Unsettling nature at the frontier| Nature, narrative, and female empowerment in Willa Cather's "O Pioneers!" and Mourning Dove's "Cogewea, the Half-Blood"

Erin E. Hendel
The University of Montana

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UNSETTLING NATURE AT THE FRONTIER: NATURE, NARRATIVE, AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!* AND MOURNING DOVE'S *COGEWEA, THE HALF-BLOOD*

by

Erin E. Hendel

B.A. Grinnell College 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2006

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
Unsettling Nature at the Frontier: Nature, Narrative, and Female Empowerment in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*

Chairperson: Jill Bergman

The American frontier has long been regarded as a mythical zone of adventure where a lone man could encounter wilderness and remake himself. Many male authors used the frontier as a place to shake off social boundaries. Female writers, too, attempted to represent mythic frontier landscapes, seeking an opportunity to escape stratified gender roles. However, women attempting to write their way into empowering stories of the self-made man on the frontier occupied an uncomfortable relationship with the tropes that represented the landscape of the frontier. Can a woman “penetrate” a feminized landscape? Despite these limitations, women did write themselves into the frontier story, changing its terms as they wrote. In this project, I engage perspectives from feminist, ecocritical and Native American literary theories to explore the ways in which two novels of the first decades of the twentieth re-wrote women into the story of frontier settlement: Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea*. In radically different ways, these two novels enter into a dialogue with the dominant frontier narrative, both revising and reinscribing some of its most persistent tropes.

In engaging frontier discourses at a time when the closing of the frontier had recently contributed to a national identity crisis—*O, Pioneers!* was published in 1913; *Cogewea* was written in 1912-1914 but not published until much later—these novels address some fundamental questions of national origins, though they do so from radically different perspectives. Mourning Dove’s novel makes a case for Native American agency and historicity, even while assimilationist pressures mounted. Cather’s novel presents a frontier narrative that critiques the violence of settlement and presents an alternative, feminine pioneer. Both texts center on active female characters who challenge the place dictated for them by society. Both authors do radical work toward creating a more inclusive account of the frontier, challenging the monolithic narrative of masculine frontier progress by revising and re-imagining relationships between nature and culture through their strong female protagonists. By revising the terms of the relationship between nature and culture, the grounds on which these narratives take place, both novels create a more inclusive vision of the frontier.
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Chapter 1

Nature in American Frontier Literature

Since Europeans first set foot upon the North American shore, writers have sung praises of the continent as a special place, a place unique in its diverse geography and accommodating landscape, a place for wider expression of self, a place that had, above all, free and open land. The trope of American uniqueness as tied to its open landscape persists to this day. A similarly persistent trope is the representation of the land as a female body. Arguably, one of the most significant features of the United States was the great push for Euro-American settlement in these presumably empty spaces, the penetration of the “virgin land.” The female body inscribed in the landscape simultaneously invites and resists such penetration. Yet even as women’s bodies were equated with the wild landscape, women’s place was regarded as largely confined to the domestic spaces of settled society, cut off from the active, masculine work of pushing the nation into the frontier. In this reading, the process of nation-building on the frontier was a form of romance—albeit a conflicted and sometimes violent one—between pioneering men and a feminized landscape. The trope of the landscape as empty, virgin territory also denied the presence of Native American societies. These related tropes highlight some of the complicated relationships between nation, gender, and nature that intertwine with questions of race and class in a complex network of ideologies surrounding the frontier.

Just as American male writers saw in the frontier an opportunity for remaking the self, so did some American female writers. Female writers attempted to enter the mythic,
wide-open frontier landscapes seeking an opportunity to escape the bounds of stratified social roles. In some cases, simple language barred the way. Can a woman “penetrate” the “virgin soil”? How does a woman respond to the call, “Go West, young man!”? Women attempting to write their way into empowering stories of the self-made man on the frontier were forced into an uncomfortable relationship with the tropes that represented the landscape of the frontier. And yet women did write themselves into the frontier story, changing its terms as they wrote. In this project, I engage perspectives from feminist, ecocritical and Native American literary theories to explore the ways in which two novels of the first decades of the twentieth re-wrote women into the story of frontier settlement: Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea, The Half-Blood, a Narrative of the Great Montana Cattle Range*. In radically different ways, these two novels enter into a dialogue with the dominant frontier narrative, both revising and reinscribing some of its dominant tropes.

Since the publication of *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984) Annette Kolodny’s landmark studies of the relationship between gender and environment in American literature, a number of feminist critics have worked to understand the links between women and nature in the American literary imagination. In *The Lay of the Land*, Kolodny examines the way in which Euro-American depictions of the American landscape repeat the trope of land-as-woman. From the earliest explorer’s journals and illustrations, the “new” landscape is depicted as a welcoming, if wild, woman. This woman is passive and accommodating, fulfilling all of men’s needs even as she shapes and disciplines them, much like a mother. Savage mother, virgin territory,
savage virgin… all of these tropes persist throughout representations of the landscape.

Kolodny seeks the literary and historical roots of the American “pastoral impulse,” the “yearning to know and respond to the landscape as feminine” (8). She refers to literary and everyday understandings of the new world land, largely from the male perspective, trying to understand how the land became layered with feminine qualities. Male writers like James Fenimore Cooper describe the land as maternal, womb-like, yet, paradoxically a place to be penetrated and mastered. While this understanding has many psychological consequences for men and for the landscape, these tropes effectively give women no way to act as agents in the new land.

Kolodny explores how women reacted to these tropes in The Land Before Her, where she argues that “the psychosexual dynamic of a virginal paradise meant… that real flesh-and-blood women—at least metaphorically—were dispossessed of paradise.” She goes on to note that Euro-American women “struggled to find some alternate set of images through which to make their own unique accommodation to the strange and sometimes forbidding New World landscape” (3). By the time women reached Midwestern and Western landscapes, she argues, men’s fantasies were well entrenched:

Women’s fantasies about the west took shape within a culture in which men’s fantasies had already attained the status of cultural myth and at a time when women’s sphere was being progressively delimited to home and family. What women eventually projected onto the prairie garden, therefore, were idealizing and corrective configurations drawn from the spheres in which their culture had allowed them imaginative play. (12)

In this understanding of women’s relationships with the landscape, women relate to the wilderness by converting a small portion of it into a garden, a space easily identified with the domestic. In this manner, women could remain within the realms of cultural
comprehensibility and their culturally accepted social roles while still forming a relationship with the landscape.

In narratives driven by the pastoral impulse, women have few choices for identification. They may identify with mothering nature or with virgin nature, but not with the penetrating male figure. A further complication for women’s agency is the way in which women have often been understood as closer to nature than men. The association of women with nature and men with a culture that dominates the natural world leaves women on the low end of a gendered hierarchy. Women are closer to nature and therefore less advanced than men. Male culture acts upon female nature. In the context of American national development, this construction allows women little agency.

The Closed Frontier in Literature

Given the importance of “virgin land” to the national imagination, the declaration following the 1890 census that the frontier line could no longer have a place in the national survey surely resonated throughout the country. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner capitalized upon that declaration in formulating his now famous “frontier thesis” of 1893. This thesis is one of the most persistent and persuasive descriptions of how frontier spaces influence American identity. Turner argues that the primary force in the formation of American national identity has been the Euro-American man’s relationship with the frontier, the struggle to tame it and make a civilization upon it. His published lecture “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” declares that the previous statement by the census bureau “marks the closing of a great historic movement.” He argues, “Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the
colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (31). This thesis gained tremendous popularity during its time. Historian William Williams claims that it “rolled through the universities and into popular literature as a tidal wave” (in Faragher, 1-2). Turner’s rhetoric was dramatic, contributing to what historian John Faragher describes as “a looming sense of national crisis” (5). Turner expressed the history of the nation in a narrative that many historians and much of the public would readily embrace. Turner’s thesis would remain the version of American history discussed in universities and expressed by Hollywood for decades to come. Though much contested in academic circles, it has remained influential in popular culture even to the present day.

In some ways, Turner’s narrative constitutes a particularly limiting idea of the American frontier. First, it represents the story of frontier conflicts and settlement as a wholly masculine process. He claims, that the “really American part of our history” is the story of the advance of the frontier and “the men who grew up under these conditions”(34). Even after the frontier line has passed on, the frontier settlements retain the characteristics determined by the action of pioneering men. The traits of American character that the frontier develops are “that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind…; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil” (59). Mary Paniccia Carden argues that Turner’s characterization of the forces dominating the American character as those of “the rugged male pioneer… claim[s]
national history and identity as male properties” (275-276). Turner does not once mention women in his narrative. Turner claims that violent conflicts with Native Americans contributed to the unifying American identity. The frontier is important “as a military training school, keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression, and developing the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman” (41-42). This narrative emphasizes the importance of violence in the American frontier narrative. In *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin proposes that violence “is central both to the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation” (11). He argues that “what is distinctively ‘American’ is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that symbolism” (13). Carden claims that the many uses of symbolic violence contribute to a naturalization of violence in the story of American origins. This symbolism, she argues, produces “a national erotics of male dominance. In the romantic script of frontier violence, America was begotten by self-made men on the sometimes pliant, sometimes resistant, but always feminized wilderness” (276). The term “national erotics of male dominance” works well to describe the relationship between sexuality and power in the dominant notions of national origins.

Carden articulates the link between such gendered power dynamics and nature:

The “new” world “materializes around the oldest of gender/power dynamics—the woman-nature/male-culture binary. Equating nation-building with male sexual conquest, the romantic version of American history emphatically closes down women’s access to the scene of self-making by equating woman with the ‘fair, blank page’ for male creativity, with the wilderness that men conquer, subdue, and transform. (276)
Understanding the ways in which "official" romances of American origins frame frontier spaces can help in understanding the complex relationship between humans, gender, and nature in American literature.

Expanding and Challenging the Dominant Frontier Narrative

At the turn of the century, the frontier had long been a potent subject in American literature. While historians have debated the validity of the thesis that the frontier is the primary defining factor of American national identity, as Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson point out, "the contribution of the western frontier to our national mythology is less debatable" (3). They note, "from Daniel Boone to John Wayne, our national folklore is replete with white male ‘rugged individualists’ finding their selfhood in the freedom of an untamed land" (3). One of the dominant tropes of this national mythology is that the wildness of an untamed, feminized landscape can heal a man of the effeminizing effects of society. The possibility of the closure of the frontier gave new life to old tropes. Mary Lawlor notes that the closure of the frontier led to a rich exploration of the topic in a variety of forms:

Writers and artists across the social spectrum found in the topic of the vanished ‘wilderness’ an opportunity to memorialize the open-endedness, the sense of possibility of what was now regarded as a storied zone of adventure. More than just the setting for heroic acts of exploration and settlement, the topography of the American West gained the status of an agent in a conglomerate epic of national origins. (1)

Many contributors to this exploration of national origins did little to challenge the masculine frontier narrative. Owen Wister’s wildly popular 1902 novel The Virginian, the book often credited with creating the Western genre, presented a character who became the archetype for the cowboy of the Western genre: a rugged individualist who
eschews both the effeminizing effects of society in the East and the corrupting influence of crime in the West. While he may eventually allow a woman to “tame” him, he must first make the land safe for women. Many novels and films depicting similar pioneer cowboy characters would pervade American markets for decades to come. An account that frames the rugged male individualist as the nation-builder of the United States is incomplete. Armitage and Jameson note that “it leaves out most westerners, including the original inhabitants of the land, American Indians, and Hispanics; men who came West, not as loners, but with their kin; and women of all ethnic groups and social classes” (3). In the last several decades, scholars have made great strides toward uncovering history from the perspectives of these excluded groups.

During this time of expanding scholarship on excluded groups, historians have given closer attention to questions surrounding gender roles at the frontier. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such studies have yielded a variety of answers to the question of whether life at the frontier was as liberating for women as Turner claimed it was for men. Did women experience the frontier as a place to shake off Eastern or European social strictures? Some historians have argued that the frontier did constitute a liberatory space for women in some areas. Gordon Bakken and Brenda Farrington note that all across the country in the mid- to late nineteenth century, “Women struggled for rights, but in the West we see variation found in few other regions. While white women marched for the vote in California, they already had the vote in Wyoming Territory in 1869” (xxiv). Some women even held public offices in western states in the nineteenth century, but prescriptive gender ideology did persist in frontier societies. In her study of firsthand accounts by emigrant women in the nineteenth century, Julie Jeffreys states, “Despite the
ways in which gender ideology and norms seemed ill suited to the realities of frontier life, I found that these women did not abandon familiar notions of a woman’s place” (6). She claims that these women carried gender ideology with them into frontier spaces, because such ideals “helped women retain their sense of self and offered them hope of an ever-improving life” (6). These gender ideologies must also be understood in the broader context of the frontier that is not just a place but also a condition that occurs where cultures come into contact with one another. Jeffreys notes, “understanding that emigrant white women struggled for control of resources not only with white men but with women and men of other backgrounds casts a different light on the outcome of their civilizing mission” (8). In light of such an expanding focus, historians have begun to expand the questions women’s experiences at the frontier to take into account not only white women but also Native American, Hispanic and Asian women.

Despite the popularity of Turner’s thesis, the persistent trope of a feminized landscape, and academic preoccupation with white accounts of the frontier, alternative, situated accounts of frontier spaces were being written even at the turn of the century. Marginialized voices were describing frontier encounters and the process of settlement in radically different ways. In this project, I explore the ways in which *O Pioneers!* and *Cogewea* present divergent, alternative accounts of the process of “taming the frontier.” I argue that both Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s novels present nature as a place from which to stage resistance to the limiting social roles allowed for women and Native Americans by the dominant frontier narrative. Both novels’ strong, authoritative female main characters use their relationship with the other-than-human world to challenge the limited domestic roles prescribed for them. At the same time, both novels also highlight
the ways in which nature itself is not a neutral space. Heroines Cogewea and Alexandra Bergson directly engage the mesh of ideologies that define human relationships with nature. Through the actions of these protagonists, these novels implicitly challenge the racialized and gendered representations of nature inherent in the Turnerian, masculine frontier narrative by negotiating a new relationship with the landscape and exposing the oppression inherent in that narrative.

In both novels, the oppressive nature of the frontier narrative is felt as a crisis of space. These novels are haunted by the threat of confinement, both in terms of gender roles and in terms of the physical environment. The heroines of both novels routinely escape domestic duties by escaping into the wild landscape, and both novels present marriage as a form of confinement for women. Simultaneously, the transition of the landscape from wilderness to settlement is represented as fencing in, closing off, an end to wildness. Characters in both novels express regret for the loss of that wildness. Although both novels negotiate a new relationship with between humans and landscape, neither text finds a way to escape completely the haunting confinement of domestic roles or of the progressive settling of the landscape. Both texts find themselves in mediating positions, situated in and moving between a variety of positions. These are not texts that wholeheartedly find in nature a site of feminist possibility. These texts find in nature a complex network of competing discourses.

In engaging these discourses at a time when the closing of the frontier had recently contributed to a national identity crisis—O, Pioneers! was published in 1913; Cogewea was written in 1912-1914 but not published until much later—these novels re-imagine the process of frontier settlement from two vastly different perspectives.
Mourning Dove’s novel makes a case for Native American agency and historicity, even while assimilationist pressures were mounting. Cather’s novel presents a frontier narrative that critiques the violence of settlement and presents an alternative, female pioneer. Both texts center on active female characters who challenge the place dictated for them by society. Despite their different subject positions, both authors do radical work toward creating a more inclusive account of the frontier, challenging the monolithic narrative of masculine frontier progress by revising and re-imagining relationships between nature and culture. In both Cogewea and O, Pioneers! protagonists serve as mediators between nature and culture and between conflicting cultures. By revising the terms of the relationship between nature and culture, the grounds on which these narratives take place, both novels create a more inclusive vision of the frontier.

Writing a story that contests such a dominant narrative can be a daunting task. In Constituting Americans, Priscilla Wald explores the limits of “official stories.” She describes these stories as “narratives that surface in the rhetoric of nationalist movements and initiatives—legal, political and literary—such as John Marshall’s legislation of Indian Removal... and the efforts of literary Young America and the Democratic Review to shape an American literature.” She argues that “Official stories constitute Americans” (2). These narratives change along with the needs of the national political and social climate as lawmakers, writers, artists and others work to define the nation in official, legal and imaginative texts. Wald’s analysis focuses on authors who responded to and contested such nationalist initiatives, those who “identified and tried to tell untold stories.” In writing against official narratives, such writers “confronted the limits of storytelling” (1). A number of pressures shape storytelling. Wald notes, “social
unacceptability and political censorship, personal prohibitions and cultural conventions, the literary market and language itself all contribute to the shaping of stories. Yet untold stories press for a hearing” (1). Such a discussion of the pressures that shape comprehensible narratives usefully frames the difficulty both Mourning Dove and Cather faced in writing against the dominant frontier narrative.

