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New Title

Fanny Fern's novel *Ruth Hall* (1855) tells the story of a widowed mother of two, who, in order to save herself and her children from the depths of poverty, becomes a highly successful newspaper columnist under the *non de plume* of "Floy." Toward the end of the novel, after Floy has become a critical and popular success, a publisher describes Floy as "elastic, strong, brave, loving...fiery, yet soft" and ends with the punctuated conclusion that she is "a bundle of contradictions!" (180). Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis) knew well how a woman writer like Floy could be labeled as much since *Ruth Hall* was largely based by Fanny Fern's own career in the literary marketplace. For professional women writers of the nineteenth century, personal and public identity manifested itself into "a bundle of contradictions" since women like Fern (and others such as E.D.E.N. Southworth, Frances E.W. Harper, and Lydia Maria Childe, to name a few) often commanded high prices for their work and regularly produced bestselling books, but many times, as in this case with *Ruth Hall*, these women had to rest their literary ambitions on the welfare of her children or through the morals of True Womanhood. For all their success, these women commanded almost no lasting critical respect.

Twentieth century women writers also met with such contradictions and writers such as Edith Wharton and Willa Cather had to carefully craft their public personas in an order to thwart nineteenth-century stereotypes that women "authoresses" were merely second-rate artists. Further, the growth of celebrity culture added to an increased interest

in the private lives of writers, and, as Barbara Hochman notes, “many publications catered to the reading publics wish to ‘know’ authors by providing new modes of access to them” (27). The ways in which Wharton and Cather responded to those cultural pressures varies greatly from those writers of the previous century, and indeed, a study of Wharton’s and Cather’s public and private personas showcases the power of both class and region in building a literary project at the turn of the century. As women writers in a field still dominated by male critics and writers, Wharton and Cather had to negotiate their own “bundle of contradictions” as they worked out their public and private identities as women novelists. In this chapter, I will explore how Wharton and Cather constructed their public/private personas in terms of self-fashioning themselves as professional and regional writers.

As a woman of the upper class, Edith Wharton, like most women of her class, was certainly not raised to be a writer—and most certainly not a professional writer. “In the eyes of our provincial society,” Wharton recounts in her autobiography *A Backward Glance*, “authorship was still regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour,” (69). Wharton further frames herself in her autobiography as child who was an “omnivorous reader,” and who followed the “many prohibitions” in reading material her mother “imposed” on her (65). For this, Wharton says that she grew up reading only the “essentials,” which translates into a long list of classic male writers and, critically, only a few women: Mrs. Heman and Mrs. Browning (66), Mrs. Beecher Stowe (“who was so ‘common’ yet so successful) (68), and the Brontës (“who shrank in agony from being suspected of successful novel writing”) (69). Wharton notes that she was “forbidden” to read the “lesser novelists of the day,” what can only be interpreted as a

subtle hint to contemporary women novelists of her day who were producing much of the best-selling fiction. Finishing her chapter, “Little Girl,” Wharton reflects on her “dream of a literary career,” that “faded into unreality” because “I had never even seen [a writer] in the flesh!” (76).

Indeed, when Wharton, critics, and other writers frame public images of Wharton in magazines and journals, she is framed around a masculine tradition of writing rather than a feminine tradition. As mentioned above, Wharton rarely cited women writers besides women such as Jane Austin, and she never cites contemporary novelists at all, besides at rare intervals to showcase her own mastery over “second rate” sentimentalists. Early critics, too, constructed Wharton as a different kind of woman writer, she was “misleading,” as one critic wrote in *The Nation* (Oct. 30, 1913: 404). In this case, that amounts to a combination of Wharton’s “breeding” and her “gentlemanlike” style. While touting her writing as such, *The Nation* reviewer says that she is nevertheless “strongly feminine” made interesting through its “hint of contradiction” (404). Even constructed in a space between masculine and feminine writing, Wharton is nevertheless a “nervous, cultivated American woman,” whose writing is limited as “an extremely clever performer” (404).

Wharton’s first major publication was *The Decoration of Houses*, which she co-authored with Codman. With it, Wharton set up what would be a major aspect of her public identity, her expertise on high forms of cultural knowledge. Part Martha Stewart part historian, Wharton continued to publish works such as *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), one year before she would find critical and best-selling success with *The*

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Further, Wharton's continued success came from her publicly touted friendship with Henry James. While critics were quick to see Wharton's literary connections to James even before she became close friends with him, Wharton's career was largely mapped out as a Jamesian protégé.

