"First you talk about love and then you talk about wheat": Portrayals of female community on the Western plains

Randi Tanglen

The University of Montana

2002

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“First You Talk About Love and Then You Talk About Wheat”: Portrayals of Female Community on the Western Plains

by

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B.A. Rocky Mountain College, 1998

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved by:

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In this thesis, I look at how female community on the plains functions to overcome social, political, and imaginary structures that isolate and subordinate women. I examine how the themes of loneliness and isolation in women's writing of the western plains—diaries, letters, memoirs, and novels—operate within and against the feminist trope of community. A survey of portrayals of plains women—by women—reveals that these women longed for, functioned in, and created a space for female community on the plains. The plains landscape opens a new space to retheorize female community against male-authorized paradigms of the West. Indeed, women's insistence upon female community and persistence to create it is apparent in the unlikely functions of that community and the forms that it takes. Women often create community with their landscape, breaking apart traditional portrayals of women and land in the male imaginary and creating new possibilities for female existence and relationships on the plains.

Due to their physical isolation from other women, female community and its ideals—were not readily available for women living on the western plains of the United States during westward expansion. Analysis of my primary sources—A Bride Goes West (1942) by Nannie Alderson, O Pioneers! (1913) by Willa Cather, and Winter Wheat (1944) by Mildred Walker—supplemented by examples from women's letters and diaries, illustrate where women on the plains find not only companionship and emotional support, but also the agency and creative expression that feminist scholarship and theory has attributed to female community.

Images of female isolation and insanity on the plains are prevalent in the popular imagination due to caricature portrayals of plainswomen in history and literature. I contend that there is a reason for such portrayals of women and their resulting prevalence in the popular imagination. Female isolation—in opposition to female community—functions to keep women subordinate in patriarchal structures. The structure I examine and apply to my primary texts is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's male homosocial triangle. Analyzing three plainswomen's texts, I contend that the lived experiences and portrayals of women on the plains work to eventually disassemble such structures.

All of the texts I examine reveal that women on the plains experience, create, function and need female community in different ways. However, the fact that female community is a consistent priority in their lives is significant and, therefore, the focus of my thesis. What becomes apparent in this examination of women's portrayals of female community is that these female bonds with other women and the land are an active, evolving and profound aspect of women's lives and experiences on the plains.
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Chapter One

The Female World of Loneliness and Isolation: The Traditions of Female Community and Isolation on the Western Plains

When she was separated from her friend on the westward trail in the mid-nineteenth century, Agnes Stewart grieved, "O Martha my heart yearns for thee my only friend...O my friend thou art dear to me yet my heart turns to thee I will never forget thee...the earliest friend...I know I can never enjoy the blessed privilege of communing with thee look for the loss of one I will never see on earth...I cannot bear it" (qtd. Schlissel 30). Another woman, settled on the plains, filled her diary with longings for the company of other women: "I feel quite lonesome and solitary....my spirits are depressed. I have very little female society, consequently feel lonely after a social visit" (qtd. Myres 168).

An examination of women's writing of the western plains--the geographic area of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, northern Oklahoma, western Texas, eastern Colorado, and most of Wyoming and Montana (Riley 12)--reveals that Agnes Stewart's loss of female community and feelings of loneliness were not uncommon. By the same token, I know from my own family history that my homesteading great-grandmothers, Marie Janzen Tieszen and Helena Martens Toews, had a different plains experience. Homesteading on the plains of northeastern Montana in the 1910s, they were surrounded by a community of female relatives and friends as part of a larger Russian Mennonite emigrant population. When my mother asked her about the first years on the homestead, Great-grandma Tieszen replied--with a statement that has become part of family legend--"We were young and it was fun!".
Knowing that female isolation was a reality for many women, while female community was a source of strength, I will look at how female community on the plains functions to overcome social, political, and imaginary structures that isolate and subordinate women. I will examine how the themes of loneliness and isolation in women’s writing of the western plains—diaries, letters, memoirs, and novels—operate within and against the feminist trope of community. A survey of portrayals of plains women—by women—reveals that these women longed for, functioned in, and created a space for female community on the plains. The plains landscape opens a new space to retheorize female community against male-authorized paradigms of the West. Indeed, women’s insistence upon female community and persistence to create it is apparent in the unlikely functions of that community and the forms that it takes. Women often create community with their landscape, and in the process break apart traditional portrayals of women and land in the male imaginary. This creates new possibilities for female existence and relationships on the plains.

**The Tradition of Female Community**

An analysis of female relationships through women’s writing of the western plains reveals that the well-known concept of a “female world of love and ritual” is complicated by the plains experience. In her now-classic essay, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg contends that in the nineteenth century, “a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American
society. These relationships ranged from the supportive love of sisters, through the
enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women” (70).
Specifically, Smith-Rosenberg analyzes the nature of women’s long-lasting intimate
friendships within the particular cultural setting of nineteenth-century urban America.
Smith-Rosenberg’s pivotal essay is significant in that it demonstrates that women act as
agents of their own history and are not merely acted upon; Smith-Rosenberg proves that
women in nineteenth-century America functioned in this female world on their own terms
by finding strength through female bonds.

Smith-Rosenberg contends that supportive networks of women were
institutionalized social conventions in nineteenth-century America. Within the comfort
and safety of this single sex, or what Smith-Rosenberg calls “homosocial” web, women
created physical and emotional intimacy based upon ritual related to their bodies:

Friendships and intimacies followed the biological ebb and flow of
women’s lives. Marriage and pregnancy, childbirth and weaning, sickness
and death involved physical and psychic trauma which comfort and
sympathy made easier to bear. Intense bonds of love and intimacy bound
together those women who, offering each other aid and sympathy, shared
such stressful moments. (80)

The female world of love and ritual was also a place where “hostility to and
criticism of other women were discouraged, and thus a milieu in which women could
develop a sense of confidence and self esteem” (76). This model of female community
also reaffirmed heterosexual love and romance, while providing a site for female
homosocial desire: “Within such a world of emotional richness and complexity devotion to and love of other women became a plausible and socially accepted form of human interaction” (74).

Smith-Rosenberg’s work is strictly based upon letters and diaries of women from New England, making her study and her conclusions both valuable and problematic to an analysis of female community on the western plains; Smith-Rosenberg’s study does not account for women with limited opportunities to create female bonds due to the lack of nearby women. This leads one to ask how and if women on the plains participate in life on their own terms without the strength and support of female community.

The use of female community as a feminist trope extends further back into early feminist thought and scholarship. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a first-wave cultural feminist, imagined a utopic woman-only community in *Herland* (1913); her pragmatic application of this ideal was that women create feminist homes with socialized housework and childcare so that they could become equal members of society. The notion of female community later knit itself into the ideology of second-wave radical lesbian feminists. Feminist thinkers such as Lucia Valeska imagined “the development of strictly lesbian feminist living and working collectives” (qtd. Donovan 178) where women could develop an alternative culture with authentically woman-identified art, music, and literature. Although Valeska’s work appears well after the plains experience as I am dealing with it, I mention it because the evolution of the present-day feminist trope of female community affects my approach to literature.

Female community, envisaged by first- and second-wave feminists, is a space for
communal work to make women equal citizens as a well as a space for women to develop a distinct female culture. Due to their physical isolation from other women, female community and its ideals were not readily available for women living on the western plains of the United States during westward expansion. Analysis of my primary sources -- A Bride Goes West by Nannie Alderson, O Pioneers! by Willa Cather, and Winter Wheat by Mildred Walker -- supplemented by examples from women’s letters and diaries, will discuss how women on the plains create female community to find not only companionship and emotional support, but also the agency and creative expression that feminist scholarship and theory has attributed to female community.

As we will later see in this section, diaries and letters of women written on the westward trail and while settled on the plains reveal that women on the plains created female community and adapted its functions for their new situation. For the purpose of my project, I use the term “female community” specifically to discuss female bonds with other women that are conducive to female agency, creative expression, and the subversion of patriarchal structures that subordinate women. As we will see in the three texts I will examine in the body of my thesis, the nature of these female bonds varies; women create female bonds based upon the intimacy of shared experiences and difficulties, homosocial networks, and homoerotic desire. In the argument I develop over the next three chapters, I contend that female community on the plains is influenced by the physical territory these women occupy and complicated by social and political territories. Female community promotes an evolving imaginary territory for plains women. Related to this, I will also argue that female community on the plains, in its very formation and existence, is also a
space for female creative powers.

The imaginary space of the West has been dominated by men. As women reconfigure the plains with their own images, they create female bonds with their landscape that break apart patriarchal structures that rely upon female isolation for their existence. As a result, female community on the plains is a space not only for women to function as acting agents, but it is also a subversive space for women to disrupt male authorized paradigms of the West and female subordination.

I will examine the role of social territories in the creation of female community on the plains. This complicates my mission of theorizing female community as a site of female agency and subversion; many women in the West created female community in ways that reinforced their subordinate position. In *Frontier Women: “Civilizing” the West? 1840-1880*, Julie Roy Jeffrey sets out to prove that women did not use the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from the private, domestic sphere, but instead the frontier experience reinforced the ideology of feminine domesticity. Jeffrey uses women’s letters and diaries to provide a narrative of women whose reasons for going West differed, but who all shared the same civilizing purpose as the guardians of culture and morality in the West. Creating female community was one way to validate this function. Women desired to hold on to the conventions of female culture by establishing networks of female community, which were difficult to maintain on the trail. Journals from the westward trail reveal “the feelings of satisfaction women felt when they visited, cooked together, or went swimming” (53), the frustration of not being able to socialize more, and the devastation women felt when companies parted each other and female friendships were broken off.
Lillian Schlissel’s observations in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* corroborate Jeffrey’s conclusions:

Women continued to observe themselves as existing primarily in the presence of other women. Most readers who have examined these diaries at length have found themselves wondering whether the writer were married at all, whether the odd initial that appears occasionally on a page represents a member of the wagon train or the diarist’s husband. Women’s daily routine—the baking, the washing, the cooking, the caring for the children, looking for herbs and berries with roots, visiting the sick—all of these were performed with women who traveled in the company. Within a loosely formed, makeshift “women’s sphere,” even the depressing necessity of having to do men’s chores could be absorbed as long as women could make a social fabric of their lives on the Trail. (77-78)

Corresponding with Schlissel’s observation that women’s diaries of the westward trail contain little mention of men, Smith-Rosenberg claims that the female world of love and ritual was one where “men made but a shadowy appearance” (70). The separate makeshift women’s sphere created on the trail included social duties typically found in the feminine domestic sphere, but with new functions and difficulties related to the journey across the plains.

Creating and maintaining female community was a priority for women who traveled West. Schlissel provides accounts of arguments women had with their husbands regarding the maintenance of female community: “Quarrels appear quite regularly noted in
the diaries of women who worried because the decision of a husband or father to separate from the wagon train could mean loneliness for a wife who found comfort in the company of other women” (89). Once settled on the plains, women did have the opportunity to form female community: “The physical isolation imposed by distance or weather soon came to an end; new settlers arrived; the comforting sight of smoke from a neighboring cabin could be seen on the horizon; the long winters ended; spring came again” (Myres 167). Schlissel records the experience of Rebecca Woodsen. When a family with ten children moved nearby, she and the older girls became good friends: “We did not think we could start to make a new dress or start piecing a new quilt without consulting each other” (qtd. Schlissel 67).