In narratives of the frontier at the turn of the century, land, women, and Native Americans occupy particularly vexed places. Both Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s narratives take shape within a confining notion of what types of stories are comprehensible. Against official narratives that naturalize violence against Native Americans and limit women to the domestic realm, these writers took on an uncomfortable task. I argue that this dominant narrative contributes to the ambivalence in Cather’s text and the dramatic unevenness of Mourning Dove’s text. Mourning Dove’s struggles with her white editor Lucellus McWhorter and the long road to Cogewea’s publication quite dramatically display the difficulty of presenting a narrative that does not conform to the public’s expectations. The effect of these pressures in Cather’s work is more subtle. *O Pioneers!* seems wholeheartedly to embrace the notion of settlement as progress and to support the Euroamerican push to tame the frontier. Yet a certain ambivalence haunts the novel. Alexandra’s struggles as a female pioneer and her complicated gender identity point to the difficulties of placing a woman at the heart of a frontier narrative. Ruptures and unevenness in the text undercut the rhetoric of frontier progress.
Nature and Culture in the Frontier Narrative

An analysis of the relationship between Euro-American culture and nature presented Turner’s thesis highlights some of the more troubling features of Euro-American culture’s relationship with the frontier. His narrative describes Native American society as inevitably vanishing in the face of Euro-American settlement, while presenting Native peoples merely as border figures, significant mainly in their usefulness to Euro-American men for opening trade routes, for guiding explorers through the landscape, and for their function as ‘other’—the force against which Euro-Americans struggled, and the mirror against which they constructed their identities. They constitute the frontier, which Turner defines as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (41). Turner imagined the progressive Euro-American domination of Native American society as a natural process. He writes that this progress “[was] like the steady growth of a complex nervous system for the originally simple, inert continent” (41); Euro-American society steadily made disruptive inroads into Native society as the American nation consolidated. Turner further asserts that this process was natural and inevitable, claiming, “In this progress from savage conditions lie topics for the evolutionist” (41). By defining the domination and settling of virgin land as the driving force in American history, Turner emphasized the centrality of the categories of nature and culture for the new nation.

Turner’s monolithic account sees Euro-American culture spreading inevitably across the continent, propelled by pioneering men who first adopt Native American ways, then supplant Native Americans, developing a hybrid culture, then establish new developments that are wholly Euro-American. This narrative belies the complexity of
frontier encounters. He describes this process as a “social evolution” (38), seeing movement westward in the United States as a movement back in time:

The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution. It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and wheat in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlements; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system. (38)

This rhetoric frames movement westward in the United States as a movement into what Anne McClintock describes as “anachronistic space” (30), a space outside of time whose inhabitants can be understood as lower on the evolutionary scale than the European settlers. The evolutionary rhetoric of this passage sees the process of settlement as inevitable, and nearly homogenous. Turner regards the “Indian frontier as a consolidating agent in [American] history” (41). His rhetoric (and, in his defense, it was not his alone but a fairly common way to represent colonized peoples) placed Native American society further down the evolutionary ladder than Euro-Americans, and placed an organized, manufacturing society as the highest point of evolution thus far. In addition, the notion of “free land” presents the landscape of the western United States as territory available for penetration, a notion that recapitulates all of the time-honored European writers’ fantasies of America as a woman waiting to be dominated and thus justifies the forcible seizure of Native American lands. Ironically, Turner describes Euro-American traders’ inroads into the wilderness as “fissures in Indian society.” He writes, “Thus the disintegrating forces of civilization entered the wilderness. Every river valley became a fissure in Indian society, and so that society became honeycombed” (40). In
this passage, Turner acknowledges a coherent Native American society, but he quickly dismisses such societies doomed due to their lower standing on the evolutionary scale.

If we were to understand the frontier as the determining factor in American history and accept Turner’s description as the authentic account of the frontier, there would be no way for Native Americans or female subjects to imagine themselves as agents, or even participants, in the forward-moving current of American history. Of course, this silencing was more than metaphorical. From the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to the Dawes Act 1887 and subsequent assimilationist pressures, national policies aimed deliberately at eradicating Native American people and culture. The persistent trope of indigenous peoples as anachronistic, lower on the evolutionary scale than Euro-Americans and doomed to dwindle and be absorbed by a more highly evolved society justified such policies.

**Ideologies of American Nature**

The relationship between nature and culture in American society is a conception in constant flux. In order to develop a coherent framework for discussing the relationship between nature and culture in Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s texts, we must try to understand the conflicting ideologies that define, in some measure, individuals’ relationships with nature. Nature at the North American frontier has been a concept laden with gendered and racial significance from the very first European accounts of the continent. Kolodny’s discussion of some of the first images and descriptions by Euro-Americans gives a thorough account of how the landscape of North America has been experienced both as a field of open possibility for the exercise of male fantasy and as an
abject, savage, terrifyingly "natural" space: both virgin land and mother. From earliest European exploration throughout the nineteenth century, nature took on conflicting values as simultaneously abject and transcendent.

Many theorists have explored the way in which Euro-American culture regards nature and culture as two distinct categories. In her famous essay "Is Woman to Nature as Man is to Culture?" Sherry Ortner argues that women are subjugated because of their association with nature. Culture, as Ortner defines it, "is engaged in the process of generating systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest" (25). In this definition, culture is understood universally as that which dominates nature. Ortner writes, "culture ... at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform— to 'socialize' and 'culturalize' —nature" (26-27). Ortner argues that because women’s bodies are more associated with "species life" processes and spend more time in such processes than men, women are less free to take up the projects of culture. Women’s bodies and functions place them in social roles that are understood to be a lower form of culture than men’s social roles, and these traditional social roles give women a psychic structure that is seen as closer to nature than men’s. Although women are the primary agents of socialization for children, Ortner argues that women only occupy that role in fulfilling children’s basic needs; by the time more sophisticated cultural knowledge needs to be learned, institutions such as school, religion, or the military take over socialization.
There are obvious problems with such a thesis. First, in addition to naturalizing women’s oppression, it dismisses too easily those systems of belief that do not separate nature and culture into hierarchical categories, those that have a more biocentric perspective, regarding all aspects of the natural world as a part of their community. While Ortner does allow that “some cultures articulate a much stronger opposition between the two categories” she maintains “that the universality of ritual betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence” (26). This conceptualization of culture as always and for all peoples that which transcends nature may be strategic for the purpose of her inquiry into the roots of female subjugation, but it also dismisses too easily the profound connections between nature and culture that exist in many societies.

Despite the problems with the assumption of pan-cultural subjugation of nature and pan-cultural subjugation of women, Ortner’s essay does provide a thorough discussion of the means by which women are seen as closer to nature in some cultures. The association of women with abject, bodily processes and their dissociation from projects of the mind provide a useful model for understanding the link between nature and subjugation. Ortner also suggests that many cultures do not simply equate women wholly with nature, but understand women as closer to nature than men. She claims that women are “seen to occupy an intermediate position between culture and nature” (38). She explains that “Intermediate” means ‘middle status” and “may have the significance of ‘mediating,’ i.e., performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture, here seen (by culture) not as two ends of a continuum but as two
radically different sorts of processes in the world” (39). This explanation of women as mediating between nature and culture does seem useful in a cultural view like the Euro-American that understands the terms as two discrete categories. The paradoxical association of women with socializing forces and with a subjugated nature may deconstruct these hierarchical associations altogether.

Given all of these competing and complementary understandings of nature, relationships with nature at the frontier represent a particularly laden category at this time in American history. While the dominant frontier narrative does repeat the male=culture/female=nature gendered power hierarchy, Turner’s account also grants the untamed land a certain amount of power. In his argument that the process of settling the frontier formed the American national character, he claims that the natural, physical landscape influenced the cultural values that developed from it. He states, “The wilderness masters the colonist.” The wilderness acts upon the colonist in a number of ways: “It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe…. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish” (33). Here, the landscape dictates the pioneer’s actions. Turner even uses a natural metaphor to describe the way in which the frontier influence persists in post-frontier settlements: “Little by little, [the colonist] transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe…. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics” (33-34). This formulation upsets, to a degree, the hierarchy of culture over nature. The pastoral impulse and the wild qualities of the landscape at or beyond the frontier attracted
pioneers to it, and the physical qualities of the land itself determined, to an extent, the cultural activities of the pioneers. Landscape, geography, and weather dictated economic activities. In this manner, we can see the interactions between nature and culture.

Yet while Turner’s thesis grants agency to the landscape, it limits the agency of the people whose presence, in his conception, constitutes a frontier. Turner describes the effect of the frontier on the male colonist to be a progressive “Indianization”: the wilderness “strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin....” (33). Turner equates the frontier not only with the edge of settlement but also with the edge of native lands. He describes the frontier as both a place that “lies at the hither edge of free land” (33) and as a zone of contact with native peoples. The “Indian frontier” is the place where white settlers came into conflict with Native peoples. This frontier, too, provided qualities inherent in the American identity Turner describes. In their status as a force against which colonizers must struggle, native peoples constitute another aspect of the frontier. Their presence creates a frontier. The colonizing frontiersman must adopt their ways before the work of transforming the wilderness can begin. The pioneering man must effectively displace the Indians. Turner writes that “he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails,” and then begins “little by little” to “transform the wilderness.” The result of this transformation is “a new product that is American” (34). In order to become American, the frontiersman must supplant Native Americans.

By learning the landscape and by turning it to productive use, rugged frontiersmen gain a claim to the landscape. They become more native than Native Americans. In Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” he claims, “the farmer displaces the Indian
even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and more natural” (165-166). Though he famously claims that “In Wildness is the preservation of the World” (162), the wildness he chooses is that which has potential to be “redeemed,” to be put to use. And the relationship with this wildness is decidedly violent and technological:

The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories, which should be handed down as heirlooms from father to son, are not the sword and the lance, but the bushwhack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field. The very winds blew the Indian’s cornfield into the meadow, and pointed out the way which he had not the skill to follow. He had no better implement with which to intrench himself in the land than a clamshell. But the farmer is armed with plow and spade. (166)

The domination of nature, or the promise of nature available for dominance, for the working out of a masculine fantasy, seems to define wildness for Thoreau. The Indians were good at living with nature, he seems to claim, but Euro-Americans will be even better by turning wild land to productive use. Thoreau’s fantasy of wildness assumes an unlimited, boundless wilderness. He regards the “redemption” of a swamp as a regenerative experience for a farmer, but that act assumes unlimited swamps available for drainage and denies any ecological purpose to swamps.

Despite this desire for dominance over nature, Thoreau also laments the over-socialization of American men. Later in the essay, Thoreau states, “Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man.” He claims that so much socialization constitutes “a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at

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most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit” (170). He also wonders how women survive, confined as they are to society and the domestic for more of the time than men are. Thoreau sees in the domestic and society that which would limit man’s transcendental experiences in nature, that which would take him away from the instinctual. Such experiences are even more difficult for women to have, as they are so much closer to society. A better mode of existence is in the “great savage mother” of nature. Experiences in nature continually allow for a sort of re-birth. New discoveries in nature bring individuals to new heights of transcendence. Climbing a tall white pine allows Thoreau to “soar,” because he is able to glimpse distant mountains that he had not known before.

The nature that Thoreau embraces, of course, is never culturally neutral. In seeing nature as a great resource for spiritual transcendence, Thoreau reveals that his relationship with nature is not ecological but rather metaphysical. His view presents the natural world not as a system of processes of which he is a part, but as a resource for the human mind. Nature is a resource for inspiring the imagination, but has no intrinsic value. Thoreau describes nature as “the one transcendent thing,” but the transcendence applies entirely to the mind that has the capacity to encounter it. Similarly, the frontier is a place for enacting a masculine fantasy of regeneration. Western landscapes are not marked by the traditional habitation of actual people. The primary characteristic of this landscape is its emptiness, its availability for domination, and its transformative properties for the mind, for the individual hero.

Some of this idea of the regenerative quality and transcendent possibility of nature persists in both *O, Pioneers!* and *Cogewea*. But this notion is complicated by a matrix of
other conceptions of the landscape. The heroines’ relationship to nature cannot simply be as mind to field for contemplation/transcendence. Analysis of these two texts reveals that rather than two discrete, hierarchical categories, nature and culture can be understood as mutually constitutive conceptions. Landscapes, climate, flora and fauna influence culture on a local level, while cultural attitudes toward nature largely determine the types of stories individuals may tell about nature. At the closure of the frontier, nature becomes an overdetermined site of cultural meaning.

**Nature as a Feminist Space**

Concurrent with the view that to be closer to nature was to be lower on the evolutionary scale is the persistent feminization of the landscape. While the deliberate persecution of Native Americans is surely more violent than the oppression of women, Euro-American women also had little room for agency in the frontier narrative. As Annette Kolodny discusses in her landmark texts, *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her*, Euro-American depictions of the American landscape insist upon the trope of the land-as-woman. From the earliest explorer’s journals and illustrations, the “new” landscape is depicted as a welcoming, if wild, woman.

On the losing end of a nature/culture binary, associated with the image of the violated landscape, women could find no comfortable place from which to act. Within the feminized landscape, women could have no agency (though, surely, there were exceptions to this). They could not take part in the masculine activity of pioneering. Excluded from the dominant narrative, many female writers imagined different ways of relating to the land. In *The Land Before Her*, Kolodny argues that Euro-American
women, unable to find positions of agency within the broad, sweeping metaphors that imaginatively constructed the landscape as female, concentrated upon the domestic arena, the small, bounded homes and gardens serving as their way of making a mark upon the landscape. Within the bounds of the domestic, they could exercise a limited authority.

For many years, feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir attempted to upset the hierarchy of culture over nature by divorcing women from nature. However, in *Undomesticated Ground*, Alaimo usefully demonstrates how feminist theory’s “flight from nature” actually reinforced the binary hierarchy of culture over nature. Many feminist theorists, she argues, simply try to associate women with culture, rather than questioning the primacy of culture, and so reinforced the naturalization of women’s oppression.

Theories that describe the women’s sphere as limited to the domestic, however, do not account for characters such as Alexandra Bergson and Cogewea. In many ways, these characters flout the limitations of the domestic, cross gender boundaries easily, and relate to the landscape in a variety of decidedly un-domestic ways, such as Alexandra’s farming prowess and Cogewea’s expansive, rule-breaking rides into the hills. Cather’s Alexandra Bergson and Mourning Dove’s eponymous protagonist are strong, expansive characters who are fully at home in the wilderness. They stage rebellion against limiting social structures in their speech and in their action in the landscape. Stacy Alaimo’s analysis of female-authored texts that use nature as a model for loosing the bonds of cultural restrictions illuminates some of the ways in which Cather and Mourning Dove re-imagine their characters’ relationship with the land and use that relationship to break out of their prescribed social roles.
Alaimo investigates “how North American women writers—ensnared within inhospitable landscapes—have written neither captivity narratives nor escape tales, but have instead, in a myriad of ways, negotiated, contested, and transformed the discourses of nature that surround them” (1). In order to claim agency within the metaphoric landscape, women writers who did not accept their status as cipher or their marginalized place in the dominant narrative could look to nature for a space without prescribed limitations for women. Alaimo argues:

These women looked outward toward a natural realm precisely because this space was not already designated as ‘truly and unequivocally theirs’ and thus was not replete with the domestic values that many women wished to escape. Nature, then, is undomesticated both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency. (15-16)

This analysis makes a space for understanding female writers who embrace the natural environment as a way to shake off restrictive social roles. However, for Mourning Dove, caught between cultures in which nature had very different meanings, such a model of insurrection does not entirely account for her relationship with nature. For Mourning Dove and her Okanogan background, nature itself is a category that cannot entirely be separated from culture.

Indeed, if we examine both of these texts more closely, we find that they call into question the idea that nature in literature is not already invested with cultural ideologies. Alaimo notes, “The gendering of the American landscape as feminine and the constellation of classist, racist, and heterosexist ideologies of ‘nature’ complicate—even thwart—the search for an undomesticated space of feminist possibility” (21). She claims that feminist conceptions of nature do not stand outside of dominant cultural views; they
stage dialogues, protests, and contests for the meaning of “nature” and the “natural” realm. While nature does offer an undomesticated space, one not defined unequivocally as belonging to women, at a time when nature itself is laden with so many racial and gendered complications, writers who wish to use nature as a model for feminist insurgency must first re-define a relationship between humans and nature in which nature has some agency and allows for a variety of subject positions for women. Alaimo notes that “the relationship between feminism and nature cannot be understood by extracting the two terms from their social and historical context, but only by analyzing what these terms have meant within specific historical moments” (21). Nature cannot be encountered as an un-cultured entity.