When it came time for Cather to publicize her new novel, *O Pioneers!* in 1912, she had to work out critical issues of marketing both her authorial self and the book to an increasingly sophisticated American book-buying public. After Cather's self-proclaimed failure with her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, the success and marketing of her new, and potentially risky, Nebraska novel would be critical for her career. Cather's years as an editor at *McClure's* magazine made her "more sharply aware," as Janis Stout puts it, "of both literary fashion and the ways in which fiction got itself published" (89). With this in mind, Cather's marketing of her first Nebraska novel (including the important necessity of writing her authorial self into the marketing) set a tone that would largely characterize her public reputation (and her later celebrity status). She may have been asking whether her success with the new novel would allow her to continue writing, especially with S.S. McClure's earlier warning that she could not pull off a successful professional writing career. In this paper I will explore Cather's early newspaper

interviews in which she positions her authorial self as a regional writer, arguing specifically that through these interviews she modernizes and complicates former literary understandings of regional writing in general and western regionalism in particular.

One of the most notable aspects of Cather's early interviews is the way she consistently refers to Sarah Orne Jewett as her literary mentor. While Sharon O'Brien and Marilee Lindemann have made much of the Jewett-Cather relationship, both concentrate on Cather's preface to a collection of Jewett's work. Cather's use of Jewett's name and literary reputation in this preface was, arguably, different than her use of Jewett's name some twelve years earlier. By 1925 Cather was sure of her literary powers—in fact, she was at the height of her creative output, producing *One of Ours*, for which she won the Pulitzer prize, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and would soon begin her masterpiece, *Death Comes For the Archbishop*. If we move back in time to 1912 and in the immediate years following, Cather's future lay uncertain, and her use of Jewett's name and literary reputation introduced Cather's own name in connection to a respectable American literary tradition of New England regionalism.

Cather met Jewett through Annie Fields in 1908 in Boston while Cather was researching a series of articles on Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, for *McClure's* magazine (Stout 98). As one of the most well-known and respected “local color” writers of the late nineteenth century, Jewett was one of many successful women writers (Freeman, Cooke, etc.) who commanded the public's attention and filled the pages of magazines. By the turn of the century, however, the success of these local colorists diminished; as Donna M. Campbell explains, the rise of male naturalist writers such as Dreiser, Crane, and Norris were a part of “a backlash against what was perceived

as feminine domination of audience and literature alike” (47). While Cather did not like many of these local color writers (most of whom were women), she *did* admire Jewett’s work (O’Brien 335). During their brief relationship before Jewett’s death in 1909, Jewett urged Cather to abandon her attempts at writing Jamesian fiction and rely on her own life experience for subject matter. While Cather ignored Jewett’s advice and wrote *Alexandar’s Bridge*, she did begin to write about her memories of Nebraska in *O Pioneers!* Cather’s interviews during this period closely mirror those Jewett gave years earlier in which Jewett discusses her technique of writing from her early life experiences and her deep connection to the New England landscape. In one circa 1900 interview, Jewett tells of following her physician father about “silently, like an undemanding little dog,” to various patients “whom he used to visit in lonely inland farms or on the sea-coast in York and Wells” collecting, unconsciously, all of the details of “the country interiors.” “Now,” Jewett said in her interview, “as I write my sketches of country life, I remember again and again the wise things he said and the sights he made me see” (*Famous Authors* 47). Throughout Jewett’s discussions of her writing, she underscores the lived experience of the places and memories that inspired her fiction in order to show the “authentic” experience behind her fiction.

In 1913, while promoting her new novel, *O Pioneers!*, Cather began to invoke Jewett’s name and discuss Jewett’s effect on her own writing. In fact, Cather dedicates the novel to Jewett “in whose beautiful and delicate work there is the perfection that endures.” In one interview, after calling Mark Twain, Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett the “great ones” when asked to name her favorite American writers, Cather relates finding a Jewett letter “among some of her papers in South Berwick after her death.”