Although it was not always easy, women on the plains maintained female community to reinforce their identity and social role as women. As we will see with later analysis of the primary texts, the plains landscape is not always conducive to supporting the strict social roles in which these women wanted to function; this can be a problem for female community. Other women, who by choice eschew these social roles, still long for female community, but have difficulty maintaining it. The physical territory of the plains seems ideal for vast movement through social, political, and imaginary territories. However, the physical space these women occupy, although expansive, also can be limiting to women because it is not always conducive to female bonds that create a network of female community.
The Tradition of Female Isolation

While giving little consideration to how women occupy the plains landscape, both history and literature have long viewed the West as the arena for men to assert their freedom and individuality. Women and their roles have been represented as ancillary to the male quest of fulfilling manifest destiny. As a result, the perceived female experience in the West has been limited by misperceptions and caricature portrayals of women.

Glenda Riley, in *The Female Frontier*, maintains that “[n]umerous...historians presented western women in brief cameo appearances as Gentle Tamers, Pioneers in Petticoats, Saints in Sunbonnets, Madonnas of the Prairies, Pioneer Mothers, Light Ladies, Calamity Janes, Fighting Feminists, and Reluctant Pioneers” (1).

The literary tradition has developed these caricatures even further. In fact, the male literary tradition has done little to paint a positive or realistic picture in the popular imagination of women’s lives on the western plains. In the twentieth century, women writers such as Willa Cather and Bess Streeter Aldrich began to portray plains women with stamina and ingenuity. Riley contends that these rounded portrayals of women were overlooked and overshadowed by these women writers’ male contemporaries, who chose to dwell upon the weakness and instability of women on the plains:

During the early decades of the twentieth century, this [Cather and Aldrich’s] longstanding trend to picture frontierswomen as able and self-reliant received a serious challenge from the works of two writers who had little experience with the West and its women. One of these was Ole E. Rölvaag, who himself never homesteaded, and Hamlin Garland, who had
fled the Middle Border area for the city at an early age. Yet, with their heartrending lamentations concerning women’s work loads, hostility to the frontier, and tendencies toward insanity, these two writers etched the picture of a helpless, hopeless drudge into the minds of generations of American readers. (Riley 9)

The dominant voices in the literary tradition have done a disservice to women on the plains by unrealistically highlighting women’s severe isolation without acknowledging the complexities related to women’s loneliness. In his novel *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, Rőlvaag’s heroine, Beret, laments: “How will human beings be able to bear this place...Why, there isn’t even a thing to hide behind!” (29).

I contend that there is a reason for such portrayals of women and their resulting prevalence in the popular imagination. Female isolation—in opposition to female community—functions to keep women subordinate in patriarchal structures. Analyzing three plainswomen’s texts chronologically, I will prove that the lived experiences and portrayals of women on the plains work to eventually disassemble such structures. The structure I will examine and apply to my primary texts is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s male homosocial triangle. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick claims that just as patriarchy has been centered around a systematic sexual exchange of women between men in the institutions of heterosexual love and marriage, the literature in such a society will mimic and promote this exchange in women. The result is a triangularization of desire: the bond between two men is mediated “through, around, or over the body and soul of a woman” (Castle 533). Despite their rivalry, men bond to each
other homosocially because their actions promote a system that oppresses women and elevates men and their interests. Sedgwick asserts that in fiction, as in life, man uses woman “as a ‘conduit of a relationship’ in which the true partner is a man” (26).

I am interested in identifying the isolation of women in this paradigm and paralleling it to the isolation of women on the plains. The two male terms of the homosocial triangle create a homosocial bond at the base of the male homosocial triangle that leaves the female term isolated at the apex of the structure. In fact, this structure depends upon the isolation of women from each other for its very existence. Sedgwick states, “[T]he isolation, not to mention the absolute subordination of women, in the structural paradigm [of the homosocial triangle] is a distortion that necessarily fails to do justice to women’s own powers, bonds, and struggles” (18). I contend that the “power, bonds, and struggles” for isolated women on the plains are reflected in the insistence upon and persistence in maintaining female community.

Sedgwick’s male homosocial triangle exposes the function of women as commodity. I see a clear parallel between the commodification of women and land. The dominant male imaginary has gendered the landscape plainswomen inhabit as female--virginal, penetrable, and conquerable. In *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, Annette Kolodny states:

By the time European women began to arrive on the Atlantic shores of what is now the United States, the New World had long been given over to the fantasies of men....By the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was relatively commonplace for colonial promoters to promise prospective
immigrants a "Paradise with all her Virgin beauties"... The psychosexual
dynamic of a virginal paradise meant, however, that real flesh-and-blood
women -- at least metaphorically -- were dispossessed of paradise. (3)

This passive, female characterization of the land leads to rivalry between men that, when
applied to Sedgwick’s homosocial triangle, makes the female land the conduit for male
homosocial bonds or “men promoting the interests of men” (3).

The way in which women occupy the physical territory of the plains landscape is
influenced by the power structures at play in the homosocial triangle. A clear parallel
develops between the status of commodity of both land and women in this system.
Sedgwick points out that power structures that favor men must keep women isolated and
subordinate; philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray illustrates that these structures
are validated because of their place in the dominant male imaginary.

Irigaray recognizes that men’s need of women determines women’s value as a
commodity. This is parallel to men using the land, too, as a commodity. Irigaray states
that in the male imaginary, “Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less
competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of
mother earth” (368). I contend that despite their commonality as commodities, women
and the land, both female terms, must be rivals in order for the male homosocial structure
to stay intact. The homosocial triangle depends upon the isolation of female terms from
each other, which according to letters and diaries of the overland trail, has been the case
for women and the plains landscape.

In their isolation, women feel alienated from the landscape. In a desire paradigm
with male bonding as the subject and women as the passive objects of desire and exchange, women are isolated. Schlissel maintains that separation from other women made illness on the trail more traumatic. When women had to separate from other women on the trail, they were distressed at losing more than the daily exchanges, comfortable conversation, and the sharing of chores. The presence of other women made a woman more comfortable with her own body:

So simple a matter as bodily functions on a terrain that provided no shelter could make daily life an agony of embarrassment when there was no other woman to make of her extended skirt a curtain....Two women could provide a measure of propriety to a sister on the Trail. But a woman alone, where could she hide from the eyes of men? There was periodic menstruation--and the lack of water. There was periodic dysentery--and the lack of water. There was occasional childbirth--and the lack of water. And all of these functions were complicated by the absence of shelter and lack of privacy. Only in contemplating the utter emptiness of the terrain the emigrants crossed one can comprehend the panic felt by women at the prospect of being left alone among men. (99)

The western experience could be survived, many felt, if a woman could preserve her modesty and privacy. But when these were stripped away, the landscape became the enemy of the female body. Only the presence of another woman could neutralize the antagonistic effect of the western, male-imagined landscape against the female body.

Without the structure and protection of female community, women and their bodies were
vulnerable.

Despite the various and unlikely forms of female community that women develop on the plains—as we will see as I develop my argument in later chapters—a woman’s relationship to her body is central and consistent to how she forms female bonds with other women. In this aspect, female community in the West was similar to that of the urban East. Smith-Rosenberg’s notion of female community is based upon ritual around the female body. Female community has the potential to give women rich emotional intimacy through their bodies. Keeping women isolated from their bodies and each other also keeps them isolated in an antagonistic relationship with the land. My thesis will show that despite the hostile situation, women transform their relationship with their landscape by relating to the land with a female bond.

**Transforming the Landscape**

In order to do this, women’s image of the plains must evolve from a flat, desolate area with no place to hide their bodies, to a space where women can create female bonds with the land and eventually with each other. The plains become the arena for a campaign between a male imaginary that subordinates and isolates women as props for their nation-building and sexual fantasies and an evolving female imaginary that creates a space for female bonds and community on the plains. Luce Irigaray, in “This Sex Which is Not One,” summarizes men’s desire to own women, and in this case, the female land:

[O]ne finds imperatives dictated by the enactment of

sadomasochistic fantasies, these in turn governed by man’s relation to his
mother: the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he has been conceived, the secret of his begetting, or his “origin.” Desire/need also make blood flow again in order to revive a very old relationship—intrauterine, to be sure, but also prehistoric—to the maternal. (364)

The land, like the female body, is a space for men to act out sexual fantasies of domination and control. Women are consigned to passivity and isolation. Relating their bodies to the land is a way for plains women to speak against classic representations of passive female sexuality. Using the land as their ally to create a female bond upsets not only the male fantasy of controlling female sexuality and the land, but also the male homosocial triangle which is dependent upon female isolation.

I contend that with images rooted in the functions of female community, women create a female bond with the land to destabilize patriarchal structures. Creating female community within their landscape and with their landscape reveals plains women’s survival and resistance against conventional representations of the land and femininity in the male imaginary. Women reappropriate the feminization of the land; women make an active choice to see the land as feminine in order to build female community, as opposed to the masculine tendency to feminize the land in order to dominate and isolate women.

Kolodny states that the western landscape gives women imaginative play to create images of the land that evolve away from and that are different from the male imaginary:

[W]herever fantasies come from--subconscious mental processes or biologically based urges--they always wear cultural clothing. Thus, men
sought sexual and filial gratifications from the land, while women sought there the gratifications of home and family relations....what women eventually projected onto the prairie garden, therefore, were idealizing and corrective configurations drawn from the spheres in which their culture allowed them imaginative play. (12)

Kolodny suggests that women struggle to find an “alternate set of images” with which to imagine the land by creating “gardens in the wilderness” (3). I contend that not only did these women find an alternate set of images--rooted in female community--they disrupt male authorized images and paradigms of power, land, and women by creating female bonds with and within their landscape.

Smith-Rosenberg’s notion of female community states that nineteenth-century female community both reinforced heterosexual romance and provided an outlet for female homosocial desire. Portrayals of western plains women--by women--will allow for an examination of how female sexuality and desire function on the western plains without the structure and outlet of established female community. Plains women do not use the landscape for fantasies of sexual conquest as do men, nor do they reaffirm heterosexual paradigms. Creating homosocial and homoerotic bonds with the land creates a female community space that provides more possibilities and promise for women occupying the plains landscape.
All of the plains women in the primary texts I will work with reveal depictions of actual geographic isolation and removal from female community. In her published book of letters, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1913) Elinore Pruitt Stewart gives an account of living several miles from her nearest female friend while homesteading in Wyoming in the early twentieth century. Since I will not directly work with this text in a later chapter, I will use it now to illustrate the main points of my argument.

Women create a female world of love and ritual on the plains, but due to their new situation in the West, women must make some accommodations. This is authenticated in Stewart’s *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*. Stewart provides several accounts of women gathering to promote female ritual and to share work. Early upon Stewart’s arrival in Wyoming, she befriends local sisters named Sedalia and Regalia. Regalia is to get married, and Stewart makes it her duty to ensure Regalia’s wedding promotes female ritual and significance. Stewart provides Regalia with a dress for the wedding and hosts a dance and dinner in honor of the wedding. The dinner itself is a function of the female world of love and ritual:

> Our dinner was a success, but that is not to be wondered at. Every woman for miles around contributed. Of course we had to borrow dishes, but we couldn’t think of seating every one; so we set one table for twenty-four and had three other long tables, on one of which we placed all the meats, pickles, and sauces, on another the vegetables, soup, and coffee, and on the third the pie, cakes, ice-cream, and other desserts.... The tablecloths
were tolerably good linens and we had ironed them wet so they looked nice. We had white lace-paper on the shelves and we used drawn-work paper napkins. As I said, we borrowed dishes, or, that is, every woman who called herself a neighbor brought whatever she thought we would need. So after every one had eaten I suggested that they sort out their dishes and wash them, and in that way I was saved all that work. (57-58)

This descriptive passage indicates that women on the western plains adapt their rituals and community in order to suit their unique situation. The borrowed dress, borrowed dishes, seating arrangements, presentation of the food and shared work suggest new social conventions and a movement toward different needs and functions of female community. Stewart finds this experience significant enough to account to her urban friend in a letter; she makes it clear that she and other women maintain the woman’s sphere, but adapt it with new symbols of female community on the plains.