While feminist discussions of nature and gender in American literature have been productive, many feminist readings also obscure the ways in which dominant representations of nature also deny agency to Native Americans. Alaimo does point out the problems in “characterizing nature as a liberatory wilderness.” She notes that “it may widen the nature/culture divide, and it may be complicit in the American glorification of ‘free land’” (17). Reading Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s texts together can illuminate some of the ways in which many feminist readings of white women’s empowerment at the frontier depend upon the idea of “free land” and continue to deny agency to Native American subjects. Placing Mourning Dove’s novel alongside Cather’s may help to highlight the way in which the frontier did serve as a zone of contact and may serve to complicate

In this project, I focus on the ways in which these two texts contextualize nature and female empowerment. I analyze the ways in which both Cather and Mourning Dove
depict characters in the process of redefining relationships between nature and culture and between conflicting cultures in the post-frontier spaces. *O Pioneers!* creates a space for a female pioneer, while *Cogewea* confronts the conflicts between Euro-American culture’s and her own culture’s relationship with the other-than-human world, making a space for traditional Salish knowledge in a Euro-American dominated society. In doing so, these texts challenge the masculine, Euro-American frontier narrative and argue for more inclusive, complex, and ecological relationship with the landscape and between individuals. By exploring the relationships between conflicting cultures and conflicting views of nature at the frontier, Mourning Dove and Cather attempt to create a more inclusive frontier narrative. Ultimately, both texts find themselves in deeply ambiguous positions. Both Alexandra Bergson and Cogewea continually perform the work of mediation between cultures and between conflicting views of nature, but both texts end with a sense that the characters’ agency is circumscribed by the dominant frontier narrative; though the texts perform some radical work, they cannot entirely convert the narrative to their own purposes.

**Settlement as Confinement**

Both Cather and Mourning Dove depict the progress of settlement as a progressive enclosure. This sense of confinement and/or enclosure relates both to the landscape and to gender. In both novels, progressive “Americanization” of post-frontier settlements becomes a form of confinement both literal and figurative. Both Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s novels present characters who feel the domestic to be confining, who are more comfortable in a wider landscape. Both of these characters experience the
domestic as a type of confinement. They turn to nature for a path to freedom. For them, nature is not domestic, but it is also not free of limitations. Nature itself is a site of vexed meaning, laden with metaphors and cultural significance: feminized landscape, landscape as a repository of cultural values, etc.

In this project, I argue that Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s strong female characters raise voices in resistance to their marginalized positions in the frontier narrative. Neither Alexandra Bergson nor Cogewea accepts a position of silent, abject object. Rather, these characters playfully move between a variety of positions of gender and race with relationship to the frontier landscape and the frontier narrative. In doing so, Cather and Mourning Dove redefine the frontier narrative and create an imaginative text of the frontier in which women and Native Americans have voices. They engage in the serious play of inhabiting alternative positions. While this play is limited—neither one can fully escape the strictures of her subject position—their re-visioning of the “frontier” as a feminist and nativist space does some radical work. These writers play upon the dominant cultural narratives of the frontier, both adopting and resisting the limiting rhetoric of the masculine, Euro-American frontier story. Both texts seem to express a desire to transform the Euro-American frontier narrative and, consequently, the dominant notion of who constitutes the nation, while taking part in the nation-building process of frontier settlement.

Cather’s *O, Pioneers!* and Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea* present striking redefinitions of nature. In complex and sometimes contradictory ways, these novels upset the binary hierarchy of culture over nature and subvert and revise the national
narratives of manifest destiny, of pioneering white men in a virgin land. These texts present strong female characters who break out of their prescribed social roles, using nature as a space that allows them to transcend or redefine their relationship to the cultures they inhabit. Alexandra and Cogewea find themselves in liminal subject positions that allow them to inhabit a variety of roles, mediating between nature and culture and between conflicting cultures. In doing so, these novels create an imaginative text of the frontier in which women and Native Americans can attain a form of empowerment.

Yet along with these radical visions comes a reinscription of the very terms the texts seek to escape. In their desire to take part in the frontier fantasy, both Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s characters find themselves in deeply ambiguous positions within the national project of progress and settlement.

Cather’s novel is seamed with conflicting layers of regret and hope, at once eager to embrace progress and the future but dismayed at what is lost in the process. The novel laments the loss of old world culture and the wildness of the prairie while embracing the rhetoric of settlement as progress. Alexandra Bergson’s prosperous farm should be a sign of success, but the death of the family (due to an interruption in the “natural” love of Emil and Marie) leaves the reader on an ambiguous note. Alexandra makes plans to marry her longtime friend Carl Lindstrom, but the ending tone of the novel is one of sadness, not exuberance. The novel subtly laments the losses inherent in the violent progress depicted in the Walt Whitman poem from which the title is drawn.
Cather’s image of the spirit of the landscape, which the narrator refers to as the “Genius of the Divide,” gives the land itself a certain amount of agency and power, upsetting the nature/culture binary. Cather’s spirit of the landscape is a male figure that has a relationship with Alexandra Bergson. Alexandra becomes successful as a farmer because she is willing to understand the landscape, because she can enter into a sort of union with the Genius. In an inversion of the land-as-woman metaphor, Cather imagines the spirit of the landscape as a masculine figure that inspires and takes care of the woman who is willing to work to understand it. The land remains gendered, though categories do not remain constant. Cather uses this Genius to re-situate the gendered narrative of the frontier. After an initial struggle, the land yields itself with pleasure to the plow. Instead of a metaphor of rape, Cather imagines the process of settling and cultivating the prairie as one of mutual gratification. Alexandra’s relationship with this male spirit of the Divide—along with her great ability to see the transcendent possibilities of the land—also allows her to act in conventionally male roles—farmer, businesswoman, and head of household. Through the character of Alexandra, Cather re-imagines the frontier narrative to include the possibility for female agency within it. Yet the narrative, ultimately, embraces imperialist rhetoric of manifest destiny, and Alexandra cannot entirely escape the strictures of her position.

Disturbingly, Cather erases Native Americans entirely from her new frontier narrative. She presents Alexandra as the first individual to regard the prairie landscape with hope and admiration, denying the possibility that the land had previously been inhabited. In this manner, Cather re-inscribes the limiting rhetoric of the progressive frontier narrative.
Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea, the Half-Blood; a Narrative of the Great Montana Cattle Range*, finished in 1912-1914 but not published until 1927, tells the story of the title character, a half-Salishan/half-white heroine in a distinct position of flux between two cultures. Mourning Dove’s novel is less subdued than Cather’s in its critique of the violence of frontier settlement. Protesting vehemently against the mistreatment of Indians, the heroine laments that her people “have suffered as much from the pen as from the bayonet of conquest” (92). Cogewea cries out against the injustices done to her people. Yet she finds herself caught between cultures, symbolically torn between two lovers—the white easterner Densmore and the half-blood Jim—and situated between her two sisters, one who has married a white man and has fully assimilated Euro-American values and one who adheres to traditional Native values, living with their grandmother. Early in the novel, Cogewea demonstrates the power of her liminal position. She attempts to claim both the native and European sides of her heritage, claiming the benefits of both and the limitations of neither. Initially, this unstable position seems to be one of power; she possesses both Salish and European knowledge of the natural world, but her behavior is not limited by either of these cultures. Cogewea sees the landscape as imprinted with the history of her Salishan mother’s people. Her home is not the H-B ranch, but rather the whole territory bounded by the mountains and Flathead Lake. By incorporating traditional oral narratives of naturalistic relationships into this frontier romance novel, Mourning Dove upsets the hierarchical associations of nature and culture and fundamentally questions the subjugation of Native American culture to Euro-American culture.
Throughout the novel, Cogewea is repeatedly disciplined for her attempts to embrace both cultures. Although she enters and wins both the "ladies'" and the "squaws'" races at the Polson fair, officials refuse to award her the prizes for either race. She serves an interpretive function for Densmore in illustrating the very real consequences that can follow upon disturbing the natural world. She repeatedly interprets the natural world for Densmore, who sees in the landscape—and in Cogewea—only the possibility of profit. Her attempts to convert Densmore to a more ethical relationship with the natural world only result in confusion. Cogewea’s agency is ultimately limited by her position as half-breed. Densmore justifies deceiving her because of her Indian blood, and her belief in his good faith leads to threats of rape and death. At the end of the novel, she accepts Jim, and the reader is left to assume that the pair’s task is now to find a way to preserve their culture while living within the fenced frontier landscape. The novel provides a possibility for continued existence, but the corral and the fences serve as a potent reminder of confinement.

Despite these limitations, both O, Pioneers! and Cogewea perform radical work toward breaking open the masculine frontier narrative. Both overtly and subtly, these two novels argue for more ecological and inclusive visions of the relationship between nature and culture and of the relationships between conflicting cultures. By revising the terms upon which the frontier narrative is based, both Willa Cather and Mourning Dove unsettle dominant conceptions of nature and dominant conceptions of the cultural significance of landscape of the North American frontier.
Chapter 2
Re-writing National Origins: the Female Pioneer in O Pioneers!

Over the last twenty-five years, Willa Cather's work has been examined through many different lenses. She has been celebrated as a feminist nature writer, a nature writer (but not a feminist), a national epic-maker, a radically queer voice, a reinforcer of imperialist frontier ideology, and as a subversive voice contesting such ideology. Such varied readings of Cather's works are not unwarranted, for much of Cather's mature work defies easy categorization. After her first two "novels of the soil," Cather's imagination roamed far and wide. Her 1913 novel O Pioneers! has elicited some particularly contradictory readings. Some critics have read this novel as Cather's tribute to the influence of Emerson and Whitman, a continuation of a masculine literary tradition. Others have read it as a departure from the masculine literary tradition and as an attempt to craft a feminine tradition. Still others have read it as a queer narrative, one that subverts coherent gender categories. Such discord can be productive, for it reveals some of the internal contradictions in O Pioneers! Cather herself agreed with her friend Elizabeth Sergeant's assessment that the novel has "no sharp skeleton" (97). Cather claims that the growth of the novel echoed the Great Plains landscape: "the land has no sculptured lines or features. The soil is soft, light, fluent, black, for the grass of the plains creates this type of soil as it decays" (97). In this statement, Cather frames the growth of this novel as an organic one, a story grown from the long grasses of the prairie.

Certainly, one point of agreement between most critics is that land and relationships with land are at the center of this novel. In this novel as in many other
novels of the frontier, relationships between individuals are deeply influenced by individuals’ relationships with the land. The natural world of *O Pioneers!* is not merely a setting but is a character in its own right, an active entity with a stake in the outcome of the story. This active quality of the landscape and the non-traditional characters—such as the female pioneer Alexandra Bergson and the vegetarian mystic Ivar—who inhabit this landscape give the novel some of its subversive power. In this chapter, I argue that the novel presents a model of cooperation between humans and nature in opposition to the paradigm of male pioneer dominating a feminized nature. Yet even as the novel does challenge the dominant models of violent relationships with nature, ultimately, it does not manage to free itself from the dominant cultural ideologies that shape human understanding of the landscape.

**Revising and Reiterating the Dominant Frontier Narrative**

Cather’s novel begins with an “empty landscape,” a bleak scene that gives readers the sense that human settlements on the prairie are doomed to fail. In the opening lines of the novel, a tenuous human settlement rocks in a struggle against the force of the prairie wind. The story begins in the bleakest part of a plains winter—mid January. The narrator states, “the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away.” The buildings themselves are impermanent: “the dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them” (1). These buildings are not even
homes; the narrator describes them only as dwelling-houses, a term which implies a practical use only, not a permanent, sentimental attachment to a place. These ephemeral buildings are the outposts of frontier civilization. All the mechanisms of society are in place, as the little town does contain the necessary elements of trade and communication, including stores, banks, a post office, and a saloon, but even these establishments do not firmly indicate a permanent community. They “straggled” in “two uneven rows of wooden buildings” (1). The scene is bleak, but there are seeds of hope for Euroamerican settlement. Even in these first pages of the novel that describe a feeling of hopelessness in the face of a hostile nature, the “anchor” of settlement has been set.

Into this scene Cather brings Alexandra Bergson, a tough young woman, oldest daughter of a struggling Swedish immigrant family. After her father’s death that winter, Alexandra takes control of the family farm and rises to become one of the most successful farmers and landowners on the Divide. Rather than abandoning the venture at this difficult point, she perseveres and becomes prosperous enough to envision a future beyond the farm for her youngest brother Emil. Due to pioneers such as Alexandra, the novel seems to argue, human settlements slowly take root and flourish. The novel closes with the lines, “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!” (122). This glowing celebration positions Alexandra herself as a resource for prairie development, as much a resource as the landscape itself. In this narrative, the pioneer is folded back into the landscape.

In many ways, O Pioneers! celebrates pioneering success and the process of settling the frontier. As it does so, it tells a new version of the story, one that contests the
narrative outlined by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her*. Rather than a contest between male pioneering force and feminized landscape, *O Pioneers!* refigures the story of the frontier into one of cooperation and mutual gratification between a willing landscape and a pioneer who has the imagination to embrace it. The novel shows an ecological awareness; it demands an ethic of environmental stewardship as criteria for success in the Nebraska farmlands. This ethic of stewardship and its growth out of a romantic union between landscape and female pioneer challenges notions of struggle embedded in the frontier narrative. In turn, this ecologically respectful relationship allows Alexandra Bergson to escape some social limitations. In Alexandra, Cather presents a woman not confined by traditional gender roles. Her position as best steward of the landscape allows her to free herself from some of the limitations American society places upon women while simultaneously developing the land to its full potential. She occupies the position of the male pioneer, but does so in a way that presents a model of interaction with the landscape that changes the terms of the relationship. Critic Mary Paniccia Carden writes that the symbolic violence of the traditional frontier story contributes to a “national erotics of male dominance” (275). *O Pioneers!* challenges such a mode of erotic struggle.

A number of critics have claimed that the simple act of inserting a female character into a traditionally male role changes this mode of struggle. Carden claims that “Cather’s frontier stories restage the romancing of the wilderness—that paradigmatic activity of the self-made man—by situating women in his place.” Simply by inserting a female protagonist in the place of a male protagonist and subtly changing the dynamics of their relationship to the land, “Cather confronts and challenges gender-specific narratives
of the nation ... at a time when tangible anxiety about the male supremacy that had
served to explain the nation to itself was attended by slippage in traditional male/female
power relations" (278-279). Rather than a triumphant army conquering a resistant foe,
Cather presents a responsive land yielding rewards to a woman who sticks through the
difficult times and regards it with love and understanding. Mary R. Ryder writes of O
Pioneers!:

The tutelary Genius that broods over the prairie landscape demanded homage
from human interlopers and responded only to those who would protect its
integrity. Such a response requires accepting ... a connection to a primordial
world of the Great Mother in which an ‘ethic of responsibility or care’ supersedes
self-assertiveness and desire for gain. (76)

This is the root of Alexandra’s success. She becomes a successful farmer because she
respects the integrity of the landscape. Ryder claims Cather as an ecofeminist:

Anticipating contemporary ecofeminist concerns, Cather assigns to her
protagonists what Lorraine Anderson calls ‘a feminine way of being in relation to
nature’: ‘This way is caring rather than controlling; it seeks harmony rather than
mastery; it is characterized by humility rather than arrogance, by appreciation
rather than acquisitiveness.’ (79)

If Alexandra Bergson is the model for this mode of caring and humility, however, the
theory has some complications. Alexandra seeks harmony, but she also seeks to express
herself in the landscape, to control it and exploit it for economic gain. As much as
Alexandra humbly submits herself to the inspiration of the spirit of the land, she is
acquisitive in desiring to control more land. The novel presents Alexandra’s orderly,
prosperous farm as evidence of her harmony with the land. Alexandra’s relationship with
the landscape resembles a “wise use” environmental ethic, a homocentric way of relating
to the land. As Patrick Dooley points out, “Cather assumes as obvious and not requiring
argument or justification that the natural world exists to serve human welfare and to

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satisfy human desires” (66). Alexandra’s farm estate, with its fruitful, ordered fields, abundant gardens and outbuildings is a testament to what can be accomplished with a wise use ethic, but it does present a homocentric rather than a biocentric environmentalism, as some ecofeminist critics have argued.

In upsetting the gendered binary of male pioneer and female landscape, Cather’s prairie epic upsets the conventional frontier narrative. It includes women and presents a place for women outside of the domestic realm. Yet as much as the novel attempts to refigure the story without hierarchical categories, the removal of native peoples from the landscapes—both literal and figurative—reinscribes oppression in the narrative. The novel reiterates the notion that the land was open, free, and empty prior to Euroamerican settlement and that Euroamericans know best how to value the land. While the novel contests some of the violence of the frontier narrative, it reinscribes oppressive ideas of how the landscape should be used and who should be allowed to use it. It repeats the removal of Plains Indians. Anxiety, and perhaps a sense of guilt, over this process arises in the novel in moments of rupture. The violence of the frontiering process makes itself felt in O, Pioneers! as a haunting, uncanny presence. The novel is seamed with moments of loss, regret, and anxiety over confinement.