Cather then goes on to quote a line from Jewett's letter: "Ah, it is things like that, which haunt the mind for years, and at last write themselves down, that belong, whether little or great, to literature." In her interview, Cather points to Jewett's honesty, "that earnest endeavor to tell truly the thing that haunts the mind," that she most values about her work. In showing Jewett's literary influence on her own writing, Cather later states in the same interview that with *O Pioneers!* she "tried to tell the story of the people as truthfully and simply as if I were telling it to her by word of mouth" (Bohlke)

Cather's use of Jewett's name and literary heritage becomes a common strategy for the emerging writer in her interviews throughout the teens. In a 1919 interview for the *Chicago Daily News*, Cather quotes Jewett as telling her to "Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You cant' do it in anybo[d]y's else[s] way—you will have to make it your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't' try to write the kind of stories that this or that magazine wants—write the truth and let them take it or leave it" (Bohlke 18). In naming Jewett throughout her interviews, Cather claims a link to Jewett's legacy of regionalism. Yet, as a western writer, Cather's claim to a New England tradition suggests a complexity and depth to her construction. That one of the most well-known and respected New England writers like Jewett could become friends with and influence a new writer from the Nebraska plains upsets easy notions of what defines "regional." Building her name on Jewett's literary legacy instead of other notable popular western writers like Owen Wister, Frank Norris, or Stephen Crane, she bypasses the male western literary tradition for her own sense of regional/literary identity.

In addition to mentioning Jewett's influence in her early interviews, Cather

constructs her authorial self by developing a picture of her Nebraska childhood throughout these interviews. She often over-simplifies her childhood to interviewers, reducing her experience to what L. Brent Bohlke has noted as a “romantic vision” of her life that often featured her “riding recklessly across the Nebraska plains” on ponies to the extent that “it would seem that even Cather herself began to believe” these stories (xxii). Another way to interpret Cather’s “romantic vision” is through Scott McCloud’s term *amplification through simplification*, in which complex qualities are simplified to their most basic, one-dimensional shape. The simplified state, McCloud argues through the example of a photographic face simplified into a happy face, allows for readers to absorb themselves into the story, or, in the case of the happy face, the generalized shape of the face allows the viewer to imagine the face in any number of ways, and hence it’s possible meanings become amplified (McCloud). So, then, in a similar way, Cather’s mythic rendition of her Nebraska childhood allows readers the space to imaginatively invent Cather. While her generalizations about immigrant women, pony rides, and other experiences with her natural surroundings gave readers a much different conception of the West than dime-store westerns, her stories also have a bareness that allows readers to imaginatively engage in her Nebraska childhood experiences. Cather’s repetition of this story, as Bohlke notes, further amplifies her story, reinforcing her Nebraska ties and her self-construction as a western writer (xxii). That is, Cather’s authority to write about the west lie in her childhood experiences.

Yet even while Cather builds herself as a Nebraskan, her interviews also dislocate her from Nebraska. In the *Webster County Argus*, for example, an anonymous writer notes,

Naturally we were especially pleased when last Friday Miss Willa Cather, whose address is New York City, but who is at home in Red Cloud, New York, London, Paris or any other city on earth in which she happens to be, called at this office for that reason. Miss Cather is enjoying a several weeks' visit with her parents... (Oct. 29th, 1921; Bohlke 26)

What is especially noteworthy in these newspaper interviews with Cather is her ability to occupy a multitude of authorial identities: a transplanted Virginian, an urban New York writer, an international traveler, and a Nebraskan. While Cather's focus on her childhood in Nebraska may have served to underscore her authenticity as a western writer, much in Jewett's tradition, it also served to obfuscate the other half of her life in the east, her New York life—an urban life very much unlike that of her Nebraska novels. Yet, as these interviews show, readers were made well aware of her New York address. Unlike Jewett, who said in one interview that, “I was born here . . . and I hope to die here” (*Famous Authors* 46), Cather constructs herself in such a way that she does not tie herself to living in Nebraska even as she claims that identity.

This complex stance on her Nebraska/urban identity is taken up in a 1921 interview, in which Cather states that she “will have it distinctly understood that she is not an eastern, western, northern or southern writer, but first and foremost a Nebraskan.” The article explains that,

When questioned as to why she considered herself a Nebraskan after so many years abroad and in the east, she replied, “Because my father and mother still live in Nebraska. They have lived here for 30 odd years, and because I came to Nebraska when I was 8 and lived here until I finished

college at 19, and the years from 8 to 15 are the formative period of a writer's life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material. (*Omaha Bee* 29 Oct. 1921; Bohke 31).

While western writing has a history of transplanted writers, making their careers writing about their non-native west (Owen Wister, for example), Cather was from the West and she made her living writing about the West from the East. To construct a sense of authenticity, she underscores her family ties to the state. As she claims in one interview, “my grandparents were among the *real* pioneers” (emphasis added; *Philadelphia Record* 10 Aug. 1913; Bohlke 11). In yet another interview, Cather, while in France, claims that “she is skeptical about remaining there, for as she recalled Paris last autumn, when the leaves were turning yellow on the cottonwoods along the boulevards, she said she would sit by the Seine and feel weepy and homesick for the Republican valley” (*Omaha Bee* Oct. 29 1921). The play Cather makes between the cultural cache of “taking up an apartment in Paris,” and her “homesickness” for Red Cloud, reveals how she could map out a complex range of geographies for herself. She is able to live the life of a successful writer, traveling to exotic locations to relax, but in connecting the Seine to the Republican valley, she shows how she remains loyal to her Nebraska roots.