I also intend to prove that the existence and formation of female community is an expression of female creative powers and an evolving female imaginary. As previously discussed, female bonds with the land represent the persistence of women to develop and maintain a space for female community on the plains. This is evident in portrayals of unlikely forms of female community. Elinore Pruitt Stewart writes that her daughter Jerrine: “has a block of wood she found in the blacksmith shop which she calls her ‘dear baby.’ A spoke out of a wagon wheel is ‘little Margaret,’ and a barrel-stave is ‘bad little Johnny” (14). As a young girl in the West, Jerrine seems to be moving toward an urge to construct female community based upon Smith-Rosenberg’s female world of love and
ritual. Using the tools around her—items that usually would be discarded—Jerrine’s imagination adapts the landscape, images, and symbols of the west and its adaptability to create female community. Jerrine’s urge toward female community seems to be the female imagination evolving as it redefines female community on the western plains.

Stewart and her daughter authenticate my claim that women desire and need female community on the plains. Because of their adaptability, women on the plains are actively involved in an evolving imaginary that makes their landscape and new situation conducive to the powers of female community.

_Primary Texts_

As they recreate female community on plains, women open up theoretical space for exploring the function, freedoms, and parameters of the physical, social, political, and imaginary territories of the West for women. As we have seen with Jerrine in Stewart’s _Letters of a Woman Homesteader_, and will see with Nannie Alderson, Willa Cather and Mildred Walker, the geography of the plains landscape establishes a space for women writers to create depictions of women who expose complexities in familiar models of female community and conventional representations of women and the land.

Nannie Alderson in her memoir, _A Bride Goes West_ (1942), recounts that she sometimes would go weeks without seeing another woman. Alderson’s narrative illustrates that her ideals of womanhood are so rooted in class and race that gender becomes the most flexible term with which to work as she develops female community: she temporarily functions in a “female” community of local bachelors who teach her how
to cook, keep house, and assist her with childcare. With *A Bride Goes West*, I will examine how lack of consistent female community and its support works against Nannie Alderson. Alderson's isolation on a cattle ranch near Lame Deer, Montana in the 1880s leads her to great mental anguish and anxiety. However, a close reading of her text reveals that what, sixty years later, Alderson derides as an overactive imagination, was actually the result of legitimate and valid concerns with no outlet, not the manifestations of a lonely woman's neurosis.

*O Pioneers!* (1913), a novel by Willa Cather, portrays how female community interacts with women's relationships with their bodies and the landscape. This portrayal of a woman on the plains reveals a female bond with the land that provides support and community for the female protagonist. Cather creates a female landscape for her heroine, Alexandra Bergson; Alexandra's resulting female bond with the land has an element of the erotic and develops a spectrum of possibilities for female community and relationships on the plains. Alexandra complicates a reading of female community on the plains; although she maintains a female bond with her landscape, she is unable to maintain female community with the women around her. Alexandra's fluidity through gender roles influences the ways she creates and functions within female community.

Mildred Walker, in *Winter Wheat* (1944), portrays a woman on the plains who, despite her isolation from structured communities of women, "promote[s] the interests of women" (Sedgwick 18) by allying herself with the land using a model similar to Smith-Rosenberg's female world of love and ritual. By identifying herself and her experiences with the landscape, Walker's Ellen Webb puts herself at the center of a landscape that has
traditionally been appropriated and occupied by men. With images rooted in a model of
demale community, Ellen creates a homosocial bond with the land and opens up the plains
for women to occupy the landscape space as subject; as we will see, Ellen transforms her
isolated landscape into a site of female support and community.

All of the portrayals of women reveal that women on the plains experience, create,
function and need female community in different ways. As we will see in the next chapter,
Nannie Anderson's sometimes dark portrayal of life on the plains in *A Bride Goes West* is
a stark contrast to my Great-grandmother's perception that "We were young and it was
fun!". What becomes apparent as we examine women's portrayals of female community is
that these female bonds with other women are an active, evolving and profound aspect of
women's lives and experiences on the plains.
Chapter Two

“I Don’t Want A Doctor, I Want A Woman”: Female Community in Nannie Alderson’s A Bride Goes West

In her 1942 memoir, A Bride Goes West, Nannie Alderson recounts suffering a miscarriage while on an isolated eastern Montana ranch in the 1880s. Her husband is away, and concerned ranch hands give her a hot toddy and tell her she needs a doctor. At that point Alderson demands, “I don’t want a doctor, I want a woman!” (205). Alderson lives 100 miles from the nearest town and would sometimes go months without seeing another woman. However, during this crisis, Alderson needs the aid of a sympathetic woman. Even after Alderson’s demand, the ranch hands prepare to send for a doctor, but Alderson tells them to send for a woman who works for a nearby ranch. Although Alderson loses her child, the woman nurses Alderson back to health and recovery.

Alderson’s desire for another woman in this body-related crisis corroborates Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s ideal of a female world of love and ritual. In this setting, women created emotional and physical intimacy through ritual related to their bodies giving women a homosocial network of strength and support. Smith-Rosenberg contends that a rich web of female relatives and friends provided sympathy and support for women as they experienced childbirth, menstruations, sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause.

However, the woman who helped Alderson through this crisis disappears from the narrative. Several times in her memoir Alderson mentions women who enter her life--

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working class and Native American women—but who fade from her narrative. Despite the presence of women, Alderson’s narrative lacks stories of successful female community. Alderson brings a dependence upon female community and a particular notion of “woman” with her from West Virginia to the plains of Montana. I will explore how Alderson’s definition of “woman” works within the structures of class, race, and gender and how these terms function on the plains as Alderson creates or denies female community. Alderson attempts to create female community that reaffirms her notions of class, race and gender. Ultimately, her fixed ideologies undermine her community-building endeavor.

Recently married, Nannie Alderson moves to Montana from West Virginia in 1883 with her husband, Walt Alderson. Her husband and his business partner had purchased land and stock to begin cattle ranching near Lame Deer, Montana. Alderson’s memoir, *A Bride Goes West*, was published when she was eighty-two years old. It spans twelve years, from the time she arrives in Montana to her husband’s death in 1895. Although she provides some background and account of what happened in the time before and after these events, the focus of the narrative remains on her twelve years as a wife on the plains of Montana. As a young wife, Alderson revels in the novelty of her adventure. As her children are born—she has four—and her husband’s business begins to suffer financial setbacks, Alderson relates that she begins to lose her enthusiasm as life becomes difficult. Decades later, in the memoir, Alderson acknowledges that she suffered, but the emphasis of the memoir remains on her enthusiasm and tenacity as a newly-arrived, young bride in the West.
The narrative is layered; the events of the memoir are distanced by time—almost sixty years from the end of the narrative to the time of her memoir’s publication—and the filter of Helena Huntington Smith. The narrative is related to the reader “as told to” Huntington Smith; in her foreword Huntington Smith claims, “I have put the stories together for her [Alderson] in this book, but they are still told in her own words” (vii). Critics have questioned the narrative filter of Huntington Smith. William W. Bevis contends that “…Huntingon Smith was a sophisticated listener and writer quite capable of sculpting the material herself” (65) while Julia Watson maintains, “It is as much Huntington Smith’s biography as Nannie’s autobiography, and Alderson’s attitudes, values, and voices, are, to an indeterminable extent, the creation of an interviewer dramatizing her as an embodiment of the mythic Montana frontier” (126).

As Alderson relates her childhood and history before moving to Montana, it is clear that her life in West Virginia socialized her to be accustomed to conditions ideal for the female world of love and ritual of which Smith-Rosenberg speaks. In the first chapter of her book, Alderson describes a network of female relatives and friends in West Virginia—sisters, step-sisters, grandmothers, cousins, and aunts—who take care of her after her father dies and her mother remarries, invite her for extended visits, and even introduce her to her future husband. After Alderson’s engagement, these women help her prepare a trousseau to take with her to Montana. After her removal to the plains of Montana, Alderson keeps up a correspondence with these women, particularly her mother, who monitor her behavior as a lady.

During her first years in Montana, Alderson attempts to maintain female
community with her female relatives and friends in West Virginia by writing letters. She sends two of her former Sunday School students souvenirs of her experience out West—locks of an Indian chief’s hair. (A young Indian Chief reluctantly gave Alderson a lock of his hair at her request). Alderson writes her mother about life on the ranch. Because of Alderson’s new situation, though, this source of female community is not capable of its typical support and encouragement: “I never told my mother, never even began to tell her, all the things I put up with on our last ranch....Mother never understood the conditions of life out here. For instance, there was the time we gave our great party, before the Upshaws went away” (193). Alderson relates the party, which, compared to southern standards is crude, but is significant to Alderson. She makes elaborate lanterns and decorations, and because it was an overnight event, situates the house for the women to sleep in and the stable for the men. Alderson’s mother writes back and critiques, “My daughter, I can’t understand how you can invite people to your house when you can’t make them comfortable” (194). The female community from which Alderson came does not provide support, but only criticism, of her new situation.

Despite her mother’s criticism, Alderson has energy and enthusiasm to invest in creating and maintaining female community on the plains; this includes maintaining the social and political territories in which she functioned as woman in West Virginia. Alderson defines herself within a strict definition of “woman” that prevents her from forming successful community bonds on the plains. According to Drew Faust in Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War:

White men and women of the antebellum South had defined and
understood themselves in relation to a number of categories: *race*, which marked the difference between bound and free, superior and inferior; *gender*, which was designed to distinguish independent from dependent, patriarch from subordinate; and *class*, more subtle and more hidden in a society that rested within a democratizing America but present nonetheless in distinctions of wealth, power, education, and refinement, in claims to honor and gentility [my emphasis]. (3-4)

The focus of Faust’s study is antebellum women; Alderson, born in 1860, was born and socialized in such an environment. These ideologies would have molded her identity and affect how she later functions on the Montana plains.

Alderson reaffirms these ideals in souvenirs of “woman’s place” she brings with her to the plains from the South. She brings a Confederate flag sewn by the women of her community and given to her father before he left for battle in the Civil War. One of her earliest memories as a child is playing with a silver candelabra and snuffers at her mother’s second wedding; she notes that she later brings these same items with her to Montana. She also brings a set of silverware from her grandmother that had been saved from a fire in her grandmother’s home before the Civil War.

Alderson needs these items--and the class and race privilege that they signify--to ease her experience in Montana. These souvenirs represent a lifestyle and a sense of womanhood that Alderson functioned within while living in the South and that she attempts to establish on the Montana plains. Even if the realities of life in Montana did not fit the mold of womanhood from which Alderson came, the flag, candlesticks, and
silverware reinforced the ideologies that Alderson attempts to recreate. Like these fragile souvenirs, Alderson’s class and race privilege are in danger of being destroyed on the plains, and Alderson does all she can to reinforce these hierarchies. Significantly, most of these items are stolen or destroyed in a fire during Alderson’s first year in Montana.

