially in her protagonists’ quiet defiance of the rules of the commodity-driven American dream [...] Again and again Cather’s protagonists, against the pressures of both family and nation, find fulfillment in pursuing the dream of another kind of nation and family [...]” (10). Alexandra declines to accept that family subsists solely through genetic or heterosexual bonds. She invites outcasts and immigrants into her home. This choice signifies an alternative genealogy that exemplifies successful household structures dependent upon an amalgamation of characters rather than marriage and biological relations. Alexandra facilitates a queer approach to family arrangements. She views her home’s development as a choice rather than compulsory marriage,

and child rearing; Alexandra's relationships depend on mutual understanding, respect, love and appreciation of difference.

In Alexandra's home reside "three pretty young Swedish girls" (58) who care for domestic duties. The young women's presence identifies Alexandra as a woman attached to other women; she desires female presence: "But, as Alexandra had pointedly told her sisters-in-law, it was to hear them giggle that she kept three young things in her kitchen; the work she could do herself, if it were necessary" (58). These words tellingly demonstrate Alexandra's defiance against those she relates to only through patriarchal constructs of law. The "pretty" women are figured as entertaining, and they distract and enchant Alexandra. Her dinner table includes the men who work for her, but the men's descriptions lack the detail and physical depictions applied to the young women: "Of the youngest girl, Signa, who has a pretty figure, mottled pink cheeks, and yellow hair, Alexandra is very fond, though she keeps a sharp eye upon her" (58-9). By applying physically attractive characteristics to Signa, Cather implies that Alexandra's interest in the young girl resides beyond personality: "Little Signa, who was waiting on the table, giggled and fled to the kitchen. Alexandra's eyes twinkled" (68). As an employee Signa displays faults, but this allows Alexandra to watch her carefully under the guise of concern for her capabilities. The young women's central purpose is companionship.

In addition to the Swedish girls, Ivar becomes a member of Alexandra's adult home. Ivar, and consequently Alexandra, causes constant speculation from the community because of his position as a nonconformist. Alexandra's understanding and admiration of him associates her to queer figures that liberate her from the normalcy in their society. The community primarily consists of people who lack imagination and reproduce stagnant cultural constraints through failure to consider lives outside prescribed domains. Ivar differs starkly from the assimilation

prominent among Alexandra's neighbors, and his lifestyle confuses socially regulated behavior. Ivar lives in Alexandra's barn, practices religion in an unorthodox fashion, neglects to wear shoes and claims his lifestyle choice necessitates the avoidance of particular physical enticements which vaguely allude to homosexuality: "He dislikes human habitations, so Alexandra has fitted him up a room in the barn, where he is very comfortable, being near the horses and, as he says, further from temptations. No one has ever found out what his temptations are" (59). Bodily temptations terrify Ivar and he resists this proclivity by removing himself from surroundings that may cause him to act on his desires.

The connection between Ivar and Alexandra rests on a mutual understanding of the consequences of difference. Ivar comes to Alexandra fearing confinement to an asylum. He believes "That is the way; they have built the asylum for people who are different, and they will not even let us live in the holes with the badgers" (63). Ivar and Alexandra acknowledge the possibility of institutionalization, physical containment and denial of freedom. This harks back to Foucault's assertion that, "[...] the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized [in 1870]" (43). Alexandra highlights the inclination to attempt to confine difference: "Like as not they will be wanting to take me to Hastings because I have built a silo; and then I may take you with me" (63). Cather exposes the interdependence between physical and social freedom. Despite Ivar and Alexandra's perceived autonomy each lack the ability to actualize physical desire due to cultural prohibitions. The two queer figure's fear of imprisonment concretely sketches the consequence associated with challenging the social order. Homosexuality corresponds to institutionalization through the prominent connection between homosexuality and unnaturalness, corruption and deviance. The conversation between Ivar and Alexandra identifies the threat of captivity, and the knowledge

that difference distances them from freedom. The characters challenge regulated behavior standards, but nonetheless they must deny the impulses that would confine them to an asylum. Cather flips normalcy by figuring Ivar closer to literal, unmediated nature; she, first, locates him in a cave and then in Alexandra's barn.

Literally and figuratively, Alexandra remains the only character who understands Ivar. She translates Ivar's words for others who cannot comprehend his language; Alexandra accepts Ivar's insubordination and becomes his voice when he relates to others. Alexandra mediates the relationship between the extremely different, queer individual and the assimilated masses through directly translated language; she converses with each side and attempts to embrace difference while placating the characters bound by tradition. She wavers between both sides and retains a position that intimidates, but does not entirely disable; she allows Ivar to "speak in their terms" (Wittig 25). Therefore, she can remain "free" (outside of an asylum). They both resist temptation, but Ivar recognizes his particular temptations while Alexandra presses them away from her consciousness. Cather causes Alexandra's feelings and desires to become the unconscious in the text. Queer temptations, located in Alexandra and Ivar, are removed from direct language and thus function as the desire that is embedded in the text.

The act of translation places Alexandra in a role that indicates her "double consciousness." On the surface, the novel and the protagonist appeal to the masses, but beneath this they work against the institution of conformity. Cather delights in the feeling on the page, and Alexandra privileges the private moments that conceal her from social judgment and release her from regulation. She knows exactly how to transform into expectation; she knows the codes and preferences of the white, homogenized culture, but her position as an outsider keeps her from passage into the patriarchal order's regime. The layers of Cather's fiction introduce the

methods that enable discovery to occur. In the next chapter, I move from the landscape and familial alliances into the interactions and events that become central to Alexandra's characterization as the novel progresses. Cather's queer setting and her binary destabilization create an initial foundation for my continued complication of themes such as location, the unconscious, confinement and queer relationships.

III. ALEXANDRA'S DESIRE AND CATHER'S QUEER SYMBOLISM

Cather connects to a queer genealogy through destabilized gender and sexual binaries. The essentialized myth that women and men contain innate characteristics based on biological ties is revoked and reworked in Cather's narrative. Several characters maintain typified gender norms, but these characters disappear by the novel's close (Amedee and Marie die, the last glimpse at Frank is in a penitentiary, and Alexandra excommunicates Lou and Oscar). The characters that coalesce traits affiliated with masculine, or feminine roles have rich stories that thwart normative reality. Carl does not identify with the strength and power that social order associates with men. Likewise, Alexandra combines masculine and feminine features. Cather re-produces gender and then impedes expected heterosexual subject desire. As Tim Dean notes in *Beyond Sexuality*: "[...] detaching desire from gender [...] helps to free desire from normative heterosexuality—that is, from the pervasive assumption that all desire, even same-sex attraction, is effectively heterosexual by virtue of its flowing between masculine and feminine subject-positions [...]" (216). Dean suggests that homosexual couplings mimetically replicate the binary divide between masculine and feminine in order to re-fit queer behavior into normative moulds. Therefore, the queer interrupts the normative tendency to replicate a naturalized heterosexuality by refusing to place homosexual individuals into masculine and feminine subject positions. For Cather, this occurs in the moments that Alexandra expresses her sexual desire. One feminine

subject desires another feminine subject, thus, she inverts the prescriptive demand to adhere to heterosexual lust “[...] regardless of the participants’ actual anatomy in any given sexual encounter” (Dean 216). Alexandra becomes fully feminized, therefore, wholly queer.