The First to Bring the Muse into Her Country: O Pioneers! as a National Origin Story

In My Ántonia, narrator Jim Burden quotes from Virgil’s Georgics, “Primus ego in patriam mecum... deducam Musas,” which he translates as “For I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country.” Jim muses on this quotation, thinking of his
academic mentor’s explanation: “‘patria’ here meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse... not to the capital, ... but to his own little ‘country,’ to his father’s fields’” (876). Cather’s biographer and friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant writes of this passage that Willa Cather “by implication, brought its meaning to bear on her own attachment to Nebraska.... She was the first! Her own ‘firstness’ as a writer of Nebraska stories was one of the luckiest hazards of her human fate” (103). Indeed, Cather’s Nebraska stories do seem to have a sense of “firstness,” of being the primary account of the settling of the Divide, the land between the Republican and Platte Rivers. In My Ántonia and O Pioneers!, Cather writes the origins of the Divide and, by extension, of the nation.

Through its focus on the origins of Euroamerican settlement on the Divide, though the words “America” or “American” are rarely mentioned, O Pioneers! tells a story of American origins and takes part in the national myth-making process. It taps into national concerns. Cather takes the title of the book from Walt Whitman’s poem “Pioneers, O Pioneers!” and so evokes the rhetoric of the heroic pioneer that Whitman celebrated in the poem. The title connects to what David Stouck describes as Whitman’s “urge to be a vital part of the dynamic young American democracy” (23). The poem is a striking celebration of the American nation story that casts the frontier as a wilderness tamed by heroic pioneers; Stouck describes the poem as a “eulogy to those who have conquered the wild country” (29). It opens with the lines “Come my tan-faced children, / Follow well in order, get your weapons ready, / Have you your pistols, your sharp-edged axes? / Pioneers! O pioneers!” (1-4). More than a eulogy, the poem is a call to arms.
From these first few lines to the end of the poem, Whitman creates the image of pioneers as an army sweeping across the western United States. The poem celebrates the energy of “Western youths,/ So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship” (9-10) in contrast to the indolence of Europeans: “Have the elder races halted?/ Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?/ We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson” (13-15). The poem clearly positions Americans as new inheritors of a vigorous project of expansion, and the virility/fertility of the pioneers is the nation’s weapon. The poem repeats images of death and regeneration. In stanzas 12 and 13, the poem creates a sense of urgency: “By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,/ Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,/... On and on the compact ranks,/ With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill’d,/ Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping” (46-51). In these lines, the poem emphasizes the inexhaustible supply of life the pioneers create. The speaker even includes women in this call to arms: “O you daughters of the West,/ O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you wives!/ Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united” (81-83). This emphasis on terms such as daughter, mother, and wife reinforces familial relationships and the importance of reproduction to the frontiering project. Pioneer women are literally birthing a nation. Whitman’s lines give a sense of frenzied movement and activity to a process of settlement that spanned many generations.

First published in 1865 and finally revised in 1881, the poem surely has some roots in a search for American unity after the Civil War. The unifying quest in the poem is the settlement and domination of the western landscape. The violence of this progress
is unmistakable; indeed, a sense of warlike purpose drives the waves of pioneers through this poem. Stanza 11 shows the American flag at the head of this army: “Raise the mighty mother mistress,/ Waving high the delicate mistress, (bend your heads all),/ Raise the fang’d and warlike mistress, stern impassive, weapon’d mistress” (41-43). These lines depict the American flag in its most warlike capacity, unifying the troops of pioneers beneath it. While the poem identifies no clear enemy, it does create a sense of a unifying purpose. If there is an enemy, it may be the territory that is dominated. A struggle against nature becomes clear in the seventh stanza: “We primeval forests felling, / We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within, / We the broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving” (25-27). Violent terms like “felling,” “stemming,” “vexing,” “piercing,” and “upheaving” clearly show a desire to dominate the landscape. This violent penetration of the landscape accords with the “pastoral impulse” that Kolodny describes (as discussed in Chapter 1). This poem presents the story of the pioneers as an epic struggle between humans and nature. Though they may have hardships and may have to suffer through several generations, the phenomenal power of the pioneers subdues the natural world over time. The poem closes with the lines, “Swift! to the head of the army!—swift! spring to your places,/ Pioneers! O pioneers!” (102-103). These closing lines cement the unifying qualities of a militaristic frontiering process.

According to James Stouck, the understanding of the pioneer’s project as a battle against wilderness gives Cather’s novel its epic qualities. I disagree that the novel presents nature as the hostile enemy against which humans can unite, but Stouck does hit on one of the ways in which O Pioneers! creates an epic of national origins. He writes
that an epic "expresses itself in the creation of public myths. The artist ... giv[es] voice to the quest and aspirations of a whole people. An epic is nationalistic for it makes its appeal to a whole people by defining a common enemy" (29). In *O Pioneers!*, he claims, that enemy is a hostile nature. I argue that, while nature resists, at first, the efforts of pioneers to settle and create communities upon it, it is not an enemy. Eventually, the spirit of the land in *O Pioneers!* comes to an ecstatic cooperation with the settlers. *O Pioneers!* appeals to a whole people by giving voice to aspirations to learn and understand the land as Alexandra does.

Certainly, *O Pioneers!* presents the story of the nation as the story of changes to the landscape. In the sections "The Wild Lands," "Neighboring Fields," Cather fashions a story of national origins in which pioneers make a new life for themselves on a "wild" landscape. The landscape is a blank slate, and *O, Pioneers!* is the story of the inscription of that slate—a permanent, meaningful alteration of the landscape. In its transition from "The Wild Land" to "Neighboring Fields," the novel spans the period of frontier settlement, moving from an resistant, uninscribable wilderness to the familiar, controlled checkerboard of farms, roads, and towns that still exists today. Cather's novel inscribes on paper and on the public imagination her particular vision of this act of marking the landscape. Pioneers like Alexandra Bergson literally mark the landscape with meaning, with the story of human struggle. At the beginning of the novel, the land resists human markings: "the roads were but faint tracks in the grass, and the fields were scarcely noticeable. The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the marking of glaciers, and not the record of human strivings" (7). Alexandra's father has been unable
to make a significant mark: “In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame” (7). Here, the land resists pioneers’ efforts to make a mark upon the prairie. Slowly, as Alexandra increases her love for and knowledge of the land, the spirit of the land “bends” toward her, allowing her to pursue her vision of progress. The land is both an entity that has a certain type of agency (deciding whether to be tamed or not) and a sort of stone tablet, a medium for recording “human strivings.”

Over time, Alexandra alters the landscape to fit her own vision. Her will and imagination make her farm prosperous, which in turn gives her social power. The description of Alexandra’s farm makes clear the extent to which the landscape of her farm functions as a vehicle for self-expression: “There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail.... Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson.” Though Alexandra’s home is “curiously unfinished and even uneven in comfort,” the landscape of her farm expresses herself. “When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm.... You feel that, properly, Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (32). Alexandra has written her self upon the formerly wild landscape.

While the novel is epic in terms of its contribution to the national myth-making process, it undercuts the idea of national origins as an epic struggle between human and nature. While the land does at first resist settlement, Alexandra’s relationship with the landscape and her understanding of it allows her to cooperate with it. To understand this
struggle for self-expression in the landscape as a form of epic contest between human and nature belies the way in which O Pioneers! attempts to frame the process as one of mutual gratification. The landscape is both medium for inscription of this nation story and a character in that story. In the first section of the novel, “The Wild Land,” the narrator states that the spirit of the landscape itself resists the pioneers; “its Genius [is] unfriendly to man” (8). But Alexandra’s belief that the land of the Divide is worth something keeps her holding on to it. She sees possibilities in this landscape. After a trip to visit farmers in a more prosperous district, Alexandra returns with great confidence in the land, and the spirit of the land itself rewards her for that confidence. She looks out upon the landscape:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious..... Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or woman. (25-26).

As Alexandra develops her love and understanding of the land, its spirit bends to her will. This vision is not simply personal, but carries the seeds of the nation. Thirteen years later at the beginning of “Neighboring Fields,” the narrator describes spring plowing as a scene of erotic mutual gratification: “the brown earth, which such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness” (29). The sensuality of this passage is unmistakable, but it is a willing sexuality. Rather than the side of the pastoral impulse that regards penetration of the landscape as a form of violation, here it becomes an expression of cooperation, of mutual gratification.
As a title, Cather’s homage to Whitman’s celebration of the violent aspect of the pastoral impulse seems incongruent. While Cather celebrates the process of taming the wild land, *O Pioneers!* seems to promote a more cooperative vision of the process of settlement. I argue that what makes Cather’s novel different, what makes this mutual gratification possible is the gender play in which the novel engages. The shift of gender in the landscape and in the character of the pioneer alters gendered power dynamics. This shift allows Cather’s novel to rewrite the national romance from a struggle for domination to a mutually satisfying relationship.

**Amazon on the Prairie: Challenging Gendered Power Dynamics**

The very act of placing a woman at the center of the frontier story changes gendered power dynamics and radically challenges some of the persistent myths of American literature. As a woman writing women into the national origin story, Cather occupied a relatively unique position. She had few female predecessors in such a task. Cather is often described as an heir to Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson. Louise Westling points out that “the classical pastorals that have been established as [Cather’s] primary literary models are stubbornly male, yet she places strong women at their center” (64). Her American literary predecessors who addressed questions of human relationships with nature at the frontier are also predominantly masculine. While she did have models in female novelists and local colorists, most notably in her mentor and friend Sarah Orne Jewett, to whom Cather dedicates *O Pioneers!*, the dominant literary traditions from which Cather draws are largely occupied by male writers. Cather draws from a variety of traditions, and it is difficult to situate *O Pioneers!* within one literary genre. Westling
claims that “Cather sought to weave … conflicting discourses together—the classical pastoral, the American frontier adventure, the Kiplingesque imperial epic, the immigrant tale, and the domestic stories of female nest-building and gardening rituals” (65). *O Pioneers!* binds a grand story of national origins to seemingly small, domestically-oriented acts, such as the creation of a farm on the Nebraska plains, combining loving, site-specific descriptions of the prairie flora and fauna with sweeping visions of national progress. Westling claims that Cather wove such divergent discourses together with her own desire, “creating an exclusively female dynamic of erotic attraction and identification in which the Nebraska landscape and Alexandra Bergson are dual protagonists in a passionate interplay that moves from strife to yearning to ecstatic conjunction” (65). Further, Westling claims that in *O Pioneers!* Cather’s “purpose was to erase [the violent] element of the American story” (65). Through its focus on female experiences with the landscape, *O Pioneers!* does create a sort of feminine literary space in which a woman’s gaze is focused on the landscape.

In addition to placing a woman at the center of the frontier narrative, the act of writing such a story as a woman may change the gendered power dynamics of writing national origin stories. By framing the act of writing national origins as an act of birthing, critic Susan Rosowski argues for “a female model of creativity at the genesis of American literature” (x). Rosowski looks to early American literature for a model of a call to define the nation. She argues that in early American literature, “the charge to writers was clear, and it had nothing to do with mapping a territory or breaking sod. Instead, writers were challenged to give birth to a nation, and they were to do so by looking to the West” (x). Claiming this metaphor as the “model of creativity at the
genesis of American literature” (x), Rosowski explores the ways in which the feminine creative metaphor carried through American literature of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. This challenge appealed to both male and female writers, but female writers occupied a vexed position. Though the metaphor of birth is a feminine act, the trope of the feminized landscape and the status of women as the Other through which the territory of the new nation is represented denied women authority to write about nation-building process, as Kolodny, Henry Nash Smith, and Judith Fetterley have discussed. Rosowski claims that “gender assigns authors to genre, and we are unaccustomed to recognizing epic seriousness in women” (x). Some women writers, however, did not accept this vexed position. They took up literature “as a serious and noble art form and wrote to influence how the United States perceived itself” (x). Rosowski situates Willa Cather among a cadre of female writers such as Margaret Fuller, Jean Stafford, and Marilynne Robinson who resisted marginalization. These authors, according to Rosowski, “belied their cultural alterity and spoke for themselves in responding to the challenge to give birth to a nation” (x). She notes that Cather and other female writers who took up this challenge had “the epic ambition of articulating national identity” (xi). Rosowski argues that Cather did not accept women’s dispossession of paradise that Kolodny outlined in

*The Land Before Her:*

[Cather] sent Adam packing and claimed paradise for women, restoring to them a psychosexual identification with nature and appropriating for them the promise of nature’s wildness. Rather than writing about a virgin land waiting to be despoiled, Cather conceived of the West as female nature slumbering, awakening, and roaring its independence. In her stories, and culminating in *O, Pioneers!,* she gave women’s fantasies to the West and cast their domestic materials on an epic scale; in doing so she reclaimed materiality for women, rewrote the captivity myth into a story of liberation, and divorced the plot of sexuality from its gendered confinements. (79)
Alexandra’s vision and farming success do seem to upset the erotics of male pioneer penetrating a feminized landscape. Westling argues that Cather drew upon matriarchs of her own family in addition to Norsk and Greek goddesses to find literary models for her female characters. She claims, “By grafting such women’s traditions and experience onto classical literary forms, [Cather] created liminal Amazon figures who invade and subvert male literary space through androgyny” (64). Characters such as Alexandra invade and subvert not only literary space but also the space of the landscape in the national imagination.

In placing Alexandra Bergson at the center of a frontier story, Cather’s prairie epic makes dramatic challenges to the pastoral impulse, the masculine frontier narrative that sees the landscape as a female body that either invites domination or nurtures the individual men who brave the wilderness. Yet Alexandra’s character does more than simply place a feminine body in a traditionally masculine role. From her first appearance in the novel, Alexandra occupies a position that is neither traditionally masculine nor traditionally feminine. When the reader first encounters her, she is wearing “a man’s long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier),” yet her apparent comfort in men’s clothing is complemented by a decidedly feminine “round plush cap, tied down with a thick veil” (2). She walks “rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and exactly what she was going to do next,” but when she discovers that her brother’s kitten has climbed up a pole, she scolds and then comforts him, turning mothering for a moment, and goes to find a young man to do the work of climbing the pole for her. Cather further emphasizes Alexandra’s multivalent gender affiliation when Alexandra
removes her hat and veil to reveal “a shining mass of hair.” As if to highlight her appearance, a traveling salesman is so struck that he stops to exclaim “My God, girl, what a head of hair!” He is impressed by her beauty, but his response is one of a man struck by awe. Her response is not shy or flirtatious but “a glance of Amazonian fierceness.” In some ways, her beauty is clearly placed in the feminine register; it made the salesman “[wish] himself more of a man” (3). Yet the narrator, from the perspective of the traveling salesman emphasizes not her femininity but that she is a “fine human creature” (3). From this first encounter, the novel shapes our reaction to Alexandra as somewhere between masculine and feminine, not either/or but both/and. She does possess a certain femininity, but it is an awe-inspiring femininity, more akin to Greek and Norsk goddesses than regular women.¹

Soon after Cather introduces Alexandra, she introduces another prominent figure in the novel: Marie Tovesky. In our first introduction, the narrator describes Marie as having hair “like a brunette doll’s, a coaxing little red mouth, and round, yellow-brown eyes.” in the “‘Kate Greenaway’ manner,” looking like “a quaint little woman.”² Her uncle clearly dotes on her as she earns admiration from all of the men, including Emil. Even as a child, she clearly represents a more conventional femininity. The narrator describes Marie as a “creature,” but in her case it is clear that she is an entirely different kind of creature than Alexandra. This contrast becomes more striking later in the novel as Marie finds herself trapped by the conventional romantic plot, tied up in an operatic

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¹ Willa Cather’s own gender play has received a great deal of critical attention. As a young woman, she frequently dressed as a man and introduced herself as William H. Cather. Louise Westling is among critics who have gone so far as to argue that Cather despised and spent much of her life denying female gender identification (Green Breast 64).

² Kate Greenaway, popular American illustrator of children’s books, active from 1867-1901. Little girls in Greenaway’s illustrations are usually depicted in ornate historical or Victorian-era costumes, often surrounded by floral decorations.
liebestod. Maries own romantic nature betrays her. She eloped with Frank Shabata as a young, impulsive woman. Years later, unsatisfied with Frank, she develops a romance with Emil, Alexandra’s youngest brother. Marie Shabata serves as the very model of conventional femininity.