The categories of class, race and gender are flexible on the plains; this is a problem for Alderson and prevents her from creating community with women in close proximity to her. Alderson’s dependence upon race and class privilege undermine her ability to form female community on plains. How Alderson creates female community reveals that class plays a significant role in her ideas of womanhood and with her notion of appropriate female community. Alderson’s desire for and valuing of female community conflict with her strict notions about which females are appropriate sources of community for her. Judy Blunt—a Montana writer, and herself once an eastern Montana ranchwife—articulates this conflict in an interview about the memoir on Big Sky Radio: “[Alderson’s goal of] striving to fulfill some of the expectations that she had brought from her mother [and] from her southern heritage...were running, of course, face to face into the brick wall of reality....she was still trying to rescue some of that; she was trying to be a ‘good woman’ in the way she perceived that to be.”

Community—and particularly female community—denotes a sense of belonging. But by the same token, especially for Alderson, female community can represent exclusion. Alderson brings a dependence on female community with her to the plains of Montana, and therefore calls for the aid of a woman, not a male doctor, when her pregnancy becomes complicated. However, Alderson simply states, “I want a woman.”
She does not ask for the woman by her name; it is significant that she does not even mention the woman’s name. In the 273-page narrative that spans twelve years of her life, this is the only mention of the woman who nursed Alderson when her health was in danger. Alderson states, “She was there by ten o’clock. I simply kept quiet and let her wait on me, and I recovered without any complications whatever” (206). This does not suggest the rich network of female support and the physical and emotional intimacy of Smith-Rosenberg’s female world of love and ritual. This is because the woman who comes to Alderson’s aid during her miscarriage is a working woman employed by a nearby ranch. The relationship between the two women is not one of female camaraderie or intimacy, but one that derives from a hierarchy with Alderson occupying the position of power.

During her first few years in Montana, Alderson has several opportunities to create female community with nearby women. Her first interaction with women does not comply with the ideal that female community and relationships are the space for female support and the development of confidence. Alderson states, “my only woman neighbor gave me what would now be called an inferiority complex” (44). If anything, her relationship with her closest female neighbor is an antagonistic one:

She came to visit fairly often, either out of curiosity or to borrow something, and every time I saw her coming down the valley, riding either side saddle on her awful old spike-tailed horse, her red mother hubbard showing up in the distance, cold chills would run up and down my spine. (44)
Alderson’s first contact with women in Montana, rather than fostering a supportive female community, gives her cold chills. Alderson cannot create community with this woman because their relationship is based upon an exchange of labor. As a new bride from the South, Alderson does not know how to do laundry. The woman and her family live four miles away. “He [Mr. Alderson] thought the women would feel kindly toward us and would, in any case, be glad to make a little extra money by doing our washing. So the first ride I took after reaching the ranch was to go and see this family and make arrangements” (36). The starting point of this potential female bond is not friendship, kinship, or even neighborly kindness, but economic exchange. This bond is complicated by an exchange of labor with Alderson, as the one paying for the labor, functioning in the hierarchical position of authority.

In order to reaffirm her familiarity with class privilege, Alderson needs the woman to function as a servant, but the woman resists this hierarchy. Throughout this exchange Alderson feels that the woman is judging her from “the top of my Eastern-made riding cap to the pointed toe of my boots” (37). As a result, this bond does not take and animosity exists between Alderson and her new female neighbor. The woman agrees to do Alderson’s washing, but at ten cents a piece, Alderson feels she is being robbed because, “Aunt Rose, our colored laundress down south, had done our entire laundry for five dollars a month” (37). Class was flexible on the plains, but Alderson’s ideas about womanhood and class are fixed.

Without a clear, deferential other to define herself against—a yielding servant or a black slave—Alderson is unable to hold on to her clear class status. Yet Alderson attempts
to keep class structures in place by isolating herself from other women and creating unflattering and unfeminine portrayals of other women which she can define herself against. Alderson creates depictions of other women who are big, ugly, judgmental, unfeminine, and deceitful. Alderson describes the two neighbor women who do her laundry:

The mother was about six feet tall, dressed in a mother hubbard wrapped of calico with her late husband’s straw hat on her head. She had iron grey hair cut squarely off on a line with the biggest ears I ever saw on any human, and her beady black eyes....The daughter-in-law was a meek pale woman with two children clinging to her skirts, and through the interview she had nothing to say. It was plain that the older woman was the boss.

(36-37)

Alderson continues with similar rhetoric. As the birth of her first child approaches, Alderson is in a dilemma because the nearest town, Miles City, does not have a hospital or even a nurse. She seeks help from an acquaintance in town, who claims to “know a good deal about nursing” (98). The woman, whom Alderson met on the train on her way out west, agrees to take care of Alderson during her labor, delivery, and recovery. Alderson’s depiction of this event spans just two paragraphs and she concludes by passing judgment on the woman who helps her: “Later the landlady was very little help with the baby. I don’t think she was the type to care for nursing” (98).

It is unclear why, specifically, Alderson does not care for the landlady. However, it is consistent with her negative and unfeminine portrayals of other women. The landlady
does not have the feminine qualities of caretaking and nursing. Alderson also has a negative opinion of a woman she stays with in town during her child's infancy. Alderson does not like this woman because “as she was from Iowa, and had strict ideas. She regarded me as an object of pity because my husband sometimes went into a saloon with other men and took a drink” (108). Like the laundry woman, this woman questions Alderson’s position of authority and privilege in hierarchical class and social structures.

There is one woman in town that Alderson is drawn to and hopes to become friends with. Alderson meets this woman in a hotel lobby in Miles City and they relate to one another because they are both lonely:

She told me she was waiting for her husband, who was on his way up the trail from Texas with cattle. She didn’t know how much longer she would have to wait, and she was so lonely.

I could sympathize. I was lonely too.... (114-115)

Alderson invites her to go on a walk with her and the baby; however, when Alderson goes to the woman’s room to invite her to go walking, the woman says she cannot go due to another engagement. Later, Alderson learns that this woman is a prostitute. When her husband’s friends explain the situation to her, she reflects, “To think that I was only saved from walking out on the public streets with her by the fact that she had another engagement--!” (116). Alderson explains any desire, interest or connection she had with the woman by transferring the blame to the prostitute: “However, it is possible that she was not wholly sincere in her desire to go walking with the baby and me. I think she simply enjoyed fooling me” (116). Alderson colors the situation so that she and the
woman could not have a sincere or significant female bond. Alderson portrays the woman as deceitful and insincere; this rhetorical strategy explains away the interest Alderson had in the woman and gives her an “other” against which to define herself.

Alderson and her children live among the Cheyenne Indians, and she is intimate with women of the tribe. Yet she resists female community with these women. Alderson perceives herself as the benevolent mother of these Indian women and parallels the relationship of blacks and whites in the south to her relationships with Native American women. In fact, one of Alderson’s preoccupations in her memoir is the complexity of the relationship between white settlers and the plains Indians.

Alderson recognizes that the relationship between white settlers and Indians on the plains is complicated, but her ideas on how Indians and white settlers should interact is rooted in a belief she brought west with her from the South:

I came from the South, and...I looked, unconsciously perhaps, for the same affectionate relationship with the Indians that had existed in my old home between the colored people and the whites. One of the hard lessons I had to learn in Montana was that the affection I sentimentally wanted just simply was not there....(113)

The clear, structured race hierarchy, which she euphemistically describes as “affectionate,” that favored Alderson in West Virginia is in place, but not as firmly, on the plains. Alderson’s statement would more accurately reflect her ideals if instead of stating, “the affection I sentimentally wanted just simply was not there,” she had said, “the subordination I wanted just simply was not there.” Like her working class counterparts,
Native American women resist Alderson’s strict placements on the race hierarchy. As Julie Roy Jeffrey reshapes and analyzes women’s “civilizing” influence on the West, she points out that the domestic femininity of white frontier women from east of the Mississippi was at odds with the concerns and values of women from other cultural backgrounds. Jeffrey writes, “Lack of sympathy for and negative evaluations of native people doubtless contributed to women’s sense of isolation” (72). Jeffrey points out that frontier women who looked down on the penury and poverty of Indian women did not realize that this situation was a result of the very presence of white women on the frontier.

Two Cheyenne women, a young woman Alderson calls Minnie and an older woman she calls Granny often visit Alderson. Minnie functions as a servant to help Alderson care for her children and even makes one child a pair of moccasins. While Alderson admires the child rearing practices of the Indians, who never spanked or hit their children, she does not allow Granny to question her own child rearing techniques. Granny spends many afternoons in the house, and one day she observes Alderson spanking one of her children:

At that the old squaw flew at me in a rage, yelling I don’t know what insults in loudest Cheyenne, and jerking the baby from me. Perhaps she was right on the spanking issue and I was wrong, but at the moment I was in no mood to be set straight by a Cheyenne squaw as to how I should bring up my child. So I snatched the baby back, and then I took Granny by the shoulders and shoved her outdoors, telling her that she was “hyper-siba” (no good), and that she could go to her tepee and not sit by my fire.
When Granny attempts to stop Alderson from hitting her child, Alderson displaces the punishment to Granny, putting the old woman into the subordinate position of disciplined child to reinforce Alderson's familiar race hierarchies.

But Alderson still needs female community; she speaks several times of her isolation and loneliness and her need for other women. At one point she talks about a nearby community of white women: "They were all fine, intelligent people, and there were so many women--four or five at least--that they looked after each other. But I was isolated. I never had the opportunity to give or to receive such help" (201). Bevis observes, "...she is...quite critical of most women she meets, and a case can be made that to some extent she isolated herself" (68). The reason Alderson does not have these opportunities is because maintaining class and race hierarchies has more priority than maintaining female community. Alderson can not bear for class and race to be flexible, so she blocks female community that would take these terms out of their fixed places.

Alderson's narrative lacks stories of successful female community with other women and female support on the plains. However, her narrative contains myriad examples of bachelor cowboys providing her with communal support in housework, cooking, and child rearing; additionally, men on the plains provide the emotional support and morale typically found in female community. Men teach Alderson how to cook: "I had to learn to cook and have a semblance of variety on the table with just what we had on hand. With no experience and no women to turn to, I don't know what I'd have done if it hadn't been for the friendly helpfulness of men" (40). She also relates, "But I learned
as fast as I could, and with a loyal and uncritical group of supporters to cheer me on, I soon built up an undeserved reputation as a wonderful cook" (68). Along with providing her support with cooking and housework, men are sympathetic to Alderson’s child care needs and work together to assist her. After her first child is born, all of the men of Miles City come together to give Alderson a baby shower of sorts. They arrive at the lobby of the hotel where she is staying to give a baby buggy to Alderson when they noticed the difficulty she had in carrying the baby around town. She states:

Is it any wonder that I was overcome, or that I thought and still think that the rough new country beat any civilized place I had ever known for kindness of heart? They were all homeless men, or at least far from home. Perhaps that quickened their sympathy. I have thought since how pleased those kindly gentlemen would be to know that their baby buggy served all my four children, and was afterwards handed down to a neighbor. (113-114)

Alderson also spends a lot of time with men on the ranch and grows dependent on their companionship to combat her loneliness: “But in the main I had to depend on men for both companionship and advice” (123). Alderson observes, “I have often wondered whether the splendid comradely attitude of American men toward women did not originate in just such conditions as those of my early days in Montana” (76). Alderson also expresses sadness when she loses this “female community.” Sometimes the men left to work elsewhere. When the ranch loses cattle, her husband does not need so many ranch hands to work for him: “So I had less of the boys’ cheery companionship, and we
were so remote that visitors were few” (167).

