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Dissertation Prospectus

*"You're too popular to escape it:"*  
**Willa Cather & Celebrity Culture**

Cultural critics such as Tyler Cowen have recently argued that twentieth-century "fame-seeking, celebrity, and fandom are deeply rooted" within American culture and as a consequence, have had an enormous impact on the production of art and the construction of private and public identities. Cowen argues that celebrity has become "the ideological and intellectual fabric of modern capitalism," and as such, celebrity culture is a particularly suggestive lens for cultural criticism, since celebrity culture intersects a wide range of cultural sites, providing for a multi-layered, complex analysis.

This dissertation proposes to build on studies of celebrity culture by analyzing Willa Cather's career and texts as they show her negotiation with celebrity culture, the literary marketplace, and the media. By charting the cultural growth of celebrity, this project will explore Cather's sustained interest in celebrity culture demonstrated by her imaginative and intellectual working out of specific issues of notoriety/fame within her work. Further, as I work through each chapter, I will work in contemporary and historical writers to contextualize Cather's negotiation with celebrity culture. As a part of this exploration I will pay special attention to wider issues of women in the literary marketplace, middle-brow and high-brow audiences and the textual and visual construction and presentation of the modern "personality" figure. Critical aspects of race and class will, as necessary and relevant, fold into my analysis.

Born in 1873, Cather's world-view was situated within late Victorian culture, and

her life follows the emergence of modernism as well as a host of technologies that reshaped the landscape of media and role of the public person within that media. Cather's childhood experiences at the Red Cloud Opera House (biographer James Woodress says that "it was the one place in town that held the most attraction for Cather .... the memory of plays and light operas there was golden" (58)), her performances in theatrical productions in Red Cloud and at the University of Nebraska, and her drama criticism for the *Lincoln Journal* and *Courier* newspapers in the 1890s are compelling evidence that Cather was highly engaged with the celebrity culture around her well before her emergence as an aspiring editor-writer.

In particular, Cather was interested in the role of art and the artist in a world increasingly geared to an "economy of fame," as Tyler Cowen puts it, which rests on the commodification of the individual artist into product and image (8). The increasing pressures artists faced due to the blurring lines between public and private life especially caught Cather's attention. Particularly, this theme of private/public critically informs her fiction while simultaneously defining a major aspect of her own negotiation with celebrity culture. The dissertation will argue that Cather's experiences in her celebrity culture are evident throughout her fiction. Each chapter will be grounded in a specific historical moment from Cather's career and will trace her response to that experience. Specifically, I will break Cather's career into three broad time frames representative of her work and attitudes toward celebrity: the early "apprenticeship phase (1900-~1918); the early to mid 1920s, when Cather became a celebrity figure (1922-1927); and the late years (1935-death).

## **Chapter 1: Contextualizing Cather in American Literary Celebrity Culture**

This paper will introduce a historical/social context for celebrity culture in general and literary celebrity in particular. I want to particularly show how advertising, marketing, and image moved from “low brow” literature to “high brow” through Whitman, Twain, and other American writers, because these are changes that directly impact the literary marketplace Cather encounters in the early 1910s. I may also be able to work with Cather’s drama reviews for Lincoln newspapers, and showcase her specific inquiry into celebrity culture. There are lots of possibilities for what this chapter can do for my dissertation, and I’ll expect to write it late in the process to efficiently and effectively inform the resulting chapters.

## **Chapter 2: *The Troll Garden* & *Alexander’s Bridge*: Reinterpreting Cather Through Celebrity Culture**

This chapter will argue that Cather’s early works, *The Troll Garden* (1905) and *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912), are primarily concerned with issues of art and celebrity and that in these works, celebrity culture emerges as a critical theme. Each story in *The Troll Garden* addresses celebrity culture from various points of view, and engages such themes as the role of the artist in a commercial marketplace; the allure of the “star,” stage, and the artistic performance to individual lives; and the ways in which celebrity culture complicates the role of art and the artist. The collection is remarkable for its kaleidoscopic look at celebrity culture as Cather shifts her perspective on celebrity from story to story—in whole, a sustained and thoughtful exploration of her celebrity culture.

Cather’s first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912), also directly addresses issues of celebrity culture. Cather signals this early in the novel when she writes that, “There were other bridge-builders in the world, certainly, but it was always Alexander’s picture that

the Sunday Supplement men wanted” (10) making Alexander’s “reputation . . . as the saying is, popular” (36). Cather’s interest in the fictional Alexander’s career as a celebrity figure gave her the scope to imaginatively process issues of celebrity culture that she had seen first-hand at *McClure’s* magazine. Cather understood the paradox at work for artists within the celebrity culture. The artist who strove for widespread recognition and a greater financial independence as a form of “freeing” one’s time, also invited in the demands of the celebrity: interviews, sales pressures, and a demand to please the public; Alexander had “expected success would bring him freedom and power; but it had brought only power that was in itself another kind of restraint” (37).

### **Chapter 3: Imagining Celebrity: Cather’s Ghostwritten Autobiographies**

This chapter investigates Cather’s two ghostwritten biographies of celebrity figures and traces how her insights into celebrity may have played a key role in the later development of her narrator figures in major novels. The first biography, *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science* (serialization: 1907-08; book: 1909), was Cather’s “first lengthy assignment at *McClure’s*” (xvii), and, as David Stouck has noted, “The central interest of the narrative is in Mary Baker Eddy’s unflagging struggle to achieve fame and power and in the psychological roots of her unique personality.”