In contrast to Marie, Alexandra’s imagination does not include the traditionally feminine ideas of romance. Her imagination focuses on the soil and the weather. She is so involved in the soil that she fails to notice the very serious complications of her brother’s romance with Marie, who is now married to Frank Shabata. In Alexandra’s only erotic moments, she repeatedly fantasizes about being carried away by the Genius of the Divide. The narrator states, “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” (79). Alexandra’s emotions and imagination are almost wholly tied to the land. Her happiness comes from “days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination of the soil” (80). These passages emphasize both Alexandra’s atypical sexuality and her close relationship with the land. “Her mind was a white book, with clear writings about weather and beasts and growing things. Not many people would have cared to read it; only a happy few. She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows” (80). Even Alexandra’s one persistent erotic fantasy brings her closer to the landscape. She allows herself to indulge in these thoughts only on leisurely Sunday mornings:

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 her 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 her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields. (80-81)

This figure seems clearly linked to the Genius of the Divide mentioned earlier in the novel. His description evokes her environment, farm fields and prairie wind. The fantasy clearly arouses Alexandra, for afterward she must rush down to the bath and “pour buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far” (81). This fantasy alone reconfigures the erotics of male dominance between pioneer and landscape. Alexandra’s position of powerful landowner contrasts with her fantasy of submission to a strong, nature-based male figure, thoroughly complicating and subverting traditional gender-based power dynamics.

Alexandra effectively gains power and explicitly confronts misogyny. As a powerful woman and landowner, she does, in a sense, live out the American Dream. But the end of the novel leaves the reader unsure of whether Alexandra’s dream has been realized. Throughout the novel, Alexandra’s experiences dramatize her gender transgressions: when she attempts to exercise her power over her farmland, her brothers try to wrest control of it, claiming it as the family’s land that rightly belongs in the hands of men. This encounter emphasizes the way in which traditional gender roles threaten Alexandra’s ownership and power. John Bergson himself recognizes he would rather have seen Alexandra’s qualities in a son, but he respects those qualities she has. Initially, her position grows from a declaration by the family patriarch, and her action as a land manager begins by executing his will to “keep the land together” (10). John Bergson gave her the power to take charge of the family’s land, but she holds on to this power by
her own merit—her economic savvy and her relationship with the landscape. The death of her father thrusts Alexandra into the ambiguous position of inheritor of his mission; he delegates to her the mission of "taming" the wild land.

John Bergson admires Alexandra for her intelligence, "resourcefulness and good judgment" (9). She demonstrates these qualities not only in her knowledge about the land but also in a practical, businesslike turn of mind. She watches and learns from the "rich fellows" who are buying up land from discouraged farmers, knowing that the land will soon appreciate in value (23). Alexandra shrewdly uses the mechanisms of the law to maintain her right to control her farmland. When Alexandra begins to spend time with her returned childhood friend Carl Linstrum, her brothers challenge her right to have control of the family's land. Her brothers Lou and Oscar worry that Carl is after Alexandra's money. Lou exclaims, "'He wants to be taken care of, he does!'" Alexandra responds, "'Well, suppose I want to take care of him? Whose business is it but my own?'

"Don't you know he'd get hold of your property?"

"He'd get hold of what I wished give him, certainly." (64)

In this exchange, Alexandra not only defends her right to maintain control of her land but also her right to subvert traditional gender roles. When Lou argues that "'the farms and all that comes out of them belongs to us as a family,'" Alexandra responds, "'Go to the county clerk and ask him who owns my land, and whether my titles are good.'" Oscar and Lou try to refute this logic by arguing that "The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title." They devalue any work that Alexandra has done and claim to have been humoring her in indulging her desire to "run things."

This confrontation leads to a break in which Alexandra again uses the law to defend her
position of power. She tells Lou and Oscar, “Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my own property. And I advise you to do what they tell you; for the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again” (65-66). Alexandra uses the mechanisms of society to enforce her right to remain united with the land.

Despite challenges to her authority, Alexandra maintains control. Her confrontations with Lou and Oscar highlight the ways in which her position as powerful landowner bucks traditional notions of gender and power. Alexandra has used her father’s mandate to develop a prosperous and expansive estate. The expedients of establishing a hold on an unsettled landscape allow Alexandra that freedom to gain power from a patriarchal society. As much as her father may have wished to find these qualities in a son, his daughter possesses the qualities that the frontier environment demands.

With her vision, resourcefulness, and appreciation for the landscape, Alexandra becomes the settling force in this particular corner of the nation. Alexandra’s atypical sexuality and her relationship with the landscape challenge notions of women’s roles at the frontier.

Uneasiness, Regrets, and Ruptures in the Narrative

In her involvement with society and the landscape, Alexandra herself embodies a strange ambivalence. At once, she shares an intimate and loving connection with the land, in its wild and domesticated states, yet her hopes rest deeply on economic progress. She allies with the pioneers who tame the wild land, but she identifies with the land itself. Her inspired vision of the prosperous future of the Divide gives her a feeling “as if her
heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring” (28). Alexandra is at the center of conflicting tendencies, embracing the past but moving toward the future. Both her struggle to succeed and her identification with the land in some ways authorize Alexandra’s material success, while her relationship with tradition authorizes or allows her innovation.

This involvement with economic process complicates some critics’ desire to read Cather as an ecofeminist. Mary Ryder characterizes Alexandra’s way of relating to the landscape in glowing terms: “it seeks harmony rather than mastery; it is characterized by humility rather than arrogance, by appreciation rather than acquisitiveness” (79). If Alexandra Bergson is our model of avoiding mastery and acquisitiveness, however, this concept of a distinctly feminine “ethic of responsibility or care” has some serious complications. While Cather does complicate the typically gendered frontier narrative, she does not entirely overturn it. Neil Gustafson outlines the ways in which Alexandra’s relationship to the land cannot entirely be claimed for a theory in which the “male abuses nature [and] the female nourishes it” (151). He notes that Alexandra’s relationship to the land carries out her father’s wishes. The novel does not depict John Bergson as a “brutalizer of nature;” Alexandra “develops her love for the land only gradually, as she begins, first, to understand her father’s vision of the land and, then, to make this vision her own” (152). O Pioneers! depicts caring for and controlling the landscape as two shadings of the same activity. Alexandra does both. She cares for the landscape by controlling it, by acting as a good steward. She has enough imagination to see the potentials for productive development of the landscape. She “expresses herself best” in
the soil. In other words, Alexandra’s identity rests upon a reconfiguration of the landscape to suit her own needs.

Alexandra’s very love for the land is also implicated in imperialist/capitalist ideology. She hopes to help it awaken, to “do something great,” but that greatness has to do with productivity, not simply with an appreciation for the land as it is. Gustafson points out that her shrewd business activities do not simply constitute “loving the land into productive submission;” rather, they constitute “the application of good, hard business sense. She is setting up her family members for a life of relative leisure based on the possession of large tracts of land” (157-158). Her ordered, prosperous farm with its “unusual trimness and care for detail,” looking like “a small village” (O Pioneers! 32) provides evidence of the way in which Alexandra has dramatically altered the landscape. Alexandra Bergson occupies an uneasy place. While Cather’s novel does rewrite the relationship with the landscape from one of dominance and penetration to one of mutual and joyous cooperation, it still repeats the Wise Use ethic and reinforces the idea that land is desirable as a possession.

Alexandra’s success as a farmer is predicated upon her understanding of the landscape. While her understanding, love, and yearning may allow her success as a farmer and display a particular ethic of environmental stewardship, her actions do not entirely resolve anxiety over what is lost in the process of settling the landscape. While the novel seems to present a “wise use” environmental ethic—an ethic of farming with some ecological awareness—deeper ambivalence and anxiety about this process arise. Deep ambivalence about the process of settling the landscape becomes clear in moments
of rupture in the text. Anxieties over confinement, enclosure, and restriction arise in plots concerning Ivar, Mrs. Lee, Frank, and Marie.

In many ways, these anxieties evoke a story of confinement that haunts this novel: the total erasure of Plains Indians from the Nebraska landscape. Cather imagines the landscape as a blank slate, removing any traces of previous occupants. In his article “Pastoralism and its Discontents,” Mike Fisher takes to task feminist critics of Cather’s work who reinforce an “idyllic view of Plains history” that is premised upon the idea that “what the first settlers had to clear was merely the land.” He argues that many feminist readings of origin stories such as O Pioneers! and My Ántonia reinforce the idea that the land was empty, that they “ignore the most significant Other in Nebraskan history: the Native Americans whose removal was seen as a sine qua non for successful white settlement” (31). In her discussion of the motifs of enclosure and confinement in O Pioneers!, Melissa Ryan claims that “the removal of native populations to reservations—the confinement upon which the ‘moral victory’ of the pioneer’ depends—constitutes the most deeply disavowed layer of meaning embedded in Cather’s complex motif of enclosure” (278). Alexandra is represented as the first person to look upon the landscape with love. When Alexandra looks at the landscape of the Divide, the narrator exclaims, “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning” (25). This notion that a pioneer such as Alexandra must be the first to value the land properly denies the presence of Native Americans.

Alexandra’s success changes the terms of the frontier narrative, reveals the limitations of such a narrative, and, ultimately, reinforces it. The consequences of her
successful ordering, fencing, and limiting of the Divide are shown in narratives of loss. The most striking example of this loss is the transformation of Ivar. More than any other character in the novel, Ivar seems to be in touch with the natural world. His uncanny ability to understand animals and his strange dwelling place set him beyond the edges of society. He is said to live in “the rough country across the county line, where no one lived but some Russians” (13). During their youth, Alexandra’s brothers are frightened of him. He lives like an old world religious ascetic, with few comforts and sustained by a naturalist religious ethic that does not permit him to harm any of God’s creatures. Even his home is barely discernible from the earth:

You would not have seen [the door or window] at all but for the reflection of the sunlight upon the four panes of window glass. And that was all you saw. Not a shed, not a corral, not even a path broken in the curly grass. But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar’s dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done. (15)

The narrator seems sympathetic to Ivar’s lifestyle, describing with loving detail the view from his front door, “the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant,” that such a lifestyle is infinitely preferable to “human dwellings” with their “broken food, the bits of broken china, the old wash-boilers and tea-kettle thrown into the sunflower patch” (15). Ivar’s naturalist ethic ties seamlessly into his religion. He tells Lou and Oscar, “I hope you boys never shoot wild birds…. [T]hese wild things are God’s birds. He watches over them and counts them, as we do our cattle; Christ says so in the New Testament.” At
night, Ivar wraps up in “a buffalo robe” (16). More than any other character, Ivar represents a conservationist, naturalist ethic with which Cather seems to sympathize.

In the face of progress and development, however, such an ethic cannot be sustained. While Alexandra uses Ivar’s advice to her advantage, flying in the face of her conventional brothers, Ivar himself does not profit by it. He loses his land “through mismanagement.” This mismanagement is presumably his failure to break the sod and turn the prairie into productive farmland as Alexandra has done. As the land becomes more settled, the nature of Ivar’s strangeness changes. In “The Neighboring Fields” and later, the novel no longer attributes Ivar’s strangeness to his relationship with the natural world; it is attributed to his old world religion and old world ways. His strangeness now has roots in his old-world cultural values and an inability to adapt to the new American society, rather than rooted in his lifestyle or relationship with the land. He is no longer the mysterious outlier who communicates with animals; he is more like a farm hand assigned to mundane tasks; he “hitches and unhitches the work-teams and looks after the health of the stock” (33). She takes him in to her home, and when her brothers challenge her decision, at bringing the “disgraceful object” into her home, she promises that she’ll “keep him at home” (39), safely in the barn, within Alexandra’s expanded domestic realm. Even his “buffalo robe” has become a “buffalo coat” (34). He is now thoroughly domesticated. No longer is he a strange shaman-like character at the edge of society; he has become a harmless old crackpot from the old country who needs to be controlled in order to be kept out of the way of machinery of the new nation’s civilization and laws (the asylum with which Lou and Oscar threaten Alexandra). The change in Ivar’s character is one of the most striking representations of domestication in the novel. Ryan
claims that Ivar “becomes the human testament to pioneering.... As the task of the pioneer is to make nature productive, Ivar must be transformed from unproductive wilderness into a productive labor force.” By the end of the novel, Ivar has been incorporated into the structures of civilization, even if he is relegated to laboring in the barn.

The reconfiguration of Ivar from the natural to the domestic feels like one of the greatest losses in the novel. He understands his own place at the edges of this civilization:

The way here is for all to do alike. I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions. At home, in the old country, there were many like me, who had been touched by God, or who had seen things in the graveyard at night and were different afterward. We thought nothing of it, and let them alone. But here, if a man is different in his feet or in his head, they put him in the asylum.... 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. (36)

Alexandra defuses this criticism with humor, the joke that they will “start an asylum for old-time people” in which Ivar can be comfortable and Mrs. Lee “can do all the old things in the old way, and have as much beer as she wants” (37). Cather defuses the threat of the asylum with Alexandra’s assurance that her status as a wealthy and respected landowner and her knowledge of the law will keep Ivar out of harm’s way. Despite this joking reassurance, Alexandra’s alternative asylum, a place for people who adhere to older, less confined ways of thinking or acting, is still an asylum. An asylum can serve as a refuge from threatening social forces, but it is also cut off from society. It has no relevance to the progress of the nation. Alexandra’s asylum would be a place for acting out anachronistic desires; the values it would shelter have no place in the modern world. The very term “asylum” evokes the confinement of Native Americans to reservations and the rhetoric that framed native culture as anachronistic and better off when confined.
The threat of confinement also lurks in conventional marriage relationships in which men dominate women. When one of Alexandra’s hired Swedish girls marries a much older farmhand, Marie exclaims, “I’ve no patience with Signa, marrying that grumpy fellow!” Alexandra responds, “I suppose she was too much afraid of Nelse to marry anyone else. Now that I think of it, most of my girls have married men they were afraid of. I believe there is a good deal of the cow in most Swedish girls” (90). While marriage may be confining, this passage implies that some women want to be confined. Some things are not wild. Even happy marriages like that of Amédée and Angélique have the potential to end in sorrow, if not violence, as Amédée falls ill and dies less than a year after his wedding. The only married couple who survive in this novel are Signa and Nelse, and, potentially, Alexandra and Carl, though the novel ends before their marriage. Signa, having a “good deal of the cow” in her character, seems to run no risk of challenging the restrictions of a domineering husband. Unlike Marie, she is fully domesticated. Just like the asylum, the institution of marriage also carries some threat of confinement for independent women.

The motif of the threat of violence against wild things weaves through the novel. In “The Wild Lands,” Alexandra takes her brothers to visit Ivar. Although his home borders a pond teeming with waterfowl, Alexandra forbids her brother Lou to bring a gun. Lou looks wistfully at the ducks in Ivar’s pond, but Alexandra insists that Ivar “can smell dead birds,” and that killing a bird would make him so angry that he wouldn’t talk with them (14). The children’s visit gives Ivar the opportunity to explain his naturalist religious ethic regarding wild creatures. Later, in “Neighboring Fields,” Emil sets out to hunt ducks in the pond near the Shabatas farm. Marie takes part in the hunt with him, but
when she touches the dead birds, she recoils and cries, "Oh, Emil, why did you?... They were having such a good time, and we’ve spoiled it all for them.... Ivar’s right about wild things. They’re too happy to kill. You can tell just how they felt when they flew up. They were scared, but they didn’t really think anything could hurt them. No, we won’t do that any more" (49-50). Her dismay at the death of wild birds foreshadows Marie’s own death.

Marie herself represents wildness. Alexandra calls her “a little brown rabbit” (52). Early in the novel, John Bergson describes the land as “a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces” (8). Marie, too, has an independent spirit that chafes at restraints. Her description of married life with Frank curiously resembles John Bergson’s description of the breaking of the wild landscape:

- The years seemed to stretch before her like the land; spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little trees, the patient lives; always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain—until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman, who might cautiously be released. (98)

Marie does not entirely accept the confinement of marriage. Even before she becomes romantically involved with Emil, she often steals away to the outdoors. Frank is controlling, jealous, and insensitive to the things that give her pleasure, like keeping fresh flowers growing in the house even through the winter. In this way, Marie may be read as a cipher for a wild female nature dominated by an unsympathetic male force. Frank treats Marie and his land badly. He does not appreciate Marie, does not manage his land well, and does not respect or appreciate the natural world. Marie’s father characterizes Frank as a “stuffed shirt” and criticizes him for abandoning his mother to hard work at her own farm on the Elbe in the old country. He compares Frank’s smooth hands to his
mothers': "Like an old horse's hoofs they are—and this fellow wearing gloves and rings!" (56). Frank spends more time reading newspapers and holding political discussions with other bad farmers like Lou Bergson than he does tending his land. Rather than spending a "clear and brilliant" spring day working in the fields, Frank goes to Saint-Agnes to spend the day talking with men at the saloon. On this same day, Marie becomes inspired by the beauty of the wind in the orchard and declares "I'm a good Catholic, but I think I could get along with caring for trees if I hadn't anything else" (56-59). Frank, by contrast, repeatedly fails to notice the beauty of the natural world.