I entertain an approach to Cather’s queer aesthetic through several modes that break the barriers signs and signifiers uphold. To connect Cather to a queer lineage I rely on Sappho’s symbols, and to intertwine Alexandra with the feminine I engage with flowers and reread the mulberry tree as an influential sign beyond, typical readings that focus on, Marie’s and Emil’s link to the tree. I display Cather’s gender and heterosexual transcendence through a close interpretation of Alexandra and her socialized growth from childhood to adult life. First, I discuss Alexandra’s relationships relative to social standards. I, then, re-interpret the mulberry tree as a locale that situates Alexandra as desirously queer. The final element in this chapter is devoted to a phallic symbol Alexandra finds in Marie’s closet and the queerness that this emblem suggests. This section focuses on lesbian erotic play as well as Cather’s refusal to depict queer desire as a mimetic heterosexual variation.

The depiction of Alexandra’s socialization occurs through hetero rather than homo-social bonds. The historical moment that surrounds *O Pioneers!* provides a specific divide, and a transformation that produces binaries through restructured social development. The social move toward adolescent heterosocial mingling became a priority because of the fear engendered through the naming, and wider visibility, of homosexuality. Heterosexuality was positioned as “natural” and homosexuality as “unnatural.” To support a power dynamic that depends on heteronormativity, cultural practices began to reinforce heterosocial rituals while deterring adolescent same-sex coupling. In his article, “Catherian Friendship; or, How not to do the

History of Homosexuality,” Scott Herring notes the fabrication of social development that aids in the forceful cultural push towards heterosexuality:

And while these moments of heterosociability typically centered on the carefree courtships of leisurely urban life, they also had a rather serious, if not always achieved, end goal: blissful heterosexual domesticity or what literary critics like to call the marriage plot. All too simply put, modern urban forms of opposite-sex coupling ideally led to romance which led to reproduction which led to the idealization of the nationalized middle-class Family, one that defined itself against previous forms of contact between men as well as that novel type, the homosexual (71).

Herring’s emphasis on the urban can also transfer to the small communities found on Cather’s divide. *O Pioneers!* is decidedly situated away from an urban setting. Nonetheless, the prairie society becomes guided by cultural norms, but Cather destabilizes and inverts expectation through alternative forms of socialization.

The progression of socialization requires steps that serve to reinforce heterosexual marriages. Initially, young boys and girls develop relationships with playmates of the same gender. With the passage of time these relationships require a, socially mandated, transfer from homosocial to heterosocial interactions that ostensibly lead to heterosexual romances. Cather flips this anticipated succession and, instead, surrounds Alexandra with young men. Again, I return to the trip to Ivar’s cave. Alexandra motivates the excursion, and her companions include her three brothers and her friend Carl. The moments traditionally consumed by children’s play and then young adult courtships diverge in Cather’s narrative and take paths that deviate from this structure. Throughout her childhood, and into young adulthood, Alexandra socializes exclusively with boys (aside from a few older women including her mother). Carl Linstrum

represents Alexandra's only early friendship, with a character about her age, outside of her family. Coincidentally, Carl leaves Hanover before courtship rituals become compulsory. Ultimately, Carl and Alexandra's future marriage represents the queer due to the lack in their relationship: lack of children (therefore failing to participate in re-production and futurism, a point I take up in the final section), lack of sexual desire, and a failure to fulfill the expected gender roles implemented through a system that essentializes identity. Here, it is important to note that gender play does not necessarily insinuate homosexuality. Cather points to this as she describes the interactions between Marie and Alexandra as the moments when Alexandra is most feminized. Gender play tests the patriarchal constructs, and queer play under cuts the heterosexual marriage myth. Cather renegotiates the, presumably, corresponding position between gender and "appropriate" subject desire. The narrative continues and queerness layers itself across Alexandra's relationships with Marie and Carl.

Carl's description includes effeminate traits keenly focused on by many Cather scholars: "There was a delicate pallor in his thin face, and his mouth was too sensitive for a boy's" (7). Throughout the novel Cather stresses this depiction. She returns to Carl's features again, and focuses on his meekness when he arrives in Hanover after an extended departure: "He seemed to shrink into himself as he used to do; to hold himself away from things, as if he were afraid of being hurt. In short, he was more self-conscious than a man of thirty-five is expected to be. He looked older than his years and not very strong" (78). Carl's position as an atypically gendered figure becomes strongly reinforced through Alexandra's, sometimes, masculine traits. Alexandra promotes reason and has a strong, dense body, represents financial security for her and Carl rather than the converse (a point I elaborate on in the final chapter).

The early bond between Carl and Alexandra becomes nostalgically highlighted in Alexandra's parting words to her friend, early on in the novel, when his family plans to relocate: "[...] we've liked the same things and we've liked them together, without anybody knowing [...] We've never either of us had any other close friend" (35). Through Alexandra's succinct acknowledgement of their relationship's function she solidifies the beginning, and she foreshadows the final return to this original relational position. Additionally, their similarity deconstructs the expectation of opposite descriptors, and the differences each gender is expected to adhere to—homo-socializing their relationship. The heterosocial bond does not take shape as the relationship pact between Alexandra and Carl continues (in friendship alone).

As consistently highlighted by scholars, Alexandra's immediate description undermines the expectation of physical femininity, but beyond her appearance lays a resolute determination against men's advances. In an instant, Alexandra denounces the intended flattery of a man: "My God, girl, what a head of hair!" he exclaimed, quite innocently and foolishly. She stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip—most unnecessary severity" (6). This moment displays Alexandra's withdraw from participation in typical heteronormative rituals. Dana Kinnison suggests the importance of the glance: "The image of the Amazon as an active and even aggressive female, who controls her own reproductivity and never marries, brings the same threat to the status quo as does Alexandra" (97). Immediately, Alexandra is situated as defiant against heterosexual and patriarchal dominance. The narrator appears to side with the man (he is innocent, and Alexandra severe). The audience has a choice between sides: conform to the narrator and thus patriarchal and normative heterosexual standards, or the character that destabilizes these myths.

Cather continues to stress the early indoctrination of children into the marriage plotline. In the moments that follow Alexandra's glare, Marie is introduced. Her position as a young child, and attractive object, surrounds her with men who seek her desire. She must pick a "sweetheart" from the group of masculine bohemians: "They were all delighted with her, for they seldom saw so pretty and carefully nurtured a child. They told her that she must choose one of them for a sweetheart [...]" (8-9). Marie's nurture includes an intense feminine and heterosexual socialization. She pacifies and delights masculine onlookers by choosing her Uncle Joe. The scenes that introduce Marie and Alexandra juxtapose against one another to symbolically position the two central feminine characters' development. Marie, although still a young child, chooses to exist in the heterosexual plot, she chooses a man, while Alexandra separates herself from the feminine position that acts as an object desired by masculine figures. Further along in the narrative, the women become highlighted against one another yet again.

When Carl Linstrum returns to his childhood home, and reinstates his friendship with Alexandra, she takes him to visit her "companion" Marie (88). The scene between the three characters (but as we will see, really, only the two) depicts important scenery. The characters find a nook surrounded by boundaries. The land they choose avoids confines: the grass grows long ("thick and luxuriant"), and is free from measures that prohibit "natural" growth:

She [Marie] led them to the northwest corner of the orchard, sheltered on one side by a thick mulberry hedge and bordered on the other by a wheatfield, just beginning to yellow. In this corner the ground dipped a little, and the bluegrass, which the weeds had driven out in the upper part of the orchard, grew thick and luxuriant. Wild roses were flaming in the tufts of bunchgrass along the fence. Under a white mulberry tree there was an old wagon-seat (91).