Watson notices that Alderson makes “astute observations about particulars of pioneer living” (127). I contend that one of the particulars that Alderson picks up on is what Watson calls “gender-bending”: “Gender-bending’ abounds there, as in the absence of women the men show ‘friendly helpfulness,’ becoming domestic, nurturant, and skilled with cooking and doctoring” (127). Gender roles, especially for men, were easier to shift than class and race, and white men had the luxury of moving between the lines that divided them from women. Alderson comments on the movement of men between spheres. The bachelor cowboys who live with Alderson and her husband on their ranch taught her how to make a rice pudding without using eggs:

They would take the uncooked rice with a lot of raisins and currants and sugar and would cook it in milk, so long and slowly that it turned carmel-brown. They would mix it in a milk pan and set it in the oven, and every so often one of them would rush in from the corral where he was shoeing a horse or branding calves and stir it up. (41)

The literal spatial movement from the corral to the oven suggests the movement between the private, domestic sphere of the woman and the public, working sphere of the man. These men had to know how to cook for their own survival, but even with the presence of a woman, the men continue weaving in and out of strictly defined gender roles.

It is significant is that Alderson recognizes this movement, and uses it to create female bonds that assist her in creating a new version of a female world of love and ritual. Alderson orchestrates a web of female community—with herself at the center—with the
men of the plains, whom she characterizes as feminine:

I was always touched to see how, in the absence of women, men develop almost feminine qualities of thoughtfulness and sympathy. The men of those days, and especially the cowboys, could and did rise to the occasion when a medical emergency arose, and the best example I ever knew was Mr. Alderson. All those men, through their work with animals, developed a rough competence at surgery and care of these injured—but Mr. Alderson's wasn't rough. He had a natural sense of what to do when someone was hurt, and all the sympathy which ought to go with surgical instincts, but is sometimes conspicuously missing. (206)

Alderson attributes the feminine qualities that are missing from her relationships with and characterizations of other women to men so that she can create female bonds and community on the plains. Thus Alderson creates female community on her own terms, establishing a space for her needs and concerns of female companionship to be filled.

Men have the luxury of moving between gendered spheres that Alderson, as a woman, does not have, but she uses the flexibility of men's gender to create her own female community. It is within this female community of men that Alderson reaffirms her notion of "woman." Not only is gender the most flexible term with which to work, it is also the safest; there is no doubt that men are not women, so they are always, no matter how feminine, the male other. Of course, the implications of this relationship between class, race, and gender hierarchies is that Alderson affirms the idea that a white man is a better woman than a working class woman or Indian woman.
Despite the work Alderson puts into creating and maintaining female community on her terms, she is eventually lonely and isolated. Toward the end of the memoir, after several business failures and three moves, Alderson and her husband are on another, even more isolated ranch. Alderson is alone with her children most of the time, and the cowboys with whom she once created female community are no longer present. When reflecting upon her loneliness, Alderson states, “Sometimes I wonder if too much hasn’t been said about the grim aspects of frontier life. Later on in my marriage it came down to hard, bare facts; to loneliness and poverty” (49). Alderson’s isolation leads her to great anxiety and mental anguish. Later, Ellen Webb in Mildred Walker’s *Winter Wheat* would create female community with and within her isolated landscape. Alderson, though, is still limited by paradigms and an imaginary that has yet to evolve from the tradition of female isolation on the plains.

During a pregnancy, she is convinced that she is going to die. Alderson’s isolation is so palpable that she fears the loneliness of the landscape even in her death:

I became foolishly depressed, even morbid, before the baby was due. I felt that I was going to die, and I asked Mr. Alderson, if I did die, to take me in and bury me where there were water and flowers and trees, not one of these lonely hills...I couldn’t help shivering when I thought of those lonely graves out west, so far from friends. Every so often you would come across one all by itself on a hillside, just covered by a heap of stones, with a fence around to keep cattle from trampling on it. They had always seemed terribly forlorn to me. (197)
However, a close reading of her text reveals that what, sixty years later, Alderson derides as an overactive imagination, was actually the result of legitimate and valid concerns with no outlet, not the manifestations of a lonely woman’s neurosis.

In retrospect—nearly sixty years later—Alderson questions her anxiety and repeatedly attributes it to her isolation rather than the valid, lived experiences that make her concerns legitimate:

Perhaps it was being alone so much that made things work on my imagination. Were other women on lonely ranches as foolish as I? I know that the worst ordeals I suffered were nearly all in my own head, and some of them, viewed afterwards, were funny. (213)

Alderson attempts to explain away her compulsive thoughts; but her concerns were real.

Alderson seems obsessed with death. Historian Lillian Schlissel records that on the overland trail West, women continued their role as the caretaker of the sick and dying (15). Death, on the plains, was a female concern. The fine line between life and death on the plains is real to Alderson; in fact, it is acted out on her own body when she suffers a miscarriage. Therefore, Alderson’s compulsive thoughts on death are not morbid, they are legitimate and valid. Judy Blunt authenticates this concern with death and what she calls the “very real fears of childbirth.” Blunt states, “few people can recognize the stress of being pregnant and being isolated....[this is] an incredibly vulnerable time for women....the fear of death is almost universal [and] at that time when it was more realistic...women thought about it a lot.” Still, Alderson derides herself for having an overactive imagination.
Alderson recognizes that her loneliness leads to her anxiety:

Again I think it was because a woman on a ranch was alone so much, that little things seemed big to her. Her hands were busy all day, but her mind was idle, with so few people to see, no radio to take her mind off herself, and very little to read. I would keep thinking of the same things over and over, until they nearly drove me crazy. Whenever Mr. Alderson was riding from home, I was terribly afraid he would be killed by the Indians. (244)

Alderson also fears her husband might be killed from working with unruly horses. Her contact and experience with death are concrete evidence that legitimize her fears. Alderson’s anxiety is natural; when she was a child, her father went away to war and was killed. Her husband’s work was dangerous. In fact, her preoccupation with his safety turns out to be valid: he ultimately is killed by ranch-related work. However, Alderson continues in a rhetoric that is dismissive of her very real and valid concerns.

Without the support of female community as the outlet for female concerns, worries and anxieties turned inward; Alderson had to struggle with her fears about ranch life by herself. Blunt states, “[Alderson] did not have an audience....did not have a peer group out there to share these things with.” Therefore, Alderson finds her concerns and anxieties simply foolish or trite. Alderson did not have the support and network of female community to voice her valid concerns; I maintain that if she had, perhaps she would not have suffered what Bevis has diagnosed as a “break down” (66).

Nannie Alderson’s *A Bride Goes West* illustrates how social and political territories can influence how women create female community on the plains. Alderson does not
create female bonds with local women who challenge her fixed ideologies of class and race and her privilege within those hierarchies. Because it is the safest term with which to work, Alderson orchestrates a female community by manipulating gender and effeminizing men. Her active involvement in maintaining this female community by creatively maneuvering gender, points to the fact that Alderson succeeds, if only modestly and temporarily, in creating female community on the plains. Unlike Jerrine in *Letters of A Woman Homesteader*, who uses new images of the West to create female community, Alderson clings to old symbols and images--such as the flag and silver--to create her version of female community on the plains. As we will see with Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, women's gender roles can shift, creating problems and possibilities for female community. The female imaginary and images of the land begin to evolve so that women begin to reconfigure images of the West—including their isolated landscape—into a site for female community.
Chapter Three

*Jouissance in the Wheat Fields: Female Community and Desire in Willa Cather’s* *O Pioneers!*

Cather critic David Stouck interprets a scene in the third section of Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* to fit the Smith-Rosenberg female community formula. In this scene, the protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, gathers with two long-time female friends. Stouck describes the scene:

In one sequence Alexandra takes old Mrs. Lee for an afternoon’s visit with Marie Shabata; the fuchsias and geraniums are in bloom on the window sill, the coffee and sweet cakes, the exchange of crochet patterns are all redolent of the cozy domesticity of women together. Although Emil is in Mexico and Carl in the Far North, the scene is imaginatively complete, as the refuge desired is a maternal and innocent one. (30)

Stouck, who reads Alexandra as an epic, maternal character orchestrating a cult of domesticity on the Nebraska plains, truncates the complexities of this scene and female community—which I will address later in this chapter. I contend that the character of Alexandra has difficulty maintaining or creating female community bonds because, as Judith Butler has posited, “Cather has appeared not to place herself in a legible relation to women or lesbianism” (143). In order to create female bonds, one must identify themselves, or some aspect of themselves, as female.

As stated in Chapter One, the female world of love and ritual, according to Smith-
Rosenberg, was a space to reinforce heterosexual norms while providing a space for female homosocial desire. I will prove that Alexandra has no female community to function as an outlet for heterosexual desire or homosocial bonds. She instead sublimates these passions into erotic images of the land. I will concentrate my analysis of this novel on Alexandra’s bond with the land as a form of female community and the homosocial and homoerotic nature of this female bond. I claim that in *O Pioneers!*, Cather disrupts male traditions of the land and the male homosocial triangle by making women sexual subjects within their landscape. Cather denies traditional paradigms of the West, the landscape, gender, and sexual desire in order to undercut patriarchal structures such as the homosocial triangle that keep women subordinated.

Cather scholar Susan J. Rosowskis recognizes that Cather’s writing, “traces the ways in which she [Cather] freed herself from the ‘codes (mores and social contracts)’ that, according to Julia Kristeva, ‘must be shattered in order to give way to the free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure, and jouissance’” (59). *Jouissance* is “feminine sexual pleasure which...[is] disruptive of the phallocentric symbolic order (Andermahr 116); “...an encapsulation of female sexual desire, pleasure, and power....power to disrupt established ideologies” (Bennet 219). Despite Butler’s claim that Cather’s characters resist sexual identification, I propose one possibility for disruption of these codes and ideologies--the homosocial triangle and the male imaginary--is for Alexandra is to function within a sexual identity as a woman to create powerful female bonds with the landscape. By imagining a female bond with the land, Cather breaks apart conventional representations of the landscape and women to create new possibilities for female
existence, experience, community and relationships on the plains.

The novel is set in Hanover, Nebraska and the surrounding area at the end of the nineteenth century. Many in the region are immigrants from Sweden or Norway. The protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, grows up on a homestead in a family of men. Her two older brothers, Lou and Oscar, prove themselves to be incompetent at managing the family farm; on his deathbed, their father leaves the management of the farm to Alexandra. This leads to jealousy and antagonism between the older brothers and Alexandra; however, Alexandra has a close relationship with her younger brother, Emil. Alexandra is also close to a local woman, Marie Shabata, who is married to a cruel and abusive husband, Frank. Despite her emotional intimacy with both Emil and Marie, Alexandra is unable to see the passion that grows between the two. This leads to a tragedy—the murder of Emil and Marie by Marie’s husband—that leaves Alexandra questioning her relationship and loyalty to both of them. Throughout all of these ordeals, Alexandra finds comfort in the constant and consistent friendship of her childhood friend, Carl Linstrum; she also finds incredible discomfort in his romantic advances.