The relationship between Marie and Emil grows like a weed in the rainy summer before he leaves for Mexico. It grows wild, rooted in the natural world. Their relationship takes place almost entirely outdoors, and their final embrace occurs beneath the white mulberry tree. When Emil seeks Marie out after Amédée's funeral, he doesn't find her in the house, but tells himself, "anything that reminded him of her would be enough, the orchard, the mulberry tree" (102). These natural elements serve as symbols for Marie, showing her own link with the natural world. He finds her lying in the grass beneath the white mulberry tree. When Frank finds them, he hears their conversation, "a murmuring sound, perfectly inarticulate, as low as the sound of water coming from a spring, where there is no fall, and where there are no stones to fret it" (103). Even after their death, natural images represent Emil and Marie. The narrator describes the scene of the murder: "the stained, slippery grass, the darkened mulberries, told only half the story. Above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies... were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows... and in the long grass by the fence the last wild roses of the year
opened their pink hearts to die” (106). Every aspect of their relationship seems natural, and Frank hunts them like the wild ducks in the pond.

Ironically, Frank’s murder of Marie and Emil, his attempt to confine his wife, leads him to incarceration. Melissa Ryan claims, “Murdering Marie merely literalizes the violence of taming the wilderness, of breaking her spirit; and if the activity of the pioneer necessarily implies containment, it is then ironically appropriate that Frank is effectively incarcerated by his own attempt to ‘cultivate’” (284). Frank’s attempt to tame his wife resonates with the cultivation of the wild landscape, and the violence of his action leads to his own confinement. His action seems to stand as a symbol for all the violence of the frontier narrative. He attempts to control Marie, and when he can’t control her, he turns to violence. Significantly, Ivar, the representative of a naturalist religious ethic, discovers the murdered couple. He sees Frank’s rifle lying on the path, sees the bodies, and immediately falls upon his knees “as if his legs had been mowed from under him” (106).

Ivar’s connection with the natural world and abhorrence of guns emphasize the ways in which the killing of Marie and Emil connects to violence against the natural world. Even the way he falls as if mowed like wheat or grass evokes the way in which death is a part of cultivating the prairie.

In contrast to the violence in Whitman’s poem where eager pioneers ravage a fertile landscape, the violence in Cather’s novel occurs mostly between humans. The latter part of the novel is dominated by human relationships. Joseph Meeker notes that in these relationships, “greed and jealousy [lead] to murder and suffering.” He points out Alexandra’s discussion with Carl, in which she says, “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” (122). This statement and the focus on human relationships, argues Meeker, are evidence that “the land is no longer the focus of attention, except as an object to be possessed.... The natural world, here as everywhere, is defined and given value by the people who inhabit it” (80). While I do agree that Cather places a great deal of emphasis on the lives of the people who inhabit the land, I disagree that O Pioneers! defines and gives value to the natural world by the people of the Divide. The anxiety over confinement expressed in the lives of the people echoes an anxiety over confinement of the land.

In looking out over Alexandra’s ordered fields and gardens, Carl Linstrum tells Alexandra “‘I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, ‘Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?’”3 (46). Carl’s sentiments of loss are not the only examples of regret in this novel. As much as O Pioneers! seems to revise the frontier narrative, the haunting presence of confinement and violence cannot be expunged from the novel. At the end of the novel, after Alexandra returns to her farm from a visit Frank in prison, she tells Carl, “‘There is great peace here... and freedom... I thought when I came out of that prison... that I should never feel free again. But I do, here.’ Alexandra took a deep breath and looked off into the red west” (121-122). These lines evoke the most cherished ideas of the frontier narrative—that in the West lies freedom and self-determination. Yet even in these

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3 Translated in the text as “Where are you, where are you, my most beloved country?”
triumphant moments, confined figures such as Frank come to the surface. The novel cannot completely exorcise the ghosts of violence and confinement that haunt such a story.
Chapter 3

"Real Indian Life": Nature and Narrative in Mourning Dove’s Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range

Mourning Dove’s frontier romance Cogewea, written in 1912-1914 but not published until 1927, has received increasing critical attention over the past several years. The novel’s popularity is timely, for, as Victoria Lamont claims, “Cogewea highlights crucial issues in Native American literary studies.” Lamont notes that Cogewea addresses the recovery of tradition and ritual in modern Native American life, subversively appropriates “Euroamerican literary forms” such as the Western romance and the seduction tale, and raises complex questions of authenticity due to the heavy editorial hand of Lucellus McWhorter, the novel’s non-native editor (369). In form, Cogewea is a typical Western romance, a sentimental story with echoes of a seduction tale in which a plucky heroine is nearly ruined by a rakish Easterner. Just in the nick of time, the heroine realizes her mistake, and her mixed blood lover steps in to save (mostly) the day. Within this stereotypical story, however, the novel does some extraordinary subversive work. It makes the radical claim that Native Americans are not a “vanishing race” but rather a people of the present. Further, by layering the conventional romance plot with narratives from Okanogan oral tradition, Mourning Dove subtly makes the genre her own. The main character is a strong and authoritative figure who gives voice to the problems she faces as a “half-blood” woman and, in so doing, drastically revises the dominant Euroamerican understanding of the frontier. She even voices vehement criticism of the treatment of Native Americans. In Cogewea, Mourning Dove gives voice to the complex problems faced by Native American women in the assimilationist era. She uses her characters’ mixed-blood status to dramatize these questions and to negotiate the possibilities for Native American life on the frontier.
Although the text has received increasing attention in recent years, few critics have focused on representations of or relationships with nature/land/the other-than-human world in this novel. Yet attitudes toward nature are at the center of Cogewea. Early in the novel, the heroine’s address to a rattlesnake shows the ways in which Cogewea claims both the Native and Euroamerican sides of her heritage in order forge a new relationship with nature and a new form of empowerment. Just before shooting the head off a rattlesnake that has caused her horse to throw her, Cogewea pauses to address the snake:

Miserable creature of a despised race! Look upon the sun for the last time, for you are going to die. I know all about your standing with the tribes. My uncle has told me of your tahmanawis power for doing secret evil to the people. Your ‘medicine’ is strong and my grandmother would not hurt you. But I am not my grandmother! I am not a full-blood—only a breed—a sitkum Injun and that breaks the charm of your magic with me. I do not fear you! Besides, I happen to know of the machinations of one of your progenitors in a certain garden several thousand snows ago, where he deceived and made trouble for two of my ancestors. An ancient book contains a law wherein is said something about a woman a bustin’ your durned head; and I am that woman. (26)

In this passage, Cogewea expresses a multivalent relationship to the natural world. Her mixed-blood status allows her to claim a form of empowerment that is expressed through her relationship with the land. She claims her Native mother’s people’s relationship to the land and its non-human inhabitants, influenced by tradition and stories, but she also claims that the blood of her white father allows her to escape some of the rules that govern Native relationships to the natural world. In this address, Cogewea claims the power of both sides of her heritage and emphasizes female power. She handily switches codes, using rhetoric that alternates between Biblical grandiosity, Okanogan language, re-situated racist discourse, and cowboy slang. In this manner, Cogewea shows herself to be conversant in all of these dialects, and she appropriates them for her own use, to work out her standing with respect to the rattlesnake, and, by extension, her status in the world. By occupying all of these discourses, Cogewea acknowledges herself as
positioned between and within all of these identities. She claims cultural associations with Adam and Eve, with her native mother and grandmother, and thus as a “breed.” She acknowledges the abjection associated with the term “breed,” yet from this place of abjection, she achieves a form of empowerment. She elevates the “breed” to a position of power, a position that allows her multiple avenues for action and ways of relating to the natural world.

Despite this form of power and these many possibilities for relating to the natural world, Cogewea’s cultural status also makes her vulnerable. The romance plot of this novel highlights the ways in which white society and the American government mistreated Native Americans. Cogewea’s romance with Alfred Densmore, the white “tenderfoot” from the East, progresses to the point of ruin because of Densmore’s colonialist desire to get his hands on the land and livestock he believes Cogewea possesses. When he finds that she has no land, that the small amount of money she has withdrawn from her Indian Bureau account is all that she has, he ties her to a tree, steals the money, and races back East.

While Cogewea is, at the surface, a typical frontier romance, it also critiques the oppression of Native Americans both by directly criticizing their treatment and by upsetting the hierarchical associations of culture/nature, male/female, white/native. Relationships with the natural world are essential to the way in which this novel negotiates the status of Native Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century. Using perspectives from ecocriticism, and close readings of Cogewea and select contemporaneous texts, I examine the ways in which Cogewea revises the typical Western romance’s understanding of nature. I argue that Cogewea critiques colonialist exploitation of the land and presents a vision of the natural world in which the living landscape is inscribed with culture and vice versa. This relationship with the natural
world both provides possibilities for Cogewea’s empowerment and highlights the unjust
treatment of Native people.

“Vacation Every Day”: Nature and Native Americans in American Texts

In order to understand the ways in which Mourning Dove’s work contests dominant
notions of nature and Native American life, we must first explore those dominant notions and the
ways they were expressed in literature. Most frontier texts by Euro-American authors refrain
from any mention of prior native inhabitants at all, or represent them as anachronistic markers of
a past already lost in nostalgia. One of the most persistent tropes of Native Americans in
literature has been the myth of the “Vanishing Indian,” a nostalgic appropriation of “Indianness”
that understands native cultures as inevitably vanishing when faced with white civilization.
Thus, native culture is understood as a mysterious, exotic force that becomes available for
consumption once the actual inheritors of that culture are contained. Once most Native
American people were safely ensconced in reservations, no longer a threat to white society,
Euroamericans could appreciate the ancient (but disappeared) culture that Native peoples
possessed. Historian Anne Farrar Hyde cites a 1914 guidebook from a western railroad line that
“explained that until the Apaches had been ‘decimated and rendered harmless,’ they could not
form ‘a romantic background to a thriving Anglo-Saxon civilization’” (231). Such a view neatly
situates Native American peoples in a romantic and irretrievable past.

Concurrent with the view that native peoples were inevitably doomed in contact with
Western civilization were assimilationist pressures aimed quite explicitly at eliminating Native
American culture. As critic Alanna Brown points out, “Mourning Dove was to live almost all of
her adult years in the period of extreme assimilationist pressures” which followed the end of the
United States government’s open military actions against Native Americans after the Wounded Knee massacre (1993, 274). Born between 1885 and 1888, Mourning Dove was part “of the first generation of inland Salish-speaking peoples to grow up on a reservation” (Brown 1993, 275). She experienced firsthand the repressive measures that characterized government Indian policy in this era. In her autobiography, Mourning Dove writes of her traumatic boarding school experience. Unable to speak English, she was thrown into an environment where other children were “forbidden to speak any native language.” She writes, “I was very much alone” (27-28).

The forced placement of Native children in boarding schools, allotment, and the opening of reservations to white settlement were all part of the assimilationist project. The rhetoric of assimilation alternated between an unabashed desire to eradicate native culture and a more benign but equally disastrous desire to “raise up” Native Americans into white culture. Those who were able to assimilate were understood as “Good Indians.” In a 1911 newspaper article one reporter claimed that assimilation would work for the Blackfeet because they “are the highest types of Indian. Their integrity, fortitude, chastity, and admirable dignity place them above all other tribes of savages” (Great Northern Railway, Reel 6, Frame 6). The designation of “Good Indians” was also given to the Sioux in a similar article whose headline read “Once Savage Sioux Good Indians Now: Peaceful Tillers of the Soil, While Children Go to School” (Reel 6, Frame 8). In order to become “good Indians,” Native Americans had to adopt Euroamericans’ way of relating to the land, ways of farming that allowed them to take part in the capitalist exchange and commodification of land. Being “good Indians” required subscribing to the idea that land’s primary purpose is to serve as a resource for an extractive culture. The benign rhetoric of assimilation belied the violence of cultural erasure.
As writers re-imagined the frontier, they largely wrote Native Americans out of the scene. In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins notes that she was unable to find any Native American characters in the western novels and films she studied. Evacuated of previous occupants, the landscape becomes a metaphor, a place for the working out of metaphysical questions particular to Euroamerican culture. Tompkins argues that in western texts “the monolithic, awe-inspiring character of the landscape seems to reflect a desire for self transcendence.... In representing space that is superhuman but man-made, domineering and domineered, the Western both glorifies nature and suppresses it simultaneously” (76). A powerful example of the transcendental properties of the landscape appears in a description from Owen Wister’s wildly popular 1902 western *The Virginian*. The Western landscape is “A world of crystal light, a land without evil, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis” (61). Here, the Western landscape becomes the ideal space for a renewed Euroamerican origin story, saturated with Christian teleology. This view also owes much to Emerson, as, according to Tompkins, “Nature is the one transcendent thing, the one thing larger than man (and it is constantly portrayed as immense), the ideal toward which human nature strives.” Yet, she argues, this ideal is not spiritual, but material. “The landscape’s final invitation—merger—promises complete materialization. Meanwhile, the qualities that nature implicitly possesses—power, endurance, rugged majesty—are the ones that men desire while they live. And so men imitate the land in Westerns; they try to look as much like nature as possible” (72). This desire for union with the landscape also necessitates an erasure or supplanting of previous occupants. Through uniting with the land, Western heroes make the land new, erasing (or supplanting) previous cultures. Through their intimate knowledge of and physical relationship with the landscape, Western heroes gain a legitimate claim to the land. In
this understanding, the frontier is a place for enacting a masculine fantasy of regeneration. Western landscapes are not marked by the traditional habitation of actual people, unless those people are long gone and can provide a “romantic backdrop.” The primary characteristic of this landscape is its emptiness, its availability for domination, and its transformative properties. Though the landscapes Tompkins discusses are largely southwestern, the texts resonate with the persistent mythology of frontier that permeated American literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and these myths are certainly relevant to anyone working in the Western genre.

Along with the emptiness of the frontier landscape, another persistent trope of western romance is that of its regenerative power. The landscape of the West was to serve the needs of weary city-dwellers. The West was understood as a place closer to nature, or at least with more nature than the East. In this manner, nature in itself becomes a commodity that weary city-dwellers can consume. In Therese Broderick’s 1909 novel *The Brand*, Easterner Jim Fletcher travels west to tap into this regenerative power. Fletcher tells a fellow railway traveler, “[T]he worry and strain of settling my father’s affairs used me up generally, and now I am going West to recuperate. I love the Western life, with its sunshine, its out-of-doors, its fresh air and vast breathing space. I wouldn’t exchange three summers on the range for all my life in the city” (13). In this understanding, the West was not a place for living but rather a place for recuperating from the pressures of modern life (read: white city life). Native life, too, was not understood as a real mode of living but rather as something outside the realm of modern culture. One 1921 newspaper photo depicting a teepee in a treed setting is captioned “Vacation Every Day!” (Great Northern Railway, Reel 6, Frame 65). Native American life was viewed as a way of life that had already passed, one that could now be taken up to fulfill a need for leisure and
escape within white culture. This view simultaneously exalts and marginalizes Native American culture.

The nostalgic view of Native American life rendered obsolete the native peoples who actually lived in the West. Mourning Dove seems have to have felt the marginalizing effect of this view, for she tells McWhorter that she wants to show scenes of “real Indian life.” In a letter to McWhorter, who had invited her to participate in a speaking tour long before the publication of Cogewea, Mourning Dove notes that she would like to be able to show “either moving pictures or slides of real Indian life[…]. Such as the Indian of today in their modern home and of the lower class in tepees and their progress in farming.” She also expresses her desire to turn her texts into films that would represent Native peoples who feel just as deeply as Euroamericans (12 September 1916). In a later letter to McWhorter, she writes, “I have out-lined another novel of real Indian life[…]. The story is going to be a great movie story and I am going to send it to one of the greatest actress [sic] of the day” (4 November, year unknown). Mourning Dove wrote that she wished to reach a wider audience, both for her own success and in order to put “real Indians,” not just romanticized, fetishized images in front of audiences.

Writing “Real Indians” into the Western: Representation and Narrative Authority

Mourning Dove struggled against the racism associated with dominant representations of Native Americans. She clearly understood the way in which representations of Native peoples in literature perpetuated racist ideals. In Cogewea, she writes that her Native Americans “had suffered as much from the pen as from the bayonet of conquest” (92). Therese Broderick’s novel The Brand—which figures prominently in Cogewea—makes clear that “Indian blood” is a stain for a modern character. Throughout Broderick’s novel, when the heroine Bess Fletcher loses her
temper, she spits out “Indian” as an epithet. The best thing that Jim Fletcher has to say about his Harvard-educated “quarter-blood” friend Henry West is, “I never thought of him as an Indian, and anyway—that is his greatest charm. Whatever else he may be, he certainly is a gentleman” (27). Later, in a moment of vexation at her brother, who is chasing down a stray bull with Henry West, Bess Fletcher exclaims, “James, have you lost all your sense to follow that—that—Indian! Yes, that is all you are now—an Indian thirsting for the blood of your victim!” (81). In these statements, “Indian” is associated with “nature” in a very negative sense. To be Indian, in this understanding, is to be closer to the instinctual, closer to beasts. As discussed in Chapter 1, in Euroamerican teleology being closer to nature places one on the lower end of a progressive evolution towards culture, in the hierarchy that values culture over nature. Henry West is most decidedly not Indian and, of course, superior, when he is displaying gentlemanly traits of his Euroamerican education, when he is enmeshed in white culture and even passing as white.