The landscape that surrounds the characters includes many allusions. The rose image symbolizes female sexuality. The Greek poet Sappho wrote extensively about her love of other women. Cather's affinity to this ancient poet influenced her writing. Sharon O'Brien's argument includes the claim that: "In Sappho she [Cather] found a poet who celebrated the delights and agonies of love between women" (588). In 1907, during her years at University of Nebraska, Cather wrote a poem that mimicked Sappho's style. In *O Pioneers!* Cather depicts a scene between Marie and Alexandra in Sapphic symbolism. Jane Snyder declares that Sappho's rose imagery represents "[...] powerful, female-centered erotic images" (58). The "wild" roses connect sexuality to Marie (the running Bohemian woman). Additionally, the flaming roses indicate Marie's passion: "She seemed so easily excited, to kindle with a fierce little flame if one but breathed upon her" (92). Alexandra's breath allows the flame to exist. As an emblem of desire the passion exhibited by roses becomes synonymous with Marie. The union between Marie and the roses represent the "erotic images" central to Alexandra's passion and desire. As the rose and Marie conflate, no longer distinguishable, Marie becomes the desirable subject. Led to the roses by Marie, Alexandra's longing only comes to fruition in her companion's presence.

Marie takes Alexandra to a place protected from masculinity (remember, Carl's character lacks essentialized masculine characteristics) and heterosexuality. The white mulberry tree designates a space that rejects compulsory male and female coupling through the tree's capability to fertilize itself (see Watson and Mylius, 1751). The tree's hermaphroditism negates gendered categories and denies the necessity of heterosexual intercourse in order to reproduce. Through the sign of the tree Cather challenges the notion that sex automatically involves a man and a woman and plays upon Foucault's "hermaphroditism of the soul" (43). Thus,

heterosexuality becomes obliterated and the homoerotic element found in Marie and Alexandra's relationship escalates through heterosexuality's symbolic removal.

The mulberry tree's history further enlightens Cather's application of the tree in connection to two important events in the narrative (the scene between Alexandra and Marie as well as the dual murder). The mulberry tree's roots reside in Asia, specifically China. Non-Western European individuals, portrayed as primitive, were associated with homosexuality because both were explained as insufficiently human. Sapphic primitivism, Robin Hackett's theory, links homosexuality to racial and pseudoscientific classifications that proliferated throughout Cather's lifetime. Richard Burton (Cather's contemporary and an author she responded to in college scholarship) conceptualized the Sotadic Zone. The zone includes a broad range of locales that include: "[...] various parts of the world [...] where homosexuality is 'an established racial institution'" (Hackett 137). These zones represent areas that spread from Greece (Sappho's home) to China (the mulberry tree's native land). Western thought perpetuated the belief that specific cultures did not discourage homosexuality: homosexuality's acceptance caused this population to expand in regions associated with the Sotadic Zone. Therefore, the (supposed) excessive prominence of homosexuality in "uncivilized" regions supported claims that both homosexuals and people of color represented degenerate humanity. Furthermore, Hackett associates Cather's cultural understanding of homosexuality as "unnatural" to mythic locations that liberate societal constraints. Cather constructs "the fantasy of the Orient as a space of sexual promise" (137). Thus, Cather's mulberry tree and the contrasted physical difference between Marie and Alexandra (an indication of racial mingling, yet another early twentieth century taboo) covertly connect them to the uninhibited land that enables sexual

freedom; Cather's strategy presents the opportunity to ingest her subtle textual queering through ethnic comparison, and her reference to places that allow sexual freedom.

When Carl and Alexandra arrive at Marie's farm she greets them: "She gave Alexandra's arm a little squeeze as she walked beside her. 'How nice your dress smells, Alexandra; you put rosemary leaves in your chest, like I told you'" (91). Marie passes the rose's passion from herself to Alexandra: the signification of desire only becomes possible when taken from Marie and placed onto Alexandra. The exchange between the women insinuates the women's intimacy and provides a foundation for the observations made by Carl. The reference to previous conversations identifies a history between the two women. Their history implies that their intimacies are not limited to one instance, and in the presence of Marie Alexandra becomes feminine. Her body exudes a flower filled scent.

Under the tree, Carl sits away from the two women which separates him from the women's action: "'You must have the seat, Alexandra. The grass would stain your dress,' the hostess insisted. She dropped down on the ground at Alexandra's side and tucked her feet under her. Carl sat at a little distance from the two women, his back to the wheatfield, and watched them" (91). The placement of Alexandra above Marie, and the flowered landscape, indicates their location in culture. Marie sits in nature (on the ground). Alexandra parts from the land (given the seat constructed by humanity) to show her inability to access the desire constructed as unnatural and denied by society. Culturally estranged from social naturalization, Alexandra is physically distanced from erotic love. Marie's placement in the land presents her as natural and therefore heterosexual; Alexandra's displacement from the earth and onto a human creation connects her to homosexuality (because of the belief that homosexual love equaled unnatural relations). Cather insists that the cultural laws that forbid homosexual love are structures

produced by societal inhibitors. Because Alexandra physically sits on the construction produced by humans she is forced to separate from Marie. The symbolic separation alludes to the societal boundaries that deny Alexandra fulfillment of her desire.

Cather transfers Carl's vision of the women onto the reader causing his impressions to become the instructed reaction placed upon the passive, feminized reader (Butler 148). The reader views the women through Carl's lens. The women become objects of speculation; a narrative mode that Judith Butler argues Cather employs through a masculine narrator: "Carl had never forgotten little Marie Tovesky's eyes, and he was glad to have an opportunity to study them. The brown iris, he found, was curiously slashed with yellow, the color of sunflower honey, or of old amber" (91-2). Cather's authorial direction: "[...] enables and conceals the workings of desire" (Butler 148). Rereading Marie and Alexandra's relationship, as reflected through a shifted gaze, produces a specific reaction to the women's connection; the narrator's view creates an infatuated Alexandra. Continuing, Butler addresses the issue of silence. The desire felt by Alexandra remains unnamed: "The prohibition that is said to work effectively to quell the articulation of lesbian sexuality in Cather's fiction is, I would argue, precisely the occasion of its constitution and exchange" (145). Thus, Alexandra's emotional subtlety represents Cather's subversion and implies the characters' feelings through actions and carefully crafted symbolism. The characters' unstated sentiments infuse the text while they, also, refuse restricted identification.

The impression Carl relays causes a particular view of the women to emerge from the text. Together, the women produce one feminine portrait; their images blend and entangle to inextricably combine their existences. The image magnifies the difference between the two

women while solidifying their relationship's eminence. The women's depiction, filled with sensual imagery, contrasts their colors next to one another through Carl's interpretations:

Alexandra took off her shade-hat and threw it on the ground. Marie picked it up and played with the white ribbons, twisting them about her brown fingers as she talked. They made a pretty picture in the strong sunlight, the leafy pattern surrounding them like a net; the Swedish woman so white and gold, kindly and amused, but armored in calm, and the alert brown one, her full lips parted, points of yellow light dancing in her eyes as she laughed and chattered (91).

Carl's presence validates the relationship between Marie and Alexandra through his attendance. Cather illuminates ("the strong sunlight," "the yellow light") and imparts the intricacies of the women's differences. She calculates minute details of physical appearance, and Carl facilitates a reading of Alexandra as amorous.

Hackett's analysis describes homoerotics through historical race representations and ethnic difference in order to exemplify homosexuality's textual presence and subjugated position. Cather employs ethnic differentiation to exemplify the prohibition against interracial and lesbian affairs; the character contrast incites a homoerotic reading. Hackett applies this notion to Alexandra, in the context of her spiritual dreams, to contend that: "Erotic force is racialized in *O Pioneers!* the powerful lover of Alexandra's fantasies is first 'yellow' and 'bronze' in contrast to Alexandra's 'gleaming white body'" (132). Noticeably, this comparison permeates Alexandra and Marie's images. Alexandra is described as "white and gold" next to Marie's yellow and brown. The ethnic differentiation between the women further confirms Hackett's theory that Cather utilizes physical difference to insinuate homosexual relationships. Additionally, Alexandra represents white womanhood: chaste and sexless. Alexandra becomes

figured as an insignia of society's invention of white women's sexuality, and, thus, she necessitates protection from racial and sexual impurity. Cather subverts this cultural perpetuation of gender and sexual standards because she writes divergent sexuality into Alexandra's character construction; Cather interjects queer sexuality into Alexandra's character through feminine/feminine desire.