Even in early Cather novels we can chart a geographical pull away from Nebraska. While working on *O Pioneers!*, for example, Cather's trip to the Southwest had a deep impact on her sense of place. David Stouck has noted that there is a “uncommon degree” of autobiography in Cather's fiction, and so, not surprisingly, in Cather's next novel, *The Song of the Lark*, Thea's most powerful awakening moment does not occur in Nebraska, but rather in Panther Canyon. In the Introduction to *My*

Antonia, we are told that Jim Burden, again like Cather herself, is a displaced Nebraskan living in New York but still retains “those big Western dreams” that make for a “quiet drama . . . in one’s brain” (xi). Even as she tried to construct herself as a Nebraskan in her interviews, the displaced characters we find in her novels reflect her own complex relationship to Nebraska, her urban lifestyle, and her sense of place. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have recently argued that that a complex relationship to place has been the norm, rather than the exception, for women’s regional writing. They say that,

These writers both in their fictions and in their own biographies frequently move back and forth between urban and rural/”regional” places; while cosmopolitan attitudes might assume clear barriers between the modernizing life of the cities and the presumptively pre-modern world of the regions, for the writers themselves and in their regionalist texts, these barriers become permeable and transitive. (5)

Certainly for Cather, while she skirted around her New York life in interviews, her readers gained a sense of this “permeable and transitive” space as they followed Cather throughout many geographies.

While this paper is not looking at how Cather’s readers and critics were responding to her literary self-fashioning, two key literary figures of this time period stand out in their response to Cather’s relationship to place. F. Scott Fitzgerald remarked in the 1919 volume of *The Men Who Make Our Novels*, that, “the writer, if he has any aspirations toward art, should try to convey the feel of his scenes, places and peoples directly—as Conrad does, as a few Americans (notably Willa Cather) are already trying to do” (167). That Fitzgerald positions Cather in the same breath as Conrad

suggests that he saw her not as a mere “regional” writer, but as a serious writer using place to develop American fiction. Further, Sinclair Lewis told an Omaha audience in 1921 that,

Willa Sibert Cather is greater than General Pershing; she is incomparably greater than William Jennings Bryan. She is Nebraska’s foremost citizen because through her stories she has made the outside world know

Nebraska as no one else has done. (*Omaha World Herald* 10 April, 1921)

That these prominent and popular writers of the time saw Cather as a successful model of a modern writer connecting herself not only to place, but to a tradition of great literature, shows that her early self-fashioning was, in many ways, successful. Certainly both writers were trying to do the same, and as Fitzgerald’s comment suggests, Cather was leading the way toward a new American literary tradition.

While Cather’s construction of her authorial self as western writer in the time period between *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* was largely successful, she faced increasing problems as some critics railed against her portrayal of World War I France in *One of Ours*. Hemingway’s famous reaction to the novel, that Cather lifted her war scenes from *Birth of a Nation* and “Catherized” it, suggests that while Cather could write seriously about the Nebraska landscape, she transgressed her boundaries when writing about war (Woodress 333). Cather’s successful self-construction as a Nebraska writer ultimately limited her ability to move her subject matter and authorial self into new directions. Her identity as a Nebraskan feminized her in connection to the land, and to take up a masculine space—as Hemingway’s remark powerfully shows—was to transgress upon male writing. As the politics of the literary landscape shifted in the 1920s, the context

and success of Cather's authorial identity created problems for her. Yet the controversy surrounding her Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* opened her up to a much broader audience and consequently, her subsequent novel, *A Lost Lady*, was a critical and popular success. So, while Cather was, in some ways, limited by her Nebraska childhood identity and subject matter, it did not hinder her finding a broad readership and later, taking dramatic risks with *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. While I think that Cather tried to build a complexity into her regional identity by trying to create a more complex, kaleidoscopic view of regionalism, her image ultimately became simplified by her readers and critics as a Nebraska writer. For Cather, her own literary self-fashioning was much like her relationship to the land itself, as she said of Nebraska in one early interview, it was "the happiness and the curse of my life."

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