As Stouck notices, Cather’s Alexandra Bergson is in a place geographically that seems ideal for female bonding based upon the terms of the female world of love and ritual. Although she was raised in a family of three brothers without her mother, Alexandra has female friends that are a steady part of her life. Marie Shabata and Mrs. Lee, a Norwegian widow, often visit Alexandra; the women find comfort from being with each other. When Carl comes back from an extended trip, Alexandra acknowledges that Marie makes her loneliness bearable: "But Marie is really a companion, some one I can
talk to quite frankly, You wouldn’t want me to be more lonely than I have been, would you?” (98). Alexandra seeks to create an atmosphere of emotional closeness and disclosure with her female friends; however, Alexandra’s female community falls short of the intimacy and protection it can provide women. A scene in the novel when Alexandra, Mrs. Lee, and Marie gather to create female community on the plains emphasizes this point; this is the scene I maintain Stouck reads incorrectly:

> For twelve years Mrs. Lee had always entered Alexandra’s sitting room with the same exclamation, “Now we be yust-a like old times!” She enjoyed the liberty Alexandra gave her and enjoyed hearing her own language about her all day long. Here she could wear her nightcap and sleep with all her windows shut, listen to Ivar reading the Bible, and here she could run about among the stables in a pair of Emil’s old boots. (140)

During Mrs. Lee’s week-long visit, Marie is able to visit Alexandra’s farm. The women are happy to see each other and prepare to spend their time in each other’s company talking and exchanging crochet patterns.

However, Alexandra’s female community with Marie is not suggestive of the close, emotionally intimate female world of love and ritual that, according to Smith-Rosenberg, women in the urban East were experiencing at the same time. It even contradicts Alexandra’s statement to Carl that she can talk frankly with Marie. Marie’s marriage is troubled; her husband is abusive and Marie and Alexandra’s brother, Emil, are attempting to hide their love for one another. When Marie begins to confide this to Alexandra, Alexandra becomes upset because Frank is one of her colleagues in the local
farming community. Alexandra does not want to hear Marie’s troubles or recognize her relationship with Emil:

Alexandra had never heard Marie speak so frankly about her husband before, and she felt that it was wiser not to encourage her. No good, she reasoned, ever came from talking about such things, and while Marie was thinking aloud, Alexandra had been steadily searching the hatboxes.

"Aren’t these the patterns, Marie?” (147)

The scene which Stouck reads as “maternal and innocent” (30) is one that denies female community. There is nothing innocent about Marie’s life--her husband abuses her, and she is carrying on a secret affair with Emil; and there is nothing maternal about Alexandra, who shoots down Marie’s attempt at disclosure and genuine emotional intimacy. Despite the closeness of these women, Alexandra’s relationship with Marie is not efficacious of female community; as an indirect result of the lack of disclosure and intimacy between Alexandra and Marie, Marie and Emil later are killed by Marie’s jealous husband.

Instead of blaming herself or even her brother for the tragedy, Alexandra blames Marie for the calamity that touched Alexandra and all in the community. As the previous passage indicates, Marie attempted to disclose the evils of her husband, Frank, and possibly even her relationship with Emil, to Alexandra. Instead of listening to her problems and helping her, Alexandra transfers the blame to Marie for being with Emil, “Can you understand it? Could you have believed that of Marie Tovesky? I would have been cut to pieces, little by little, before I would have betrayed her trust in me!” (226). Alexandra does not betray Marie, but she denies her and the potential for genuine female
intimacy and bonds. Although Alexandra is not as isolated physically from other women as Nannie Alderson in *A Bride Goes West* or Ellen Webb, as we will later see in *Winter Wheat*, social and emotional isolation still prevent her from creating female community with these women.

One reason Alexandra is not able to create a female bond with the women around her is because of her vast movement on the gender roles spectrum. Alexandra has difficulty in maintaining or creating female bonds because, as Butler points out, Cather creates “texts which have as one of their persistent features the destabilization of gender and sexuality...” (143). As she travels through gender roles, she creates problems and new possibilities for female community.

Within her family of men, Alexandra emerges as the one with the most commitment to the family homestead, talent for managing the business, and tireless dedication to the farm. Even as a child, Alexandra is compared to men; Alexandra’s father recognizes and associates male ingenuity to his daughter: “Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying that she was intelligent” (18).

Unlike Nannie Alderson, who works within strict conventions of womanhood, Alexandra functions outside the female sphere. She takes over the family farm after her father dies, which transplants her into the male sphere giving her daily contact with men and men’s work. But as a woman, Alexandra is still able to cross back into the woman’s sphere. The following passage illustrates Alexandra’s fluidity of movement between male concerns and female community:
Alexandra and Emil spent five days down among the river farms, driving up and down the valley. Alexandra talked to the men about their crops and to the women about their poultry. She spent a whole day with one young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new kind of clover hay. She learned a great deal. As they drove along, she and Emil talked and planned. (49)

Alexandra moves between male and female gender roles—remember the scene of Alderson’s ranch hands moving from the corral to the kitchen as they make rice pudding—talking with men about crops and women about chickens. But, unlike Alderson’s ranch hands, who ultimately return to their gendered position as men, Alexandra returns to men’s work. This takes her away from a fixed feminine identity and opportunities to create community with other women. In fact, Alexandra is labeled as a non-woman by others in her family and local community. Her brothers, when discussing that Alexandra has yet to marry before forty, notice that it does not seem to bother her. Her brother Lou states that this is because, “Alexandra ain’t much like other women-folks” (129).

But she is not perceived--by herself and those around her--to be like men, either. She is able to conduct business in the male sphere, but she does not function successfully there, simply because the other men will not accept her. This is ironic, because what emerges from the narrative is the suggestion that Alexandra is a better “man” than her brothers. This is a threat to her two older brothers, Lou and Oscar. Before he died, her father tells his sons that he wants Alexandra to make decisions about the farm and that they must listen to her. This decision and Alexandra’s subsequent leadership creates
rivalry that causes the brothers to stigmatize Alexandra:

Lou turned to his brother. “This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business,” he said bitterly. “We ought to have taken things in our own hands years ago. But she liked to run things, and we humored her. We thought you had good sense, Alexandra. We never thought you’d do anything foolish.” (125-126)

The sexed identity of woman, that even Alexandra has not embraced, is used against her. The “foolish” behavior that her brothers fear is Alexandra marrying Carl, who, they fear, may eventually have more say in the farm than they do. Alexandra defends herself and her best interests for the farm. Her brother replies:

“That’s the woman of it; if she tells you to put in a crop, she thinks she’s put it in. It makes women conceited to meddle in business. I shouldn’t think you’d want to remind us how hard you were on us, Alexandra, after the way you baby Emil.”

“Hard on you, I never meant to be hard. Conditions were hard. Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn’t choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree” (127-128).

Social structures and institutions do not allow the space for Alexandra to function fully within the male sphere, but out of necessity--the survival of the family farm--she has to. Alexandra has fluidity in the gendered spheres that she occupies, but she is marginalized in both of the spheres. She is not allowed to fully function within the male sphere, but at the
same time, her female relationships are influenced and denied by her movement into the masculine sphere.

I have identified how Alexandra’s fluidity creates problems and complications for female community, but she also creates new possibilities. Rosowski notices and appreciates that “...Cather discarded the gendered West that history had bequeathed her and prepared to write her own birth of a nation” (59). By doing so, Cather disrupts classic representations of the West, and, I contend, the isolation of women in the male homosocial paradigm. In Chapter One, I defined “female community” and “female bonds” as a site or relationship that promotes female agency. Cather places images of the female body on the land to promote a female community bond because, as Rosowski points out, it disrupts sexual hierarchies that subordinate female sexuality. Just as Alexandra herself moves through the gender spectrum, her image of the landscape moves past conventional images of a virginal, conquerable female landscape.

Recall from Chapter One that Irigaray, in “This Sex Which is Not One,” summarizes men’s desire to own women, and in this case, the female land. Men feel entitled to return to their origin, or their mother’s womb, and therefore try to control and own women. I connect this with Kolodny’s recognition of the psychosexual dynamic men have with the land. The land, like women, is a space for men to act out sexual fantasies. In the past, male literary critics of the novel have stated, “It’s [O Pioneers!] theme is the conquest of virgin soil by pioneers” (Auchincloss 99). This statement by Louis Auchincloss in 1969 plays into a male imaginary that equates female sexuality with a conquerable land. In fact, Cather’s mission is quite the opposite. Cather makes the plains
landscape the site of female desire in order to disrupt male-authorized paradigms such as the male homosocial triangle.

Alexandra, in a moment of epiphany:

[H]ad a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it...The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring. (54)

This scene, an awakening of Alexandra’s relationship with the land and of her sexual desires, places the land as the site of the female body and sexual desires. Rosowski states that by making these moves, “Along with claiming wilderness and nature for her women, Cather claimed materiality; that is, she wrote of women’s relationships with nature as a kinship with a vital and animate physical world” (76).

Landscape scenes that erupt with female sexual desire are prevalent in Cather’s work. For example, Rosowski speaks of Cather’s short story, “Eric Hermannson’s Soul,” when “the story builds to two scenes that explode with a woman’s passion. In the first, Margaret and her mare (not stallion) ‘are tempted by the great open spaces and try to outride the horizon, to get to the end of something’ (69). Rosowski relates the other scene and concludes, “Cather writes--the quest romance adventure again, but with a difference, for her the seeker is a woman and the treasure she discovers is Eros, not in the romantic sense of passion in love but in the classical sense of passion underlying creativity,
akin to what we would now call jouissance” (70). Actively relating the female body and its sexuality to the land is an incendiary way to speak against classic representations of passive female sexuality and the male-imagined landscape where men re-enact their sexual fantasies.

Alexandra has recurring sexual fantasies of being carried across the fields by a gigantic man:

It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly across the fields. (153)

What is significant about this fantasy is that the land is no longer the prop for the fulfillment of a male sexual imaginary; Alexandra claims the land as the setting for female sexual desire. Cather makes Alexandra Bergson an active sexual agent in a landscape once inhabited by the male sexual imaginary. Alexandra extends her sexuality to the landscape; the man in Alexandra’s fantasies resembles the landscape she inhabits—he is vast and overpowering. The sensations this image creates—his color and smell—bring Alexandra back to the land.

In O Pioneers! Cather creates a landscape that is full of female images that make women the active subject of the landscape. With the following passage Cather paints a
picture of a valley and furrows to create a geography of the female body:

There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country,
where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and brown
earth, with such a strong, clean, smell, and such a power of growth and
fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; (58)

Rosowski recognizes Cather's tendency to "undermine sexual hierarchies and erase
boundaries by joining woman and nature in sexuality/fecundity/fertility" (76). Not only is
this space fertile, its colors and smells maintain that it desires sexual pleasure and actively
(not passively) "yields itself" to the plow. Irigaray states, "[T]he geography of her
pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more
subtle, than is commonly imagined--in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on
sameness" (366).

The plains landscape--recall Cather’s images of its furrows, shaggy ridges and the
Divide--is "the geography of her pleasure," and a way to break away from the sexual
imaginary that makes women and the land obliging props for the enactment of men's
fantasies. Irigaray states, "But the woman has sex organs more or less everywhere,"
(366) including the landscape she occupies. Cather continues:

[the wheat] rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of
the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. The wheat-cutting
sometimes goes on all night as well as all day, and in good seasons there
are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. (58)

This passage, instead of describing women as lack (not having a penis), promotes the idea
that men and their extensions—the horse and plow—are not “enough” to do all the harvesting of the land. The passage continues to describe the female landscape and sexuality as one of strength and power: “You feel in the atmosphere the same tonic, puissant quality that is in the tilth, the same strength and resoluteness.” (58)

The female sexual pleasure of the land, expressed through a “soft, deep sigh of happiness,” is similar to the comparison that Ellen, in Winter Wheat, would make between the fields after harvest and a mother after giving birth. Orgasm and childbirth are both female body-centered events that have been ways for women to relate with each and create the physical and emotional intimacy that Smith-Rosenberg speaks of in the female world of love and ritual. Remember that Smith-Rosenberg’s female community was also an outlet for heterosexual and homosocial desire. In both examples, the female land is an active participant in sexual pleasure or childbirth, instead of a passive sexual or reproductive commodity of exchange between men as they are in the male homosocial triangle.