Cather pairs gold with Alexandra to return to Sappho who invokes this color to describe the goddesses of love: "golden-crowned Aphrodite" (Groden 12). Because Cather depicts a golden Alexandra only in Marie's presence she suggests that Alexandra's feelings of romantic love exclusively emerge from this relationship. Clearly, Alexandra's platonic love for Carl does not emulate the white innocence infused with Aphrodite's gold when near Marie. Behind the color-contrasted women's images the natural backdrop, "the leafy *pattern* surrounding them like a net," suspends and protects them from the rest of the world (91, italics added). The freedom in the landscape provides an arena for Alexandra to escape from the cultural implications that impede her sexual release. The net's image in the landscape appears again when Emil comes upon Marie under the mulberry tree, and they consummate their love, but in this instance light breaks through the net and suggests a lack of natural protection: "Long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light" (174). For Emil and Marie, the trees act as false security and present the illusion that love rises above social consequences. Alexandra does not act on her desire. Therefore, Cather and Alexandra's unstated feelings remain protected from punishment.

Before the women disperse Carl comments on one woman's behavior: "'What a waste,' Carl reflected. 'She ought to be doing all that for a sweetheart. How awkwardly things come

about!” (92). This statement directly associates the relationship between the women as romantically founded rather than a friendship. The “she” Carl refers to appears to associate to Marie, but remains inexplicit. For Alexandra the relationship with Marie causes fulfillment; intimacy is absent in every other facet of Alexandra’s life. With Marie she maintains passion, excitement, and simultaneously adores the woman for their closeness and the feeling Marie ignites. Marie’s beauty awakens Alexandra’s admiration; an emotion that she could never muster toward men: “Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows. She had grown up in serious times” (136). This comment situates Alexandra’s feelings in a cultural context that viewed homosexuality as unnatural and impure: “serious times” deny sensations that do not conform to heteronormativity. Men do not provide the sentimentality, flirtation and attachment available to Alexandra through her relationship with Marie: “Alexandra came from the sitting-room and pinched Marie’s cheek playfully” (128). Alexandra touches Marie as she never does her masculine associates: an act of boundary crossing that transfers Alexandra from an autonomous to a unified zone, as she moves from distance to proximity.

Cather situates Marie, in the first few pages of the narrative, through the language of flowers: “[...] this city child was dressed in what was then called the ‘Kate Greenaway’ manner [...]” (8). Later, in a subsequent excursion to visit Marie, Alexandra brings Mrs. Lee to the woman’s home. Immediately, Mrs. Lee notices the pink geraniums that sit on the table: “My, a-an’t you gotta fine plants; such-a much flower. How you keep from freeze?” (128). In 1884 Kate Greenaway illustrated a book titled *The Language of Flowers*. The book includes the meaning of various flowers. Rose scented geraniums are defined as a sign of preference. Orange flowers (the flowers given to Alexandra by Carl) indicate charity and bridal festivities. Significantly, the orange flowers, that Alexandra cares little about, die: “Before he [Carl] left

California he sent me a box of orange flowers, but they didn't keep very well" (128).

Continuously, Cather compares Alexandra's friendship with Carl, one that lacks passion, to Alexandra's companionship with Marie—here evident in the flower symbolism.

When Mrs. Lee becomes tired Marie takes Alexandra to the attic to find crochet patterns. The women look through old boxes in an attempt to discover "patterns:" a word Cather uses four times in a two-page scene. Cather's repetition insists on the importance of patterns, symbolically in the attic, literally in her prose. In "The Novel Demeuble" Cather writes: "How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns [...] leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little [...]" (51). Cather declares that the old patterns should be thrown out. Alexandra and Marie attempt to find them, but get lost in emotion. The "physical sensations" become replaced by "emotions" in Cather's narrative. As Alexandra searches for the patterns she comes upon an item that belongs to Frank: "Alexandra went into the clothescloset. Presently she came back, holding a slender elastic yellow stick in her hand" (131). Ironically, Alexandra emerges from the closet holding a phallic symbol. In regards to irony Lee Edelman states that: "Queer theory, it follows, would constitute the site where the radical threat posed by irony, which heteronormative culture displaces onto the figure of the queer, is uncannily returned by queers who no longer disown but assume their figural identity as embodiments of the figuralization, and hence the disfiguration, of identity itself" (24). Thus, Cather's irony poses Alexandra as threatening identity through her exposure of gender's performative and constructed reality.

The conversation between Alexandra and Marie refers to the sexual relationship between Marie and Frank. Formerly, when their courtship began, Frank carried his cane and phallus

proudly. Frank tucks this piece of the past away along with his connection to “the old country” (131). Reflectively, Marie remembers Frank with his cane and pities the pride he finds in this item. It represents the initial desire that Marie forgets and loses over time. In contrast to Marie’s experience, Alexandra cannot understand the heterosexual desire between Marie and Frank because heterosexuality remains absent from her own experiences. Alexandra cannot comprehend heterosexual intercourse: “What in the world is this, Marie? You don’t mean to tell me Frank ever carried such a thing?” (131). Alexandra’s mockery is followed by Marie’s acknowledgement that she has forgotten the “thing”: “Marie blinked at it with astonishment and sat down on the floor. ‘Where did you find it? I didn’t know he had kept it. I haven’t seen it for years’” (131). The discussion continues as Alexandra laughs at the cane and the symbol’s importance, and particularly the hypermasculinity represented in Frank’s character: “Alexandra twirled the stick in her fingers and laughed. ‘He must have looked funny!’” (131). Unlike Alexandra’s ridicule of Frank’s patriarchal symbol, Marie takes Frank and his stick seriously: “Marie was thoughtful. ‘No, he didn’t really. It didn’t seem out of place’” (131). Cather displaces the cane, she moves it from Frank to Alexandra, and therefore destabilizes the identity the sign attempts to maintain.

The women’s conversation turns as Marie describes how she feels about Frank. She no longer believes she is the wife that Frank deserves, and she projects her dissatisfied feelings onto her husband. As a young woman she believed that Frank would fulfill her desire, her lack, and replace the initial masculine figure (seen earlier as her Uncle Joe). She expected that Frank could return her to a space of completeness. Marie’s presumptions fail and she continues to lack, and to, again, try and find unity she shifts her desire from Frank to a new subject, Emil. Marie continues to search to fill the void left at childhood when her separation from the real transpired.

She falsely believes a man (and his signifying phallus) will ultimately lead her beyond the lack she perpetually feels. Mistakenly, Marie attempts to place her feelings in the symbolic order, and to receive understanding from Alexandra. This move into language presents a problem for Alexandra who prefers to obliterate the structure and will consequently distance her from feeling through the act of “talking about such things” (132).

Alexandra’s sexual identification remains guarded in her mind’s layers as well as through Cather’s narrative contrivances. In a crucial moment Cather finely expresses Alexandra’s essence: “Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there [...]” (135). The account of Alexandra’s subconscious adds a complex understanding to her character representation. Her concealed emotions appear in metaphor; Alexandra’s veiled feelings are incomprehensible to those who refuse to conceive meaning from indirect indications: “There was about Alexandra something of the impervious calm of the fatalist, always disconcerting to very young people, who cannot feel that the heart lives at all unless it is still at the mercy of storms; unless its strings can scream to the touch of pain” (150). In direct response to Marie’s rejection of Alexandra’s physical touch this analogy positions Alexandra’s heart as subject to destruction, or fulfillment, based on Marie’s denial, or acceptance, of her desire. Tellingly, Cather expresses Alexandra’s sentiments through enigmatic language that signals that her actions and her emotions require attention to subtly: the feeling that is implied rather than directly stated. Again, to extend Cather’s theory on writing: “to interpret imaginatively the material and social investiture of their characters; to present their scene by suggestion rather than enumeration. The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (“The Novel Demeuble” 48-9). For Cather, simplification allows the reader’s thoughts and interpretation to

respond to the writing without the author eliciting one specific, easily discernable, response.