The culmination of the romantic plot of *The Brand* demands a marriage. But before Bess can marry Henry West, she must forget the stigma—both literal and figurative—of his Indianness. She must forget not only a violent act of retribution that West has performed on an enemy (while Bess watched in horror, he used a branding iron to scar a man who had attempted to abduct and rape Bess) but also his Indian blood. In the final line of the novel, Bess exclaims, “Henry West! I—have forgotten!” (271). By representing both West’s act of violence and his Indian blood as “the brand,” this novel makes clear that Indian blood is as much a stain on one’s moral character as an act of excessive violence.

Mourning Dove evidently understood the resonance of this representation of Indian blood. Her reaction to *The Brand* was so strong that she included both the book and its author in *Cogewea*. Some critics have even argued that it was a reaction to reading *The Brand* that spurred
her to write Cogewea. At a key moment in Cogewea’s narrative, the heroine reads The Brand. Cogewea herself is obviously disgusted with the book. The narrator decries The Brand’s theme as “an unjust representation of Indian sentiment and racial traits” (88). As Cogewea’s rage grows, the narrator lambasts Broderick: “The writer, wholly ignorant of her subject, instead of extending a helping hand, had dealt her unfortunate hero [Henry West] a ruthless blow.” When Jim approaches Cogewea after she has read the novel, she exclaims, “I almost hate myself today. Every thing is against me, even to this maligning, absurdity of a book. The thing does nothing but slam the breeds! as if they were reptiles instead of humans. You are no good! along with all the rest of us. You are only an Injun!—a miserable breed!—not higher than the dust on your white brothers’ feet” (88-89). In her self-loathing, Cogewea displays a degree of internalization of The Brand’s racist rhetoric. Further, descriptions of reptiles and dust as lower than humans clearly reinforce the primacy of humans over the other-than-human world and reinforces the association of Native American with a subjugated natural world. In her disgust at the book, Cogewea “with sudden impulse ... threw the hateful volume to the floor” (90). The problem of racist representations of Native Americans in literature, however, cannot easily be thrown aside.

The presence of this book in Cogewea exemplifies the problem of mis-representation of Native Americans in literature written by white authors. It calls into question the idea that a non-Native writer can truly represent Native Americans and makes clear the injustice of these representations. Cogewea “reflected bitterly how her race had had the worst of every deal since the landing of the lordly European on their shores; how they had suffered as much from the pen as from the bayonet of conquest” (91-92). However, the narrative also pokes fun at the idea that superior white authors can easily pick up the information that they need to adequately represent “primitive” culture. A few pages after Cogewea’s diatribe against representations of Native
peoples in literature, Therese Broderick actually appears in the text. Jim claims that he and some
of “the boys” had “stuffed” the author with falsified Indian names and information for use in her
novel. Jim relates:

A bunch of us riders was together when this here lady comes up and begins askin’
questions ‘bout the buffaloes; and Injun names of flyin’, walkin’ and swimmin’ things
and a lot of bunk. Well, you know how the boys are. They sure locoed that there gal to a
finish; and while she was a dashin’ the information down in her little tablet, we was a
thinkin’ up more lies to tell her. (93-94)

Cogewea herself expresses the problem: “It is practically impossible for an alien to get at our
correct legendary lore” (93-94). In this manner, Cogewea challenges the very possibility that a
white writer could accurately represent Native culture. This challenge complicates the notion
that Euroamerican culture is superior to and more complex than Native culture, but it also brings
attention to the vexed relationship between Native writers and white editors. Ironically, it would
be Mourning Dove’s authorship and authority that would be challenged after the publication of
her novel.

Questions of authenticity and authorship have dogged Cogewea ever since its publication,
largely due to McWhorter’s heavy editorial hand. The frontspiece of the first edition frames the
novel as an ethnographic narrative written by Mourning Dove but “Given through Sho-Pow-
Tan,” McWhorter’s Yakima name. Mourning Dove approved many of the changes that
McWhorter made prior to final publication, but evidently did not see or approve the final
manuscript. In a letter to McWhorter, after seeing the published book, she writes:

I […] am surprised at the changes that you made. I think they are fine, and you made a
tasty dressing like a cook would do, with a fine meal. […] I felt like it was someone
else’s book and not mine at all. In fact the finishing touches are put there by you, and I
have never seen it. […] You surely roasted the Shoapees [whites] strong. I think a little
too strong to get their sympathy. (June 4, 1928)

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Determining exactly which portions of the book received these “finishing touches” is a nearly impossible task. Cathryn Halverson claims that “McWhorter’s ‘tasty dressing’ not only overstepped the bounds of editorial propriety, but, more important, counters Mourning Dove’s own assertions” (109). Indeed, McWhorter’s preface to the novel does indicate a viewpoint that contrasts with Mourning Dove’s stated goals. He counters Mourning Dove’s claim for Indian emotionality by his description of “a race renowned for unemotional stocism [sic]” (11). Halverson points out McWhorter’s understanding that Cogewea is “in essence an elegy for cowboy life” (110). He closes his preface with the statement, “Her characters are all from actual life, and throughout the narrative, she has endeavored to picture the period as she actually saw it—an Indian—in the closing of the days of the great cattle range, and the decadence of its King, the cow-puncher” (12). Through these contradictions, Cogewea itself becomes a site of contestation over how the West and the frontier are to be depicted, a contest between the mythical understanding of the frontier as a bygone place inhabited by romantic cowpunchers and stoic Indians or as a real place where a collision of cultures can provide productive ways to renegotiate identity within the frontier landscape.

McWhorter himself seems to have changed his understanding of the goals of the work over the years. In a letter sent to his friend J. P. Maclean in 1916, he notes:

The story is a true depiction of events [on the Flathead] at that time. It graphically portrays the social status of the Indian, especially the half-bloods; or ‘breeds.’ It is given from the Indian standpoint and by one well qualified to write on the subject. Mourning Dove rode in the great roundup of the buffaloes sold to the Canadian Government; and is well versed in the ways of the range. (January 13, 1916)

He goes on in the letter to ask advice regarding annotating the work, speculating that “notes could be given explaining that certain narrations are true and as gathered from the old Indians.”
At this point, McWhorter had not edited the novel, but from the start it was clear that the simple fact of Mourning Dove’s authorship was not necessarily believable without support. Whether due to pressures from the publishing market or to prejudices ingrained in his dominant cultural position, McWhorter’s appeal to white-authored ethnographic studies reveal an anxiety about granting authority to a Native American woman’s voice. McWhorter’s annotations, along with the frontpiece that designates him as the interpreter, give Cogewea an uneven focus. The ethnographic framing of the novel seems to be at distinct odds with the conventional romance plot that Mourning Dove had written.

Undoubtedly, McWhorter also added political content to the novel, either to increase its political relevance, from his point of view, or to express his anger and frustration at dealing with the Indian Bureau. In 1922 he wrote to Mourning Dove to tell her that he was re-writing “a few pages” which include some discussion of the Indian Bureau as an “octopus [sic]” (140). Many critics convincingly argue that some of Cogewea’s most vehement outbursts against the Indian Bureau, such as the exclamation, “a nasty smear, the government escutcheon!” are attributable to McWhorter. Indeed, his understanding of the political goals of the novel is made clear in his description of Cogewea from a letter to the Honorable Joseph W. Latimer, dated August 25, 1924:

Mourning Dove, a woman of the Okanogan tribe, has written a story depicting the status of the Indian, including the half-bloods, in contrast to the social and political standards of the land. It is correct in its essence, and is historically and ethnologically annotated. The manuscript deals with the blight of the Bureau system, and is outspoken in denunciation of the Government’s policy towards its ‘wards,’... At this time when the public’s attention is being drawn to the cures of the Indian Bureau, I feel that the publication of this work, coming as it does from the pen of an Indian, would be a potent factor in bringing about a reformation and cleaning up of the Indian Department.

Though the content of the letter may have been designed to suit its audience, this letter does show that McWhorter’s editing added a layer of overt political involvement that did not figure in
Mourning Dove’s original goals for the book. Whether he framed it as ethnographic narrative or as a politically potent text, Lucellus McWhorter surely altered some of the text in attempting to provide a political or ethnographic purpose for the novel. Despite attempts to frame the novel as ethnography and despite the unevenness that political additions cause in the text, Mourning Dove’s novel still presents a compelling story of realistic Native American characters negotiating life at the close of the frontier. Despite the unevenness in the text, the focus of Cogewea remains a romantic plot that deliberately subverts some of the most persistent tropes of the western romance genre.

Representing Nature, Challenging Frontier Myths of the Western Genre

Working within this genre, Mourning Dove must take on some of the persistent myths about the frontier that it represents. By challenging Euroamerican authority to represent Native culture, Cogewea upsets, to a degree, the notion that Native culture is more primitive and somehow lower than Euroamerican culture. By ridiculing and “stuffing” the author of The Brand, the mixed blood ranch hands deny the white author’s attempts to appropriate their culture for her literary uses. They deny her right to represent them, and in so deny the idea that Native culture is so primitive as to be easily comprehensible to a culture that understands itself as superior. In order to challenge the hierarchy of white over Native, one must also challenge the ideology that associates Native with nature, white with culture, and understands culture to be superior to nature. Cogewea challenges these associations and the notion of hierarchy itself. In her novel, Mourning Dove presents a world view that links culture and nature intimately and that shows white culture to be more rapacious and more destructive than Native culture. She does not simply reverse the hierarchy but complicates the notion of hierarchy altogether. Mourning
Dove’s novel challenges the assumption that nature is a vehicle for self-expression by members of the dominant culture as well as the notion that nature’s only value is as a resource for culture. In her characterization of Cogewea, Mourning Dove depicts another way to relate to the other-than-human world.

From our first introduction to Cogewea, we are made aware of her special, mixed relationship to the other-than-human or “natural” world. On the second page of the text, a description of her childhood makes clear both her mixed-blood status and the way this blood allows her a special relationship to the land:

Life in the open, the sweat house and cold river baths, had stamped [Cogewea’s and her sisters’] every fiber with bounding vitality.... Cogewea...could ride well and made long strolls into the bordering mountains. These runaway trips were not unattended with danger and consequently were a source of considerable solicitude on the part of the old grandparent. Unlike other children, the repeated warnings that Sne-nah would catch her, had no effect. Contrary to all precedent, the little ‘breed’ defied this dreaded devourer of children by extending her rambles farther and still farther into the luring wilderness. Like some creature born of the wild, neither fancied nor actual dangers deterred her from her set course. (16)

This passage introduces Cogewea’s special relationship with the landscape and with culture. By “extending her rambles,” she challenges the limitations set up for her by Okanogan culture. The description of Cogewea’s actions as “contrary to all precedent,” undercuts the notion that wildness is a fundamental characteristic of Native American life. Instead, this passage shows that Native culture has its own set of rules and restrictions. In this passage, Cogewea’s especially close relationship with the other-than-human world is not predicated upon her Native blood or her white blood, but rather is a result of her desire to challenge cultural restrictions. This notion contests the idea of the “Natural Indian,” the essentialist notion that all Native individuals have a close relationship to the landscape by simple virtue of their Native blood.
Rather, Cogewea will negotiate her relationship to the landscape by occupying a variety of cultural positions.

Cogewea’s ability to inhabit different positions, as shown in her address to the rattlesnake, complicates the stiff Euroamerican hierarchical binary that separates culture from nature and places the former above the latter, associating Native with nature and Euroamerican with culture. Cogewea’s view of the landscape that surrounds her is also based upon her understanding of her own cultural history. The landscape, for Cogewea, provides a living record of the history of her Native ancestors. She views the landscape as imprinted with the history.

Looking out from the summit of Buffalo Butte, she literally sees the past re-enacted:

A vision of the dim misty past rose up before her. The stately buffalo roved in the distance, while the timid antelope stood sentinel on the neighboring heights. An Indian village on the move, wound its way like a great mottled serpent over the crest of the highest ridge. It reached the brow, where each separate horse and rider showed in sharp silhouette against the horizon, then vanished over the crest. The girl arose and stood as in a trance. Slowly, with outstretched arms she whispered. ‘My beautiful Eden! I love you! My valley and mountains! It is too bad that you be redeemed from the wild, once the home of my vanishing race and where the buffalo roamed at will. Where hunting was a joy to the tribesmen, who communed with the Great Spirit. I would that I had lived in those days,—that the blood of the white man had not condemned me an outcast among my own people.’ (109)

Jace Weaver describes this outburst as “a paean to the wider community,” (108), and, indeed, the community upon which Cogewea calls is wide; it includes the valley and mountains and extends into the past to include the history of people who lived in this place. Her relationship to the landscape is both familial and enmeshed in cultural history. She tells Densmore,

‘These are my prairies, my mountains, my Eden. I could live here always. I shall hate to leave them when the final summons comes. Wherever I go, I recall every outline of those embattled ranges, nor can the vision close at the grave. When away, I grow lonesome, as a child for its mother. I become heart-sick for a sight of those snow-shrouded peaks, so rich in legendary lore.’ (143).
In this exclamation, Cogewea expresses her familial relationship to the landscape. This place also contains a physical marker of the past in the form of a buffalo skull. This symbol provides her a reminder of the historical bond between the natural world and her cultural history.

"Colleague of my race, with him went our hopes, our ambition, and our life. A gift from the source of all existence, the buffalo was valued by the tribes above all animals. My nation was ruined when this, our larder, was destroyed by the invader. I can not forgive the wrong" (143).

In this instance, the interdependence of Native culture and nature is depicted as an ethical relationship, not a base or "savage" relationship. Rather than simply being closer to nature and therefore lower on the evolutionary ladder, such statements reveal a moral relationship with nature in which human culture is not inherently dominant over nature. The violation of this relationship by Euroamerican invaders is clearly depicted as morally "wrong." This association complicates the separation of culture and nature and clearly criticizes Euroamerican destructive relationships to the other-than-human world.

Cogewea sees history written not only on the valleys and ridges that she can view from the summit of her favorite musing spot, but also in the H-B ranch itself. As such, her view of the ranch shows ambivalence about the process of ranching. The ranch, though largely populated by "half-breed" cowboys, is owned and run by her sister’s white husband. The buildings and grounds provide a tangible example of the settling and appropriation of Native lands. Cathryn Halverson claims that "Cogewea is less concerned by the settlers’ threat to ranching than she is by the displacement of native Americans and destruction of the ‘wilderness’ to which ranching itself contributed. […] Cogewea is both fond of the ranch and the ranch culture it enables, and pained by its cost" (111). The narrator describes the H-B ranch as “constructed on allotted Indian lands,” but still “typical of the pioneer homes of certain parts of the West, and at one time
traceable across the continent" (31). In this description, the ranch itself takes part in the process of western settlement and displacement of native peoples. Within the house, Mourning Dove writes that “The floor was bare, save for the buffalo, bear and mountain lion skins scattered about. […] The walls were decorated by a few paintings portraying wild life, several antlers of deer and elk, while above the bookcase leaned the mounted head of a mighty buffalo bull.” The living quarters of the ranch are literally littered with markers of the conquest over the wilderness. Instead of serving a useful purpose, all of these items serve merely as decoration. The most significant of these items is the buffalo head. “Cogewea never looked upon this trophy without a pang of regret. The fixed glassy eyes haunted her, as a ghost of the past. With her people had vanished this monarch of the plains. The war-like whoop and the thunder of the herd were alike hushed in the silence of last sleep—and only the wind sighing a parting requiem” (31). Through these descriptions, the ranch itself is a monument to the appropriation of Native lands and the end of traditional rhythms of life.

Oral Narratives and Traditional Wisdom in the Modern Novel

The end of the buffalo—though it serves as a potent symbol of the way of life that colonialism and Manifest Destiny rendered impossible—does not, for Mourning Dove, mean the end of Native culture. Oral narratives and traditional ways of viewing the world, she seems to argue, are not dead. The very prominence of oral narration in Cogewea provides a distinct argument for the necessity of making such traditions a part of contemporary life. Both the Stemteemä and Cogewea repeatedly tell traditional stories throughout the novel. Stemteemä tells them to Cogewea, her sisters, Jim, and Densmore, while Cogewea tells such stories to Densmore alone. Events in the novel show these stories to have power, to represent truths about the world
and how to live in it. When Densmore questions the authenticity of a story that the Stemteemā has told about a white man who visited her tribe before Lewis and Clark, Cogewea responds, “Are oral impartations of mind-stored truths to be reckoned as naught? A fact, like the life germ of a seed, is no less a fact from having been stored for a time” (129). Later, Cogewea herself tells a traditional story when she chides Densmore for turning a frog on its back: “Oh, Alfred! Don’t do that to the poor little helpless thing. Besides, it will bring a storm sure. Indians claim that [...] if you turn the frog thus, she will look up at the sun and flirt with him as in the beginning. He hates her so badly that he will wrinkle his brow and a tempest gathers which wets the earth. This forces her— to find shelter out of his sight” (159-160). In Cogewea’s voicing of this story, we realize the connection between narrative and reality. Densmore’s flipping of the frog does indeed provoke a storm. These stories show both the truth value and the power invested in traditional Okanogan ways of understanding the world.