With her second project, *My Autobiography* (1914), Cather herself takes on the persona figure as she writes in S.S. McClure’s voice. In assembling the pieces of McClure’s life, Cather configures his rags to riches story as she simultaneously takes up “her most thinly veiled autobiography” in *The Song of the Lark*.

At issue in these works is celebrity culture itself, including the public’s

fascination with the public person, the thorny process of researching and writing another person's life for public consumption, and the difficulty of separating the public identity from the private, etc. I will argue that these celebrity-driven issues form the lens through which Cather constructs her unique outsider narrator figures in *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and *My Mortal Enemy*. These are figures fascinated by the life of another, and each one struggles to understand and “get at” the central mystery—the secret of self—that drives its subjects. This construction allows Cather to deepen her intellectual conversations with these critical themes of fascination and secret selves, as well as mirrors her own negotiation with these issues.

#### **Chapter 4: From Bank Street to Main Street: Cather, the Press, & Regional Identity**

This chapter will examine how Cather constructed her public identity/reputation/biography in her early interviews, and I will build on a conference paper I recently wrote on how Cather used Sarah Orne Jewett to build a sense of regional identity as a writer. In that paper I argue that Cather consciously bypassed celebrated male Western writers such as Owen Wister, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane to build a literary identity through Jewett's literary celebrity as a regional writer. To flesh out this argument, I will contrast Cather with Edith Wharton's construction of her literary self. Since Cather was often compared with Wharton in popular a celebrity-driven magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, the contrast between these two writers and their construction of their strikingly different public literary selves will shed light on how women writers contended with celebrity culture as they worked to shape their public identities.

### **Chapter 5: The Problems of Renown: Cather Responds to Celebrity Culture**

This uses as a starting point Cather's 1923 Pulitzer Prize as a site of inquiry for both Cather's position as a literary celebrity in American culture and her response to that celebrity in her later fiction, especially in *The Professor's House* and *My Mortal Enemy*.

To provide context for Cather's award and the critical response to the award, I will discuss the politics of literary awards in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. (I have done much of this work in a previous conference paper.) I also want to show how the issues Cather faces as a celebrity writer show up with increasing sophistication in her fiction. For example, in *The Professor's House*, the Professor faces the legacy and fame of his brilliant former student; and in so doing, he must also face the material success connected to Tom Outland's fame. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather uses the framework of a fairytale to showcase the downfall the Driscolls; from evening parties with Modjeska and other well-known celebrities to the bareness of cheap apartment dwellings, the novel suggests the fragile line between celebrity and obscurity.

### **Chapter 6: Picturing Cather: The Iconic Cather**

This chapter has been drafted for my exam, and I am currently working with Sue to substantially revise it. My revision will narrow in on Cather's photographs, and take out some of the historical context.

### **Chapter 7: Drowning in Celebrity: Cather, Warner Brothers, and *Lucy Gayheart***

This chapter will use my previous work on the 1934 filmed version of *A Lost Lady* to discuss Cather's relationship to her public, especially how her name became a marketable product in the 1930s. Building on this work, I will argue that her next novel, *Lucy Gayheart*, is a dark response to her status as a celebrity.

I will explore how *Lucy Gayheart* can be read as Cather's interpretation of a sentimental novel, a highly popular form of fiction and certainly the genre of the 1934 filmed version of the screenplay for *A Lost Lady*. Cather's response to her celebrity culture can be read through Clement Sebastian's drowning. The event becomes the primary metaphor around which Cather constructs her statements on artists in a celebrity-driven society, since it was the James Mockford, the "white" skinned, "somewhat rubbery" accompanist, who "fastened himself to his companion with a strangle-hold and dragged him down"(57; 138). Further, *Lucy Gayheart's* plot mirrors *The Song of the Lark* in striking ways, but Lucy's life becomes a foil to Thea's rise to fame, and she is literally pulled under by her superficial romantic fascination with Sebastian.

### **Chapter 8: From Celebrity to Classic: Cather's Late Years**

This last chapter will center on Cather's final years—years that some critics and biographers term her "reclusive" years. This chapter will question that belief, and situate Cather as a popular writer who is constructing a long-lasting legacy in her final years. Of primary concern is how does someone outlast "celebrity"? In a culture full of writers, actors, and other public personalities who take on short-lived public importance only to fade in a matter of months or years into obscurity, how does one secure a more permanent place within this celebrity culture?

I will especially look at her construction of the *Autograph Editions*, her book of essays on literature and writing, *Not Under Forty*, and her selection of public appearances. Also, I want to pay special attention to the marketing of *Sappirha and the Slave Girl*, which, to my mind, is one of the most sophisticated campaigns of her literary career. For example, the book was featured prominently in the Book of the Month Club

catalog. Further, letters recently given to the UNL Archives suggest Cather's continual negotiation with celebrity culture. In a remarkable 1936 letter to Cather, Alfred Knopf tells Cather to consider turning down a lecture. He writes:

I am writing despite your word, because my thoughts on the subject seem at the moment to be quite clear. What I'm afraid of is that you'll have to turn out to be just a very disagreeable swollen-headed beast or just simply everybody's sweetheart. It's a horrible choice, but you're too popular to escape it.

Knopf's letter not only suggests the pressures of Cather's public renown, but also shows her continual negotiation with her public profile—the very problems Cather forecasted in *Alexander's Bridge* decades earlier. Further, this letter highlights Knopf's personal engagement and commitment to Cather, one he took on with great care and sensitivity.

**Conclusion:**

The final conclusion of the dissertation will suggest the complexity of Cather's handling of her career, especially in comparison with other writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, who fell out of fame at the end of his career.