Now, I delve deeper into Alexandra's unconscious life. I evidence representations of spatial and emotional confinement found in Alexandra's dream sequences, her escape to the graveyard and the meaning apparent in her visit to Frank in jail; each instance leads to Alexandra's realization of her own confinement.

IV. ALEXANDRA'S UNCONSCIOUS: DREAMS, CONFINEMENT AND TRAUMA

Cather discloses the arbitrary relationship between the symbolic order and the excess prohibited by an accepted identity fantasy; Lee Edelman posits this as "[...] the fantasy, precisely, of form as such, of an order, an organization, that assures the stability of our identities as subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form" (7). When Alexandra confronts the discrepancy between reality, the imaginary and the real she must retreat to a prelinguistic form, death, or reconcile to live with the knowledge that identity is only ever a constructed falsity. The order, the organization is never fully coherent, real or autonomous. Alexandra's dreams and then her voyage to the graveyard each enable her to move beyond a social identity and into queer terrain, for Jagose identity: "[...] is an effect of identification with and against others: being ongoing, and always incomplete, it is a process rather than a property" (79). The queer steps away from the belief in an autonomous self and instead recognizes that identity lives, relationally, inside language and social structures.

The intermediary space, the imaginary, is presented through a fantasy (a dream) that reoccurs throughout Alexandra's life. The dream inhabits an innocent, childlike state where the structured order necessitated through adult's symbolic exchange, and full normative acceptance, still remains in development. John Swift claims that, in Cather's work, "That 'thing' is the

speechless desire at the foundation of the unconscious, the child's desire, unrepresentable but unforgotten: the 'thing not named'" (222-3). I interpret one small piece, the dreams, in *O Pioneers!* to mark the relationship between childhood freedom and adult stasis that comes to express Cather's character's layered psyches. Alexandra's dreams indicate her desire to escape the social, heterosexual and patriarchal, order that demands she use language to make meaning in the dominant ideology's terms.

After Alexandra visits Emil's grave she pointedly remarks on the experience to Ivar: death, the prelinguistic, the real seems like blissful escape from the pain trauma creates. To avoid the real Alexandra designs to visit Frank in jail, and do all she can to free him. The moments with Frank cause Alexandra to realize the terror associated with a lack of language and the state beyond expression. Although, after she leaves Frank she compares their similar states: "Alexandra thought of how she and Frank had been wrecked by the same storm and of how, although she could come out into the sunlight, she had not much more left in her life than he" (202). Despite her reconcile to hopelessness, Alexandra turns away from her drive to embrace the real. Through her interaction with Frank she realizes her own lack, not in language, but freedom, and learns the symbolic order's power. Alexandra becomes aware that she can live queerly through a "resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions [...]" (Edelman 18). The exposure to Frank allows Alexandra to see the constructed façade identity continues and to refuse to invest herself in false reality: she maintains her capacity to return to language with new knowledge to guide her.

Alexandra's characterization includes a vast discrepancy between the moments that engage her with the symbolic order and the feelings and desires she cannot to recognize, or

identify, positively, in language. Metaphorically, Alexandra's desire emulates the land. Her feelings remain estranged from the meaning available in language, and they exist buried beneath the surface: "She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun" (47). Cather acknowledges the disparate layers created in Alexandra's character and figures these elements in her to create a relationship between the words written on the page and the inexplicit inner depth of the character. Two waves envelop Alexandra and motivate her actions. She desires to live in a way that culture deems righteous and also wants to follow her personal desires despite cultural persecution: "She was never very communicative about her own affairs" (126). Rarely do Alexandra's disparate tracts detangle as the novel progresses, but when the trauma of Maria and Emil's death shatters Alexandra's surface security she moves to immerse in the "real:" the unnamable place where her heart resides. Julia Kristeva describes the real as "[...] what cannot be symbolized" (111). This includes feelings, thoughts and the unconscious, aspects that Cather utilizes language to obtain. Although she recognizes that the symbolic cannot conceptualize these inner components accurately Cather effectively pictures the imaginary so that a transfer from character to reader can occur. To reach this aim, Cather builds Alexandra's imaginary existence.

Like much of Alexandra's life, her dreams indicate a serious pull between safe confinement (found in her home) and fleeting, flying away to discover a person outside the identity stagnated by the divide's community. The two dream sequences fluctuate between Alexandra's draw toward the safety confinement offers and away from the stifled order her society continues. The imagery present in the dream fantasies evidences a dichotomy between enclosure and freedom, and the elements that allow or prohibit each possibility. John Swift's

article, “Cather, Freudianism, and Freud,” establishes a relationship between Freud and Cather. Swift argues that Cather expressed disdain for Americanized psychoanalysis and refused to read Sigmund Freud, yet he magnifies the ineffable similarities between the two authors: “I felt at once that I had come upon a writer [Cather] who had both access to the great unconscious world that Freud had disclosed—the kingdom of the irrational, the infantile, the prelinguistic—and the power to summon its presence on the page” (220). Exactly, and, I argue, the sentiments that underlie this space in *O Pioneers!* are the issues with identifiers that presuppose a tangible relationship between the subject “I” and an actual, *real*, expressed identity. Cather situates the imaginary and the real in her narrative to represent the disjunction between reality and the self to show that there is never a unified “I” capable of full disclosure.

Freud’s 1916 work on dreams⁴ prompts a unique entrance into Alexandra’s fantasies. Although Alexandra remains a character in a novel her development indicates a societal critique on the part of Cather. In Freud’s seventh lecture “Manifest Content and Latent Thoughts” he defines the dream-element: “[...] it is not in itself a primary and essential thing, a ‘thought proper,’ but a substitute for something else unknown to the person concerned [...] a substitute for something the knowledge of which is indeed possessed by the dreamer but is inaccessible to him” (102). Cather creates the dream sequence in a manner that weaves a perplexing inaccessible element into Alexandra’s character and, thus, her dreams read as an extension of her unconscious realizations about herself and the world around her. Importantly, the figure is a man. He represents patriarchy’s power and naturalized heterosexual desire. The figure’s

⁴ The use of Freud stems from two primary purposes: first, the fact that he and Cather wrote during the same period in history, and second because of his focus (much like Cather’s) on the unconscious. Specifically, the individual’s creation of an unconscious as a method to cope with the repressions instated by societal norms. For Freud, dreams serve as an entrance to understand unconscious desires.

strength conceptualizes the unconquerable cultural power that naturalizes masculine (phallic) domination and hetero-sexual love.

In two instances this vision, engendered in Alexandra's childhood, emerges. The first description of this dream directly follows a pronouncement that indicates Alexandra's rationality and lack of heterosexual desire: "She had never been in love [understood as heterosexual], she had never indulged in sentimental reveries" (137). Cather then describes Alexandra's opinion that men represent "work-fellows." The stark contrast between this intense lack of sexual desire, directed towards masculinity, casts itself against the fantasy figure that carries her away from the symbolic order and takes her to the imaginary:

Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields. After such a reverie she would rise hastily, angry with herself [...] no man on the Divide could have carried very far (137).

This image does not equate to a person among Alexandra's social contacts, but rather conceals her unconscious feelings and indicates a discrepancy between the dream image and reality.