The paradigm of the male homosocial triangle remains stable only if the female term is isolated and unrelated to any other female term. If two homosocial triangles exist parallel to each other—one with plains women as the conduit and one as the female-gendered land as the conduit—it is clear that female rivalry and isolation are needed in order for each separate male homosocial structure to stay in place. Cather, in her portrayal of woman and the land, destabilizes male bonding by making women and their relationship with the land acting agents. In her essay “The Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction,” Terry Castle reworks the homosocial triangle by adding a female-female bond.
She states, “Within this new homosocial structure, the possibility of male bonding is radically suppressed: for the male term is now isolated just as the female term was in the homosocial structure” (536).

As a female bond becomes functional, imagine what happens when the two triangles begin to morph. What emerges from this model is a female bond that diffuses the male bonding that has isolated women in the homosocial triangle. The nature of the female bond varies, existing on a continuum that Sedgwick claims spans from “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women” (3). We will see the variance in the nature of these bonds from Alexandras’ homoerotic bond with the land to Ellen Webb’s homosocial bond with the land in *Winter Wheat*.

The plains becomes a place where women use a new set of images to create female community and where patriarchal concepts and controls are taken apart and transcended. Female community within the landscape puts an end to fantasies of the land and desire that deny any reference to women and their bonds. Cather’s portrayals of women are a way to examine what Sedgwick has identified as “women’s own cultural resources of resistance, adaptation, revision, and survival” (18). Cather’s erotic landscape and Alexandra provide a way for women to function on the plains on their own terms--with agency--as a disruptive force against classic representations of the land that favor men and subordinate women. Cixous states:

[...] woman has never her turn to speak--this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the
precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.

(350)

The landscape and desire paradigm with woman as subject of female bonds is the start of a new imaginary for women to transform the social and cultural structures of writing and the western plains; Cather’s landscape transforms the geographical isolation of the plains to a spatial paradigm where women function as subjects of female bonds. Using images of female community, women write and think of the landscape in terms of their active bonds in a resistance against the passive role of commodity that women and the land play in the male imaginary.

Despite the landscape that Cather creates for change, it is a landscape that functions within the limits of Cather’s imaginary. Alexandra eventually marries Carl, reinforcing the cultural norms of heterosexual romance and marriage. Like the female world of love and ritual, Cather’s female community ultimately reaffirms heterosexual love and marriage by providing a temporary site for female desire. With Mildred Walker’s Winter Wheat, we will see that the legacy of female bonds with the land continues, but without the need for heterosexual resolution, carrying on the tradition of new possibilities and relationships for women on the plains.
"Now I Was Free and Alone in Myself": Female Community With and Within the Isolated Landscape of Mildred Walker's Winter Wheat

In Mildred Walker's Winter Wheat (1944), Ellen Webb functions in a female community that follows the traditions of Smith-Rosenberg's female world of love and ritual. Walker's novel reveals that Ellen's images of the land are rooted in the functions of female community; within her landscape, Ellen finds female community that supports heterosexual romance while providing a space for homosocial bonds, creates physical and emotional intimacy based on shared female experiences, and contributes to Ellen's development of confidence and self-esteem.

Winter Wheat is a coming-of-age novel that spans a year-and-a-half of Ellen's life and follows her development from an uncertain eighteen-year-old girl into a confident young woman. In his introduction to the 1992 edition of the novel, Montana writer James Welch summarizes the events during the time span of the novel that contribute to Ellen's struggles and resulting growth:

Ellen finishes harvest in the fall; goes away to college in the East...falls in love with learning and a very sensitive young man with long, beautiful fingers; gets jilted in a very insensitive manner; falls out of love with her parents; teaches the following years in a one-room schoolhouse on a wind-swept plain in northern Montana; begins to enjoy her isolation; begins to love the country children who come to her school, especially one
emotionally troubled boy; then witnesses the tragedy for which she blames herself; and comes home to the family wheat ranch. (ix)

Ellen copes with and overcomes all of these events because of support she finds in female community. For Ellen, who was born and raised on her family’s homestead in north-central Montana, the physical isolation of the plains is not limiting, but rather creates new possibilities for female relationships with the landscape. The novel illustrates that while she struggles with her geographic isolation, Ellen overcomes it by creating a female bond with the land; as a result, she finds the strength to overcome the hardships in her life.

Ellen creates female community with and within her isolated landscape. Ellen is isolated—geographically and emotionally—from other women; as a sign of resiliency and determination, Ellen finds in her isolation a female bond with the land.

At the end of the novel, Ellen talks with one of her students about love, and brings resolution to her troubles by signifying love as the winter wheat that grows on her family’s land:

“Wheat can stand a lot,” I went on. “The hard winter wheat doesn’t grow in warm countries, you know. And wheat grown on irrigated land lacks the strength of dry-land wheat. I guess it takes cold and snow and dryness and heat to make the best wheat.”

Leslie laughed and gave a little bounce on the seat. “You’re funny, Ellen. First you talk about love and then you talk about wheat.”

“I get them mixed up, don’t I?” I said. (298)

Ellen blurs her image of the land—and the wheat produced by it—with her own lived
experiences, Ellen is even aware that she “get[s] them mixed up.” But the fact that she self-reflectively uses the land as a set of images to signify her experiences is significant, because it provides structure in a woman’s life and influences how women relate to the land and each other on the western plains.

Ellen is geographically isolated from other women, with the exception of her mother. However, there is an emotional gap that keeps Ellen from forming an infrangible female bond with her mother. At times, it is as if Ellen goes out of her way to deny this potential for female community. When describing her physical appearance, Ellen notices that she is more like her father, and describes her mother’s physicality in pejorative terms:

I look more like Dad. He is tall and thin and has light hair and blue eyes and his face shows what he thinks or feels. Mom is square and stocky with broad shoulders and hips. It’s just as well that I am more like Dad in my body. I like being slender and straight. I am strong like Mom, though, and I like working in the fields better than working in the house. (4-5)

Throughout the novel Ellen struggles with her relationships with both of her parents; she feels a closer connection to her father, but would like to maintain a stronger connection with her mother. Ellen contends that she likes being more like her father than her mother; she works in the fields and understands the complexities of the farm’s finances. Within her family economy, Ellen constantly works and moves outside the woman’s sphere: she “can drive a truck, thresh wheat, milk cows, pluck chickens and turkeys, sit on a tractor seat all day long, even worry about her parents paying off the combine and mortgage” (Welch ix). Ellen has movement on the spectrum of gender roles, but this fluidity is confusing to Ellen.
as she attempts to relate to her parents.

It is odd that Ellen feels closer to her father than her mother, who travels with her through and between gendered tasks. Ellen’s father, Ben, is rarely portrayed working in the home or with traditional women’s tasks. Ellen and her mother, along with keeping house and cooking, constantly work in the fields with the men, especially because there is a shortage of farm laborers in the community.

As I have noted previously, Julia Watson points out in her essay on female autobiography in Montana that the circumstances of the plains experience creates occasion for “gender bending.” When Alderson lives on the plains in the 1880s, men had the fluidity to move through gender roles lines, while Alderson was confined to the woman’s sphere. Alexandra, in Nebraska at about the same time, moves through both spheres, but is marginalized in both of them. Ellen, on a dryland wheat ranch in northern Montana in 1940, is the moveable, flexible subject on the gender spectrum. For example, contrast Welch’s quote above with the scene in Alderson’s memoir describing the ranch hands’ movement from working in the stable to running into the kitchen to stir their rice pudding with Cather’s description of Alexandra traveling through the Divide talking to the men about crops and the women about chickens. Unlike Alderson, Ellen is able to expand her gender role, but like Alexandra, at first Ellen can not find her place in the male sphere or the female sphere, making difficult the possibility for female community.

Ellen’s struggles with her mother are rooted in the history that her mother, Anna, has with Ellen’s father, Ben. Ben and Anna met when he was a soldier in Russia in World War I. After he is severely injured in battle, Anna, then a young nurse, tends him during
his recovery and the two fall in love. When he plans to return to the United States, Anna
lets Ben believe she is pregnant. They marry and move back to his hometown in Vermont.
Anna is unhappy there and convinces Ben to homestead to Montana. The resulting years
on their dry land wheat ranch are full of hard work, pain and struggles for Ben and Anna.
Ellen wants to feel close to her mother, but resents her for lying to her father and blames
Anna for the difficult life in which she sees her parents trapped.

In her emotional isolation, Ellen retreats to her landscape. Unlike Nannie Alderson
or other women who experienced the plains before her, to Ellen, images of isolation on the
plains are comforting, rather than disconcerting or conducive to insanity. Ellen
remembers, “When I was little, I used to play that a spot out on the fields was an island
and I was marooned there, between sky and the sea. I wasn’t a child anymore, but I felt
that way today” (114). Ellen actually fantasizes that the landscape is more isolated than it
already is, and actively imagines a place in that landscape even further removed from her
already isolated place. This isolation is a comforting image of the land that Ellen brings
with her from her childhood and affects how Ellen thinks of the landscape as she moves
into adulthood.

Ellen uses images of isolation for comfort, indicating that isolation and female
community are not opposing terms. In Chapter One, I contend that in order to create
female community within the landscape, women develop and use alternate images of the
landscape, as opposed to the isolation and subordination imposed by the male imaginary.
Ellen’s transformation of the landscape is similar to Jerinne, in Letters of a Woman
Homesteader, creating female community with new images and symbols of the West.
Jerinne imagined female community with scraps of wood that seemed useless to the adults around her. Ellen transforms what is perceived as a desolate landscape—especially by her fiancé—into a female bond. Ellen looks out onto her landscape to imagine an island, far removed from her own place in the landscape. She transforms fields of wheat into a vast body of water, and imagines herself at the space where the water and sky meet. Although Ellen's transformation of the landscape is a form of escapism and seems to contradict my thesis that she bonds with her landscape, the landscape is her ally, or means of escaping emotional turmoil and finding comfort in her loneliness. Ellen can use her creativity to transform the vastness of the landscape she was born into, and finds ways to reimagine and reconfigure her isolation. In fact, Ellen's isolated landscape performs some of the same functions as Smith-Rosenberg's female world of love and ritual.

Ellen’s relationship with the land is a positive element in her life that provides support and stability in her female experiences, particularly falling in love and heterosexual romance. Ellen transforms the isolation of the plains as a space to express her love for a man she meets and falls in love with while at college in Minnesota, Gil Borden. While anticipating Gil’s visit to Montana, she looks to her landscape as a space of support of her relationship with Gil:

Everything looked beautiful to me. I went out to see if the wild flowers on the prairie where still in bloom. The grass wasn’t very green, but there were bright blue and yellow and pink patches. I went up on the rimrock and felt the sun and looked way off to the mountains. It was almost as though I told all the places I loved that I’d be back and bring Gil. (61)
Instead of telling her sisters or girlfriends about her new love, as many young women would, Ellen tells the prairies, flowers, and rimrocks. Just as a network of female support would usually encourage a young woman’s relationship with her fiancé, the landscape validates Ellen’s happiness with Gil.