Despite her acceptance of these stories as truth, Cogewea disregards all of the traditional signs that warn against her relationship with Densmore. Later, Cogewea’s disregard of the truths taught by the Stemteemā’s story of Green-blanket Feet and by the sweat lodge rock leads nearly to her death, providing a lesson in itself. The story of Green-blanket Feet is particularly important, as it represents the Stemteemā’s passing on of tradition. She gathers Mary and Cogewea and tells them, “My grandchildren! I am now old and cannot stay with you many more snows. The story I am telling you is true and I want you to keep it after I am gone” (165). She goes on to relate the story of her best friend, who left her people for a white man who beat her and planned to kill her. Eventually, Green-blanket Feet escaped and made a perilous journey back to her people, where she said, “I am to blame! I preferred [the white man] to my own people and he drove me away” (176). This story is aimed directly at Cogewea. In an inverted
echo of *The Brand*, the grandmother says to her, “The grandchild is not full Shoyahpee [white]. She is only half! She must forget her white blood and follow after her Okanogan ancestors. To their women there came no shame.” Cogewea listens, but she does not obey. The narrator relates, “she rebelled at the thought that she must not love the fair-skinned Easterner too well” (177). When Cogewea’s sweat-lodge rock explodes—a sign of “misfortune, loss in a gambling game or other adventure” (241)—and even when she hears a “spirit voice” whispering “Beware! beware!” she doubts the signs’ truth. She says, “It can not be true this old Indian belief in the sweat house” (244). Cogewea disregards all of these signs as well as her grandmother’s disapproval, thus setting the stage for a re-evaluation of the importance of such traditional modes of wisdom. If only she had listened to the signs and had honored her grandmother’s wishes, she would have known not to trust Densmore.

The outcome of Cogewea’s relationship with Densmore provides another layering of oral narrative and written fiction. The novel itself can be read as a re-figuring of a traditional Okanogan oral narrative. Numerous critics have read Cogewea as a re-figuring of the Okanogan story of Chipmunk and Owl Woman.¹ According to the version included in *Coyote Stories*, Chipmunk (Kot-se-we-ah), a “gay, mischievous girl” (Fisher xii) is tricked out of her safe place in the service berry bush by Owl Woman (Snee-nah), who “travel[s] from camp to camp, eating children” (*Coyote Stories* 52). Chipmunk is wounded, but runs home to her grandmother, who hides her between two oyster shells. Owl-woman bribes Meadow Lark to find Chipmunk, then cuts out and eats Chipmunk’s heart. Chipmunk is brought back to life. In some accounts, this is done by Meadow Lark (Fisher xii). In *Coyote Stories*, the grandmother brings her back to life. In all versions, Coyote kills Owl-Woman by appealing to her vanity, tricking her into covering

¹ See Susan Bernadin, Dexter Fisher, and Victoria Lamont
herself with pitch and then pushing her into a fire. Mourning Dove alludes to this story in
_Cogewea_ from the very beginning of the novel, both by the heroine’s name and in the story that
for Cogewea, “the repeated warnings that Sne-nah would catch her, had no effect” (16). Victoria
Lamont argues, “With Densmore as the Owl woman figure, the plot of _Cogewea_ puts the
[traditional oral] lesson story in a contemporary, colonial context” (388). Lamont claims that the
purpose of this refiguring of the Owl-Woman story is “not only [to teach] Euramerican readers
about the humanity of Native American peoples but also [to teach] Native American readers both
to value their cultures and to recognize the many guises of colonization” (388). Susan Bernadin
notes that “Cogewea mistakenly considers herself exempt from the cultural authority of
traditional Okanogan beliefs. Mourning Dove recasts this Okanogan story to fit and articulate
the contemporary vulnerability of Native women in a threatening Anglo world” (501). In the
context of the romance plot, the cultural authority of Okanogan stories serve to foreshadow the
ruinous outcome of Cogewea’s relationship with Densmore.

The fact that Mourning Dove places these stories within a Western romance format
removes them from the realm of ethnographic narrative and gives them a new currency in the
realm of romantic fiction. Dexter Fisher notes that the result of this strategy “is a curious and
intriguing blend of oral and written forms” (xii). The blending of oral lesson stories and popular
Westerns is not as incongruous as it may seem. Victoria Lamont explains:

Similar to the way in which lesson stories both teach and entertain, early twentieth-
century popular novels were regarded both as entertainment and, for better or worse, as
powerful vehicles for the inculcation of values in the reader. _Cogewea_ is a lesson story in
written form, and the lesson it teaches is one of Native ‘survivance,’ to borrow Gerald
Vizenor’s term, rather than disappearance. (376)

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2 In _Manifest Manners_, Gerald Vizenor discusses “survivance”:
Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction,
or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and
victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense,
the estate of native survivancy. (vii)
If *Cogewea* teaches a lesson, it is that Native American traditions still have a vital place in the modern world and can provide guides for ways to live and ways to recognize colonialisit desires. Further, Susan Bernadin argues that “by fusing [western] forms with selected Okanogan materials, Mourning Dove does not necessarily incorporate Okanogan cultural information within a familiar, formulaic plot. Aimed at a mixed audience and available for differing reader responses, *Cogewea* could be read equally well as the inscription of Euro-American literary forms within an Okanogan story” (501). Using the techniques of romantic or sentimental novels, which impart lessons by inculcating readers with the values of the characters with whom the readers identify, *Cogewea* plays upon a reader’s sympathy in order to present a challenge to the dominant notions about Native Americans and the colonizing process.

By recasting traditional Okanogan stories within a popular Euroamerican literary genre, Mourning Dove provides a counter-narrative to hegemonic colonialisit discourse. Directly, Cogewea voices a challenge to the notion of Manifest Destiny and questions the Euroamerican colonizing project. In response to Densmore’s comment that “The coming of the Mayflower was as a spiritual light bursting on a darkened New World,” Cogewea launches into a monologue that challenges the white supremacy embedded in such an idea:

‘Zealous and good Christians,’ rejoined Cogewea, ‘see in the Discovery by Columbus, a guidance of Divine Providence, in that a new faith was brought to the natives. This may be, but the mistake was with the priests and teachers who did not understand that there was no fundamental difference in the attributes of the deities of the two races.... Viewed in its proper light, the coming of the Mayflower was, to my people, the falling of the star ‘Wormwood’; tainting with death the source of our very existence.’ (133)

This monologue clearly claims equal humanity and equal right to existence for Native peoples.

By representing the arrival of Europeans from the colonized side of the frontier, *Cogewea* attempts to shift the reader’s perspective. The Stemteemä’s story of the “Dead Man’s Vision”
has made clear that “the coming of the first pale face would result beneficially to the people spiritually; but the storm-rack of death would shriek in the wake of the myriads to follow” (134).³ By representing Manifest Destiny from a native perspective, Cogewea manages to subvert the rhetoric of westering.

By revealing the consequences of colonization for Native peoples, this novel challenges the notion that Euroamericans had a divine right to the land. Further, Cogewea criticizes Euroamerican’s inability to value nature as anything other than capital. These attitudes are embodied by Densmore’s relationship with the landscape. He is persistently unable to see the beauty or significance of the landscape Cogewea opens up to him. Alanna Brown notes that in Cogewea, “To love the earth is a sign of goodness in a character. To fail to see the beauty is a clear indication of spiritual corruption” (“Mourning Dove’s Voice” 11). Over and over again, Densmore fails to love the earth. When Cogewea takes him to Buffalo Butte, a place which has great historical, cultural and personal significance to her, the narrator relates, “Densmore mounted the rock and settled himself at her side. He manifested but slight interest in the great panorama unrolled to the eastward. His unpoetic nature was not visibly impressed by the picture so soul-inspiring to the girl.” A moment later, he asks Cogewea, “Would you not leave these sandy wastes, those piled up stones of chilly bleakness for a life of social elegance and untrammeled gayety?” (143). Victoria Lamont connects these promises with the goals of the 1887 Dawes Act. This act “promised to introduce Native American people to the opportunities of the Euroamerican economy and culture by dividing their reservations and ‘educating’ their children, but in practice, Native American land holdings diminished drastically under the Dawes Act, just as Cogewea’s would have if Densmore’s plan had succeeded” (383). Just as Densmore

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³ Jace Weaver claims that this monologue was “undoubtedly influenced by McWhorter, but nonetheless reflect[ed] Mourning Dove’s belief” (109). The heavy-handed language of the passage obviously bears touches of McWhorter’s rhetorical style, but it does summarize the story that the grandmother has told.
promises to grant Cogewea access to Euroamerican social circles when his real desire is only for her land and wealth, the real aim of the Dawes Act was control of Native American land and the “systematic dismantlement of Native American communities and cultures” (387). Lamont notes, “this cultural economy is rooted in colonial interests in Native American land, a relationship exposed in Cogewea but repressed in colonial discourse” (383). By exposing the imperialistic desire to obtain control of the landscape, Cogewea undermines the rhetoric of the inevitably Vanishing Indian as a strategy for Euroamerican domination.

Within the context of the legalized theft of land from Native Americans, it is ironic that the final twist of the novel involves a legal mistake in favor of Cogewea and her sisters. Due to a flaw in the will of the white father who had abandoned the girls and their mother, each of the girls inherits a quarter of a million dollars from their father’s mining estate. The fact that wealth extracted from the earth has been returned to Cogewea, with her strong ties to a particular piece of earth, serves not only as a tidy (if awkward and generically appropriate) ending to the novel, but also as a satisfying form of poetic justice. In choosing such an ending, Mourning Dove seems to insist on returning some of the unjustly obtained wealth to her Native characters. This restoration gives Cogewea literal and figurative currency for creating a life in a society dominated by Euroamericans.

McWhorter urged Mourning Dove to alter her happy ending to a tragic one, the better to reflect what he saw as the inevitable outcome of Native relations with Euroamericans. Mourning Dove, however, was adamant in her desire to provide a hopeful ending. Yet even this hopeful ending leaves Cogewea in a somewhat mixed position. By the end of the novel, it has become clear that possibilities for people of Native American heritage are limited in the same way that the landscape they inhabit has been fenced and settled. In his proposal to Cogewea, Jim uses that
corral metaphor: “S’pose we remain together in that there corral you spoke of as bein’ built ‘round us by the Shoyahpee? I ain’t never had no ropes on no gal but you” (283). In this manner, the fate of Cogewea is intimately linked with the settled, confined landscape, and the other-than-human world responds to her fate:

Cogewea paused, gazing intensely at the grey skull—listening! She heard the Voice as it comes only to the Indian:

*The Man! The Man! The Man!*

The moon, sailing over the embattled Rockies, appeared to smile down on the dusky lovers, despite the ugly Swah-lah-kin [frog woman] clinging to his face. (284)

In this final moment, the other-than-human world cries out the appropriateness of Cogewea’s choice. The presence of frog woman on the face of the moon in this image reminds readers of the potency of traditional knowledge as demonstrated earlier in the narrative. These lines encapsulate the link between lived modern experience and traditional ways of understanding the world. In refusing to give her novel a tragic ending, Mourning Dove ends with possibility.

McWhorter may have inserted an allusion to the tragic ending he desired by adding a closing epigram to the novel, from poet Badger Clark: “The trail’s a lane! the trail’s a lane!/ Dead is the branding fire./ The Prairies wild are tame and mild,/ All close-corraled with wire” (285). This nostalgic notion of the vanished wilderness, however, does not undercut the notion that traditional Native ways of relating to the world can provide valuable, ethical relationships, and that two “breeds” can find a productive way to exist within the fences.

By humanizing and depicting the complex emotions and complex culture of her Okanogan and other Native American characters in contrast to the imperialistic desires of Densmore, Mourning Dove upsets the hierarchy that places Euroamerican over Native American. Yet she does not simply do this by reversing the association, by distancing Native peoples from nature and claiming they are as much on the side of culture as Euroamericans. She
complicates the very notion that culture and nature constitute separate categories. Relationships with the natural world are the definitions by which one works out his or her identity, whether that relationship is capitalistic, acquisitive, driven by greed or whether that relationship is based on understanding and communication.

In exposing the colonialist desires of Euroamerican culture for possession of Native lands, *Cogewea* revises the romanticized notion of the frontier. In representing the complex emotional and ethical relationship of Native peoples to the other-than human world, *Cogewea* subverts the Western's (and the dominant American) representation of nature as a field for domination, a barren place available for the expression of the Euroamerican self. The frontier in *Cogewea* is a site where cultures clash and identity must be renegotiated. Ultimately, the novel offers no radical vision of Native empowerment but does offer a possibility for hope, for a continued existence in which ecological relationships retain their full value. Indeed, given the persistence of the myth of the Vanishing Indian, the assertion of a continued existence that incorporates traditional Native ways of relating to the world into modern life may in itself be radical.

Although the novel is complicated by editorial intrusions—and it’s a nearly impossible task to determine with certainty what unevenness is wholly due to McWhorter—the occasional unevenness in tone does not undercut the fact that Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea* presents a striking entry of a native woman’s voice into the literary marketplace. Though she never achieved her ambition of writing screenplays that depicted “real Indian life,” Mourning Dove’s vision managed to survive the intense pressure of narratives (and laws) that demanded she, as Native American woman, should vanish or assimilate. It is a novel of survivance, one that addresses complex issues of how to live within the mythical and material pressures of the frontier. While it
may not provide an easy concrete answer, it provides possibilities and paves the way for radical voices in the future.
Conclusion

At first glance, reading *O Pioneers!* and *Cogewea* side by side may seem counterintuitive. On the level of genre and strength of composition, these are radically different novels. Cather’s and Mourning Dove’s vastly different subject positions—Cather as a successful writer making her living from writing, Mourning Dove as a migrant laborer or housekeeper, writing after long days of work in migrant camps and through constant battles with illness—produce further disparity. One cannot even compare the two novels’ different influences upon the reading public. *O Pioneers!* enjoyed national popularity, while *Cogewea*’s distribution remained extremely limited—the author herself saw almost no profit from her novel and struggled to sell her personal copies. On a more fundamental level, these novels present radically different views of the process of frontier settlement: *Cogewea* makes a case for Native American presence and survivance, while *O Pioneers!* presents the frontier landscape as a place occupied solely by white settlers. Despite—or perhaps because of—these differences, I have found that reading these two novels through lenses provided by ecocritical, feminist, and Native American literary theories can help to expand our understanding of the complexities of frontier spaces and of the relationships that women writers at the turn of the century imagined between humans and the other-than-human world.

Both of these novels address the question of gendered power relations with respect to the landscape, rewriting and challenging frontier mythology. Both of these novels dramatize the experiences of women seeking empowerment or finding empowerment through their relationship with the natural world, and both of these novels, to a degree, upset the power hierarchy of culture over nature. These two disparate views of the frontier settlement and the relationship between women, frontier, and Native Americans are productive in their similarities and in their
differences. Mourning Dove’s novel takes up some of the voices that Cather’s leaves silent. Reading these two texts together creates an opportunity to explore the limits of feminist readings of frontier literature.

Ultimately, we must acknowledge that there is no one story of the frontier. There are “official” and “dominant” accounts, but novels that truly tell the story of this complex place and idea, one must first define the frontier. It is the place where “wilderness” meets “civilization.” It is a condition that occurs when two cultures meet. It is a physical boundary, or it is simply a state of mind. Women’s experiences with the frontier are as complex as any event in human history. Women’s writings about the frontier are as complex and as varied as women’s experiences; they both reinforce and challenge a number of dominant ideologies. Writers like Cather and Mourning Dove did seem to appreciate the complexities of frontier life, and wrote to make a place for strong female characters within the official narratives of the frontier. They challenged some of the most persistent tropes of frontier literature, carving out spaces for these strong women to exist within or in dialogue with dominant ideologies of nature at the frontier.

In doing so, both Cather and Mourning Dove transformed, to an extent, the discourses of nature and discourses of the frontier that surrounded them. Reading these two novels together with a focus on the relationship between ideologies of race, gender, and the other-than-human world can give us a richer picture of human experiences in the complex and contested zone called the frontier, and ultimately, a richer account of the successes and losses that attend the formation of American national identity.
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