Melissa Ryan reads Alexandra's dreams in the context of Indian removal (from both Cather's novel and the settlements she describes), but first she acknowledges the readings preceding her own. The dream sequence retains a decidedly negative tone: "As several critics have pointed

out, the threat of this figure is linked to his emphatic heterosexuality (in contrast to the lesbian eroticism of Alexandra's relation to the land). Indeed, he is the land bodied forth in masculine sexual aggression [...]" (294). I, likewise, suggest that the dream embodies masculinity, but also that the dream creates an unconscious (to the text and the character) that develops the importance of Alexandra's placement in a culture that desires symbolic stability.

The figure symbolically captures Alexandra's death drive:⁵ a return to the real where the differentiation between the self and all others collapses and the need to use language to create meaning becomes obliterated. Consequently, Alexandra feels normalized because she is no longer trapped by the structure the symbolic order mandates. Arnold Cooper delineates the mechanisms used to negotiate an individual's conflict between cultural personas (and identity) and their "deviant" desires. In this situation, a disparity arises between conscious self-identification and the unconscious knowledge of disunity. This takes place by "exploring mechanisms of splitting, disavowal, and denial—alternative techniques for maintaining unacceptable thoughts and desires within consciousness, but not within awareness as part of the self" (278). Alexandra's two dream sequences indicate this denial: a device that allows her to play out a fantasy that returns her to the oceanic feeling (associated with infancy and death) and, therefore, removes her from the socially normative behavior that places an expected identity upon her. Thus, the dream figure becomes a paternal (and patriarchal) emblem. He represents a person who can carry her away, as her parents once did, as if a part of her, before she could differentiate between herself and the other, from a regulated symbolic system.

The trauma the dual deaths induce heightens Alexandra's drive to escape the symbolic order. She embraces the death drive as she wanders to the graveyard:

⁵ In psychoanalysis, the death drive is the realization that death will come and a desire to reach that end.

Ivar, I think it has done me good to get cold clear through like this, once. I don't believe I shall suffer so much any more. When you get so near the dead, they seem more real than the living. Worldly thoughts leave one. Ever since Emil died, I've suffered so when it rained. Now that I've been out in it with him, I shan't dread it. After you once get cold clear through, the feeling of the rain on you is sweet. It seems to bring back feelings you had when you were a baby. It carries you back into the dark, before you were born; you can't see things, but they come to you, somehow, and you know them and aren't afraid of them. Maybe it's like that with the dead. If they feel anything at all, it's the old things, before the were born, that comfort people like the feeling of their own bed does when they are little (190-1).

Rain begins to fall and Signa enlists Ivar to save the "mistress" from the storm. After he retrieves Alexandra from her attempted passage to a place outside symbols she reflects on her desire to retrieve oneness with the world. This revelation provides Alexandra with the knowledge that entrance into the symbolic order necessitates a removal from closeness to the land, and to the once unified self. Through her movement towards death Alexandra closes in on the real, and an oceanic feeling sweeps over her (the rain is certainly important in this moment). The vice associated with "worldly thoughts" becomes a necessary factor for the living and also a detriment to the ecstatic feeling found only in infancy and death. These two positions do not mandate symbolic exchange.

Previous to Ivar's venture to locate Alexandra he and Signa discuss his choice not to wear shoes. The theme of bare feet, in *O Pioneers!*, grasps critical attention. Many scholars interpret this emblem, and they offer an interpretive range. Although my discussion does not explicitly enter this discourse, I include Lindemann's reading because she suggests that Ivar's

behavior connects to Signa's performance relative to Alexandra. Ivar explains, to Signa, his one freedom from bodily restraint: "It is for the indulgence of the body. From my youth up I have had a strong, rebellious body, and have been subject to every kind of temptation. Even in age my temptations are prolonged. It was necessary to make some allowances; and the feet, as I understand it, are free members [...] I indulge them without harm to any one [...]" (189). The feet's freedom acknowledges Ivar's culturally and self-induced prohibitions. When Alexandra returns from her quest toward the real Signa cares for her by giving her feet a bath: "She [Signa] undressed Alexandra and gave her a hot footbath [...]" (191). As Lindemann notes, this action is "particularly appropriate, in view of what Ivar has recently told her about feet" (38). This phrase posits the importance of Signa's "appropriate" boundary crossing; she embraces the one bodily location that does not necessitate restraint from physical proximity. Ivar gives license for Signa to engage in a behavior that is established as queer by the homogenized population in the divide.

The interaction between Signa and Alexandra facilitates the second description of Alexandra's perpetual dream. The placement of the dream indicates Alexandra's desire to remove herself from the cultural order that prohibits desire, and simultaneously instigates her resolve to free Frank from the physical confines of jail. To return to the fantasy, the figure arrives in Alexandra's imagination following her desire to leave her body and return to a position that does not weigh down her existence with meanings: "As she lay alone in the dark, it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life. All the physical operations of life seemed difficult and painful. She longed to be free from her own body, which ached and was so heavy. And longing itself was heavy: she yearned to be free of that" (191). In this desperate state Alexandra again imagines the dream figure. She feels that he carries her away.

His strong foundation embodies the cultural inclination to create a natural origin that Alexandra feels she must succumb to:

[...] she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by some one very strong. He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself was very well. Then she went to sleep (191-2).

In comparison to Marie's dream about Emil, one she wakes to find in reality, Alexandra's dreams include images and symbols that substitute and leave the dream content open to interpretation. Surely, the land infuses the dream, as the background the dream figure falls against and the place the two descend into, but the fantasy figure, the location, presentation and the figure's movement (and at moments Alexandra's) in the sequence prove consequential as well. Alexandra's dreams come to her as she lay in her room; Freud notes this metaphorical significance: "[...] the room came to symbolize woman on account of its property of enclosing within it the human being" (145). The trapped feeling Alexandra associates with community expectation confines her to a place she wishes to escape. The figure in her dreams carries her into the landscape, and away from the "prison house" her room represents. A particular type of

journey, but a voyage nonetheless, designates Alexandra's resign to death: "Going away on a journey stands in dreams for dying [...]" (Freud 144). Therefore, the dream stands for the stifling felt by Alexandra and her knowledge that the only way to escape the feelings brought on by trauma and confinement is death, or an unattainable prelinguistic state. The figure represents the real found in Alexandra's imaginary consciousness. Ultimately, the image will take her away from the symbolic order, and he allows her to return to the infantile position of immersion with all that surrounds her. The struggles that her desires produce will escape the confines of her body. Alexandra sees the figure clearly for the first time; she realizes the societal compulsions that restrict her. The affinity she feels to Frank comes from her recognition that they share a mutual experience of confinement and physical constraint.

Cather describes the reasons behind Frank's unhappiness in life and suggests the reasons behind the empathy Alexandra extends to him: "His unhappy temperament was like a cage; he could never get out of it; and he felt that other people, his wife in particular, must have put him there" (176). Frank's temperament, he believes, derives from his social surroundings. Comparatively, Alexandra's emotions exist on an unconscious level, she rarely expresses her discontent, but her dreams indicate an underlying unhappiness. As Frank retreats from the mulberry tree, the site of his three gunshots, he attempts to blame Marie for his actions. He implicates her and their neighbors for his discontent: "He wanted his wife to resent that he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative people; but she had seemed to find the people quite good enough [...] he wanted her to feel that life was as ugly and unjust as he felt it" (179). Frank's sentiments encompass the negativity Alexandra initially feels towards Frank, but when she acknowledges her own discontent she attempts to free him from his literal prison cage.