Smith-Rosenberg states that the female world of love and ritual bonded women through rituals centered on the female body such as menstruation, sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. In the opening chapter of *Winter Wheat*, Ellen reflects upon the fields of her family’s homestead after harvest: “The fields have a tired peaceful look, the way I imagine a mother feels when she’s had her baby and is just lying there thinking about it and feeling pleased” (3). Ellen imagines the landscape in context to herself as a woman and shared female experiences; by projecting the experience of childbirth to the fields, Ellen creates physical and emotional intimacy with the land. Even though Ellen is a young woman who has yet to experience pregnancy and childbirth, she still can create a particularly female bond with the land by relating shared female experiences.

Female community, according to Smith-Rosenberg, was a space where women could develop a sense of inner-security and self-esteem. With Ellen, we see a character who begins to find comfort in her isolation as she forms a female bond with the land. Ellen connects so closely with the land that it reflects her own feelings and experiences. Ellen realizes, for example, that she can endure personal crises because the land has endured natural disaster:

The deep-yellow grain, laid against the fallow strips, was beautiful beyond
anything you could think of. The damage of the hail didn’t show from here. There isn’t anything prouder than a field of ripe grain. It makes you stand a little taller so you can see farther across it. (120)

Ellen again blurs the experience of the fields with her own experiences. Like the fields, Ellen has survived through damaging events; her fiancé had left her, she could not return to college in the fall due to a bad harvest, and she was questioning her parent’s connection to each other and to her. When Ellen states, “It makes you stand a little taller so you can see farther across it,” the “you” she is addressing seems to be herself. The proud survival of the wheat inspires Ellen to persevere through her difficult emotional experiences.

It is with her isolated landscape that Ellen creates female bonds and community. According to Smith-Rosenberg, a network of female relatives and friends historically would have provided the emotional support that Ellen searches for throughout the novel and finds with images of the land. Communing with the land creates a space, despite the lack of female community and her geographical isolation, for Ellen to develop into a strong woman with a sense of independence and self-confidence.

An analysis of Ellen’s relationship with Gil Borden authenticates the claim I made in Chapter One that the plains landscape is a place for the male and female imaginary to come into conflict. Gil does not appreciate or understand the land the way Ellen does. As stated in Chapter One, the male imaginary has a specific image of the plains landscape; this image is parallel to male-imagined female isolation and passive sexuality that is displayed in the paradigm of Sedgwick’s male homosocial triangle. The isolated female term in the homosocial triangle is parallel to women’s isolation on the western plains. As I illustrated
in the previous chapter, if two homosocial triangles exist parallel to each other—one with plains women as the conduit and one as the female-gendered land as the conduit—it is clear that female rivalry and isolation are needed in order for the male homosocial structure to stay in place.

One of the most significant bonds the homosocial paradigm does not cultivate is women's relationship with the land. When women bond with the land, they form a female bond that destabilizes this patriarchal structure. When women form a homosocial bond with the land, the two male homosocial triangles begin to morph, creating a paradigm in which a female-female bond emerges as the subject of the homosocial structure. When women create female bonds with the landscape they inhabit, they begin to disrupt male constructs of the land and expected female behavior.

Ellen is isolated from other women, but not from her landscape. Ellen transforms her landscape to create female community. She reconfigures her landscape as another female subject with which she creates a homosocial bond. However, this creation of female bonds is in opposition to male authorized paradigms that favor men, such as the homosocial triangle. As stated in Chapter One, in order for the homosocial triangle to exist, female terms must be isolated from each other. Ellen forms a female bond with the land, and, as a result, her bond with the land and the occupation of her isolated landscape functions as a barrier to heterosexual romance.

Ellen's female homosocial bond with the land, which ultimately functions to destabilize male homosocial bonds and authority, functions as a barrier to her own heterosexual romance. When Gil arrives in Montana for a visit, he does not have the same
perceptions of the landscape that Ellen does. Instead of becoming a space to maintain love and romance, as she expected, Ellen’s female community within her landscape becomes a barrier to heterosexual relationships. There are several times throughout the novel that Ellen’s bond with the land is at odds with Gil’s male imaginary of the plains and female isolation:

The road ran between the fields; the strips of faint green were spring wheat; the strips of olive green were winter wheat. They were beautiful under the sun. I could never drive through the country without noticing the wheat. I felt happier.

“Don’t you like the wideness, Gil?”

“It’s so wide it’s depressing,” Gil answered. “Look at that shack without a shrub or a tree around it!” (81)

A landscape that Ellen is sensitive to, describes as beautiful, and that pleases her is one that Gil finds overwhelming and depressing. Ellen perceives her landscape as radiant and “beautiful under the sun”; Gil’s perception is devoid of that beauty and radiance. Ellen and Gil look out at the same landscape, but there is a gap in their perceptions.

If anything, Gil is perplexed that Ellen is not the victim of her landscape and isolation:

“It must be lonely for you here sometimes,” Gil said, as though he were being kind.

“No, I’ve never been lonely here,” I answered. I wanted to go on talking, about anything, but I couldn’t. (76)
Ellen states that she couldn’t say anything more to Gil; she can not explain her relationship with the land. This translates into a communication and imaginary gap—based in the differences between a male and female imaginary—between Gil and Ellen. At one point Ellen acknowledges, “I was always trying to explain myself to Gil. I suppose all people in love do that” (53). But Ellen can not explain to Gil her connection to the land.

Gil functions as the male imaginary that constructs women as dependent victims of their isolation rather than independent occupants of the landscape who use their isolation as a subversion of male authorized images of the land. Gil’s imaginary would rather see Ellen end up like Rölvaag’s heroine, Beret. Later Gil comments to Ellen:

“I should think people would go stark, raving crazy out here in winter,” Gil said.

“Why?”

“Well, there’s nothing to do, except the work, I suppose. You’re so far away and dependent on each other. Take your mother and father; I think they’d have been talked out years ago.” (74)

After he cuts short his visit to Montana and ends their relationship, Gil writes to Ellen:

I am afraid that we are too separated in background and interests and ways of looking at things to be happy together. You are a little like your country and I feel a sense of strangeness with you as I did in that wide desolate country. I didn’t want to say this while I was there, to spoil our time together. (197)

Gil has a limiting image of Ellen and what she should be to him. Gil wants to picture Ellen
as something weak and understandable—something he can take care of. This is similar to
the traditional male imaginary of the land and women as vulnerable and conquerable,
articulated by Kolodny and Irigaray in Chapter One.

The disequilibrium Ellen feels when Gil leaves her is similar to the observation
Irigaray makes on the exclusion of the female imaginary:

The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in
the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-
structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is life
is a mirror invested by the (masculine) “subject” to reflect himself, to copy
himself. Moreover, the role of “femininity” is prescribed by this masculine
specula(riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman’s desire, which
may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt. (367)

This disequilibrium is one that Alderson never recovers from; living in a landscape
dominated by men and a male imaginary, Alderson’s concerns are what Irigaray calls the
“waste or excess” of a male imaginary. Therefore, Alderson begins to experience herself
fragmentarily—in what William W. Bevis has diagnosed as a breakdown. The stigma
associated with the breakdown is similar to the “hiding, anxiety, and guilt” that women
feel when their concerns are isolated from other women, and even themselves. Cather’s
Alexandra, too, denies her desires and passions. Only Ellen is able to come out of the
other side of this oppressive imaginary. Gil leaves Ellen because she is not the “mirror
invested by the (masculine) subject to reflect himself.” Instead of internalizing her fears,
like Alderson, or denying them, like Alexandra, Ellen overcomes them by creating an even
stronger female bond with the land in her female imaginary.

After Gil ends their relationship, Ellen moves to a one-room school house on the Montana Hi-Line to teach. There, she begins to struggle with the landscape bond that was once a source of strength and comfort to her:

When I saw Mom driving away after supper with eighty-five miles to go I felt deserted. I sat down on the wooden stoop and looked at the sunset over the butte and the empty twilight. If I had been able to see a thicket of aspen against the soft endless sky it would have helped, but there was nothing but the shabby earth rolling off under the slack wires of the fence that marked the school land from the prairie, and here and there a lonely, twisted jack pine. For the first time in my life I knew what Gil meant by the emptiness. I had taken it in with my mind before, but I had not felt it in my throat and stomach. The emptiness surrounded me and swept over me until I was nothing. (147)

The force of Gil’s imaginary returns to Ellen and relegates Ellen and her landscape as other; he defines himself against what he can not understand or control. Ellen’s female bond with the land is intimidating to Gil because it speaks against male authorized paradigms of landscape and female passivity. Here, Ellen, for awhile, functions in that imaginary and begins to “experience herself fragmentarily” by questioning her bond to the land. If Ellen had internalized Gil’s perceptions of the land, she would have been driven mad and turned to Gil’s rationality and imagination for her salvation; she would have been driven from the female bond she creates with the land and the autonomy she finds in her
These feelings occupy Ellen only temporarily; she soon returns to the land even more unapologetically and with more strength. Unlike the male-authorized images of the land, Ellen occupies her loneliness and uses it as a space for growth and empowerment. This space of isolation, traditionally used against women, becomes a space for women to function independently, powerfully, and subversively. Cixous challenges women to occupy the space of other—in this case, Ellen’s isolation—that has systematically been used against them by patriarchy.

Ellen teaches and lives in the school house; she spends evenings and weekends alone. But even in this environment, Ellen finds comfort and satisfaction. She eventually states, “Now I was free and alone in myself” (164). With this statement, Ellen reclaims what Sedgwick called woman’s own “powers, bonds, and struggles.” Ellen opens up possibilities for women to exist on the plains outside of male authorized myths and structures. Using the land as a female bond to destablize male images of the landscape and femininity, Ellen overcomes the images of an antagonistic landscape that are oppressive to women. Ellen creates her space for agency, creative thought, and power.

Ellen states, “I have the whole sky to myself” (164). Reimagining and reclaiming this landscape as her own with images of female community, Ellen also reclaims the powers, struggles, and bonds of women on the plains. Ellen embraces her geographic isolation because she creates a female bond with the land. She is also able to heal the other female bond in her life, that with her mother. This pivotal change comes when Ellen confronts her mother at the end of the novel about the history of her relationship with her
father. When talking to Ellen about her relationship with her husband, Anna says: “We get mad, sure! Like fire an’ snow an’ thunder an’ lightening storm, but they don’t hurt the wheat down in the ground any” (284). Ellen’s bond with the land, then, is something that she inherited from her mother. Ellen later takes her mother’s metaphor and expands it to talk with her student, Leslie, about wheat. A female bond with the land is a shared experience between Ellen and her mother that allows them to form a space for female community. Ellen’s relationship with her mother is healed and reinforced by a female community bond with the land. The last lines of the book emphasize that Ellen has resolved the conflict of identifying with her mother and father, “I had not always been glad that I was their child, but today I had a kind of pride in being born to them” (306).

Ellen’s female community with and within her landscape makes her physical isolation freeing—instead of oppressing—and opens up new possibilities—instead of reinforcing paradigms that subordinate women. The trajectory of female community on the plains landscape develops from women on the overland trail expressing the antagonism they felt with the landscape in their isolation from other women, to Nannie Alderson’s moderate success with female community in eastern Montana. Alexandra Bergson creates a female bond with her landscape, paving the way for Ellen Webb to create female community with and within her isolated plains landscape. The persistence and evolution of these female bonds gives women on the plains a model and inspiration for claiming the sky, the landscape and female community as their own.
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