Alexandra, knowing that she may only free herself in death, reconciles to assist the only one she can, Frank. In the mourning process, described by Dominick LaCapra, the subject who faces trauma attempts to regain order through blame. Alexandra internalizes the blame and projects it on Marie to locate and ameliorate the negative feelings brought on by the deaths. According to LaCapra, a subject presented with a trauma seeks a cure, but:

Any 'cure' could be deceptive, and avoidance of this anxiety is one basis for the typical projection of blame or a putative loss onto identifiable others, thereby inviting the generation of scapegoating or sacrificial scenarios. In converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made 'us' lose. To regain it, therefore, one must somehow get rid of or eliminate those others—or perhaps that sinful other in oneself (183).

For Alexandra's character the blame locates itself on her as well as Marie. The "sinful other" in Alexandra represents her latent desire and her inability to reconcile her unconscious desires with those prescribed to her through social order. The trauma becomes the event that tears apart her perceived unity, and her belief in personal security. Through the loss, Alexandra is presented with portions of herself that she would rather keep undisclosed. In an effort to recover the perception of unity, she travels to Frank to recreate wholeness and justice. Alexandra re-places the blame on herself for the knowledge of the unconscious desires that struck her through trauma. She blames Marie for destroying her stability because Marie embodies Alexandra's social sin.

In the days following Alexandra's ripened want of peace and unity (feelings she imagines only babies and the dead can attain) she decides to visit Frank in the penitentiary. The clarity

brought on by her voyage to the graveyard, and the vision of the figure from her dreams, produce a realization of her position in the world, and that the confinement she feels will not disappear. The effort to free Frank stems from Alexandra's wish to alleviate her own imprisonment, but she cannot change her position so instead she invests in changing Frank's situation: "Frank was the only one, Alexandra told herself, for whom anything could be done" (192). Alexandra believes that through proximity to Frank she can accept her own position as tolerable by comparison. The order of her world can again feel safe rather than confined. When Alexandra meets with Frank this enables her to return to the symbolic order, the perceived unity and identity she desperately attempts to maintain, by accepting him as that which she is not. Alexandra confronts the confinement she fears, as expressed in her dreams, to relieve her guilt and recreate the identity illusion. But, instead, she finds that Frank's literal confinement supports the presence of the imaginary and the real.

Upon reaching the penitentiary Alexandra waits and then sits across from Frank. He can hardly articulate himself. The loss of hair is Frank's rationale for his lack of English linguistic skills: "'I no can t'ink without my hair,' he complained. 'I forget English. We not talk here, except swear'" (199). Frank, confined, reduced to a number (1037) and "somehow, not altogether human," becomes the result of failing to uphold social and legal mandates (200). Therefore, Alexandra must re-inscribe herself in the social order to avoid reaching Frank's position (whether inside or beyond the prison gates). Alexandra resolutely determines to free Frank from confinement. Through this possibility, she perceives a power in her ability to feel a false wholeness. There remains a power in her capability to leave the real behind and become a regulated subject. She recognizes her loss, but resolves to move away from the real and into deceptive security again.

Cather relies on her structural aesthetic to embody the symbolic, imaginary and real in Alexandra's character. Alexandra lives in confinement and yet desires to locate a space beyond the symbolic, a locale that facilitates the queer to emerge. The trauma, Alexandra's dreams and her visit to Frank each construct her encounters with unconscious desires and the stark reality that her identity depends upon the symbolic and social order. Although many critics mention Alexandra's dreams as well as Cather's influential unconscious element, in my concluding chapter, I combine Alexandra's queer positionality to her disavowal of the traditional marriage plot to connect these themes to her ultimate refusal to reproduce false identity structures; she wants to feel and live beyond the terror of confinement and to merge the real with reality to accept her excess and move into queer zones.

V. ALEXANDRA AND CARL QUEER THE MARRIAGE PLOT

In this final chapter I associate Alexandra's portrayal as Emil's surrogate mother, then to her position as childless future wife, to Cather's political commentary on the, still, prevalent reproductive futurism that produces a mythic center based on the future, embodied in the child. Emil must die to facilitate Alexandra's shift from a reliance on future possibilities to a queer stance that rejects reproductive futurism. Lee Edelman describes this cultural phenomenon, and how the queer denies this naturalization, through his definitional word pairing: "reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). I relate this concept to Cather's early commentary on familial relationships because she denies this mandate in Alexandra. Therefore, Cather displays the queer through an individual who escapes reproductive futurism and who rejects the all

importance of the child. For Edelman, a lack of engagement with reproductive futurism defines queer in those who do not accept this ideology: “Indeed, at the heart of my polemical engagement with the cultural text of politics and the politics of cultural texts lies a simple provocation: that *queerness* names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3). I trace Alexandra’s growth, the disavowal of reproductive futurism that makes her queer, and the shift that leaves her with a queer partnership and outside those who are “fighting for the children.”

When Carl surprises Alexandra with his return to Hanover Lou and Oscar immediately judge him, as strange, but when they fear that Alexandra and Carl will marry they step further and condemn her. The brothers use normative power and influence as a mechanism to assure stasis. For Lou and Oscar, Carl appears to desire Alexandra’s capital, but his primary threat resides in his failure to meet the gender norms that insist that masculine figures care for their feminine counterparts, Lou exclaims: “Alexandra! Can’t you see he’s just a tramp and he’s after your money? He want to be taken care of, he does!” (111). As the two brothers leave their sister they reflect on Alexandra’s perceived dissent from normative marriage rituals, and Oscar tells Lou that “[...] she is old enough to know better, and she is. If she was going to marry, she ought to done it long ago, and not go making a fool of herself now” (115). They wish to protect their property, but also reproduce marriage as an institution that revolves around the child. Children Alexandra is presumably too old to have. Additionally, Lou and Oscar wish to procure her estate for their own offspring—the token of their reproductive futurism. The power Oscar and Lou rely on stems from what Foucault designates as “agencies of regulation,” further demarcated through positive connotations: “Faced with a myriad of clashing forces, these great forms of power

functioned as a principle of right that transcended all the heterogeneous claims, manifesting the triple distinction of forming a unitary regime, of identifying its will with the law, and of acting through mechanisms of interdiction and sanction” (87). Lou and Oscar consistently attempt to reinstate this order. They replicate this power dynamic through reliance on communal consensus, associations with the law and authoritative prohibition supported by the majority’s approval.

Alexandra’s interactions with her brothers lead her to seek affirmation from Emil. Outwardly he accepts her choices, but he privately reflects on her seemingly absurd overture: “He felt that there was something indecorous in her proposal, and she did seem to him somewhat ridiculous. There was trouble enough in the world, he reflected, as he threw himself upon his bed, without people who were forty years old imagining they wanted to get married” (119). The marriage itself does not pose a problem, but rather the fact that her marriage abstains from a premise that promises reproductive futurism. Based on Lou and Oscar’s commentary, Carl decides to leave Hanover and return in a year when he’s achieved monetary success; Alexandra opposes his decision: “I wonder why I have been permitted to prosper, if it is only to take my friends away from me” (122). Alexandra disdains propriety and instead favors friendship. Emil’s death occurs in Carl’s absence and when the tragic news reaches him it catalyzes a return to his friend.

The years that lead to Emil’s death position him as Alexandra’s child (although, importantly not her child, but a younger brother), her futurism emblem. Initially, Alexandra, in a discussion with Carl, connects this ideological tradition to her father: “I’m sure it was to have sons like Emil, and to give them a chance, that father left the old country” (79). The ideals imbedded in these words speak to the thoroughly ingrained idea that: “For the social order exists

to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due” (Edelman 11). Furthermore, Alexandra transfers what she believes were her father’s motives to her own success via Emil: “He is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that’s what I’ve worked for” (79). Not her own satisfaction, but the rewards reaped from witness to Emil’s freedom. Although, at this point, neither can escape the heterosexual, normative, thrust toward marriage and reproductive futurism. Emil’s dearest friend Amedee best encompasses the drive to perpetuate order for the child’s moral interest. This, coincidentally, combines with Amedee’s hyper-heterosexuality, “much more boyish in appearance” than Emil, and his strict abidance by the marriage plot: “Oh, Emil, you wanna get married right off quick! It’s the greatest thing ever!” (107). Amedee excitedly hopes for the same end he experiences, although he will die before the novel’s close, and reinforces these words with his institutional commitment to the child’s future: “‘I never did know a boy twenty-two years old before that didn’t have no girl. You wanna be a priest, maybe? Not-a for me!’ Amedee swaggered. ‘I bring many good Catholics into the world, I hope, and that’s a way I help the Church’” (107). In response, Emil contemplates Amedee’s “natural” love in a societal context that views only love like Amedee’s as prolific: “He liked to see and think about Amedee’s sunny, natural, happy love” (109). Amedee’s love is symbolically and socially verified. Amedee, Lou and Oscar reinstate the normative heterosexual myth that Alexandra and Carl come to queerly reject.

When Carl and Alexandra ground their relationship in a pact that hinges on their queer lives. Carl explains his experience, as a “kind,” to Alexandra: “I waste a lot of time pretending to people, and the joke of it is, I don’t think I ever deceive any one. There are too many of my kind; people know us on sight” (82). The homosexuality this statement links to is affirmed in

Foucault's analysis: "[...] since sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it—as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom—in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior" (44). The surveillance Carl encounters position him as suspect, queer, and othered. Further, Carl describes a negative response to his kind: "We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theatres. We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder" (83). Then, Cather extends Carl's queer vantage point to Alexandra, "He knew that she understood what he meant. At last she said slowly, 'And yet I would rather have Emil grow up like that than like his two brothers. We pay a high rent, too, though we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here'" (83). The resolute "we" places Alexandra in Carl's queer category and acknowledges their mutual rivalry against normative regimes.

O Pioneers! ends when Carl returns and reunites with Alexandra. Together they contemplate the deaths that devastated Alexandra and forge forward, yet they leave reproductive futurism behind: "Suppose I do will my land to their [Lou and Oscar's] children, what difference will that make? The land belongs to the future, Carl; that's the way it seems to me. How many of the names on the county clerk's plat will be there in fifty years? I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it for a little while" (209). Alexandra's sentiments move the future away from the children and into an abstract sphere that views existence as temporal. She focuses on the present and away from the demand to rely on the reproductive futurism evident in her brothers' desire to control her life for their children's sake. The death drive found in her dream sequence shifts to a queer death drive, she tells Carl that, "I had a dream before I went to Lincoln—But I will tell you about that afterward, after we

are married. It will never come true, now, in the way I thought it might” (209). Alexandra does exactly what Edelman requests; she kills the future instead of choosing the death her dream suggests. To allow excess in life, she becomes “[...] what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is the willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here” (31).

Ultimately, Cather dispels the marriage plot; she defines the marriage between Carl and Alexandra as one beyond normative patterns, and Alexandra announces this to Carl: “I think we shall be very happy. I think when friends marry, they are safe” (209). Thus, the marriage lives outside prescriptive bounds and accepts the queer through a “dismantling of futurism” (Edelman 28). Alexandra and Carl’s “radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (Edelman 6) is enacted through their withdraw from social spheres that negate the queer. Only in each other, and the land, do Carl and Alexandra find solace to recognize the false disunity identity represents. Together, they look toward a future with no children in mind.

My project follows Cather’s narrative through the character Alexandra to interject the subtle queering that takes place throughout the novel. I traced Alexandra’s trajectory to show the disparity between the internal self and the external subject, and to promote a reading that leaves the normative behind. I focused on the theoretical tones that challenge identity and I avow Cather for her innovative approach to reality as a construct that attempts to fix a unified, natural identity. The fissures, symbols, as well as the unconscious elements in *O Pioneers!* serve to shatter individual autonomy. She frees Alexandra from social order through trauma and dependence on characters (like Frank and Carl) that allow her to recognize that as a subject she can never be real. I extend Cather scholarship through readings of the mulberry tree,

Alexandra's relational alliances, her dreams, and I introduce reproductive futurism to Cather's work. Each element continues to queer and re-structure identity's importance in Cather's fiction.

The themes I address are evidenced throughout Cather's writings, and extend beyond my analysis. Sapphic primitivism declares itself in Marie's "mechanical toy, a Turkish lady" a token Carl remembers when he and Alexandra visit the Shabata's (93). The wheat and corn offer another symbolic entry, and Cather's use of light demands later attention. I see an opportunity to, further, connect Cather to the unconscious through her choice to give Alexandra the patrilineal name Bergson. On September 12, 1912 she references the philosopher Henri Bergson in a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Bergson, an author who often focused on the unconscious and extended psychological discourse, proves Cather's meaningful choice to borrow his name as a gift to her protagonist. In a conversation with her brothers Alexandra tells them: "I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was," but Cather did make this choice and the consequences of her precise selections guide the queer in her prose (114). Outside *O Pioneers!*, Cather's queer geography strongly motivates *The Professor's House* both in Godfrey St. Peter's almost empty home, and in Tom Outland's discovery of an ancient, desolate town. Location always plays extreme importance in Cather's prairie novels, but not at the detriment to her character development. Cather's work reinstates her commitment to the unconscious. She develops the rich inner lives of her characters as they struggle with identity and recognize the normative positions culture desires they maintain.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Book History Reader*. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds. London: Routledge, 2002. 221-24.
- Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. "'Dangerous Crossing': Willa Cather's Masculine Names." *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 143-166.
- Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!* New York: Penguin Books, 1989.
- "The Novel Demeuble." *Not Under Forty*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936. 43-51.
- Cooper, Arnold. "The Changing Psychoanalytic Model of the Mind." *Whose Freud?* Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch, eds. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 275-80.
- Dean, Tim. *Beyond Sexuality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1963.
- Goldberg, Jonathan. *Willa Cather and Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Greenaway, Kate. *The Language of Flowers*. London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1884.
- Groden, Suzy Q. trans. *The Poems of Sappho*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966.
- Hackett, Robin. *Sapphic Primitivism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004.
- Herring, Scott. "Catherian Friendship; or, How Not to do the History of Homosexuality."

- Modern Fiction Studies* 52.1 (Spring 2006): 66-91.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York UP, 1996.
- Kinnison, Dana K. "Cather's O Pioneers!" *Explicator* 58.2 (Winter 2000): 97-98.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Bruce Fink, trans. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "Reflections on Trauma, Absence, and Loss." *Whose Freud*. Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch, eds. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 178-204.
- Lindemann, Marilee. *Willa Cather: Queering America*. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Nealon, Christopher. "Affect Genealogy: Feeling and Affliction in Willa Cather." *American Literature* 69.1 (March 1997): 5-37.
- O'Brien, Sharon. "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer." *Signs* 9.4 (Summer 1984): 576-599.
- Ryan, Melissa. "The Enclosure of America: Civilization and Confinement in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" *American Literature* 75.2 (June 2003): 275-303.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. "Nature of the Linguistic Sign." *The Critical Tradition*. David H. Richter, ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 842-851.
- Sedgwick, Eve. "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88.1 (Winter 1989): 53-72.
- Swift, John. "Cather, Freudianism, and Freud." *Cather Studies* 7 (2007): 212-229.
- Watson, W. and Mr. Mylius. "Some Observations upon the Sex of Flowers by W. Watson, F.R.S. Occasioned by a Letter upon the Same Subject, by Mr. Mylius of Berlin." *Philosophical Transactions (1683-1775)* 47 (1751-1752): 169-183.
- Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Palgrave, 2004.