

2019

# Disturbing the Ecological Pastoral: An Examination of Willa Cather's Fictional Spaces in *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Anne Carter Stowe

University of Mississippi, [annecarterstowe@gmail.com](mailto:annecarterstowe@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Stowe, Anne Carter, "Disturbing the Ecological Pastoral: An Examination of Willa Cather's Fictional Spaces in *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1571.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1571>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

DISTURBING THE ECOLOGICAL PASTORAL: AN EXAMINATION OF WILLA  
CATHER'S FICTIONAL SPACES IN *MY ÁNTONIA* AND *DEATH COMES FOR THE*  
*ARCHBISHOP*

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

By

ANNE CARTER STOWE

May 2019

Copyright © 2019 by Anne Carter Stowe  
All rights reserved

## ABSTRACT

Willa Cather is universally lauded for her ability to render landscape into prose. Critics have observed for years that the landscape often functions as the main character in her fiction, or that her characters can easily be evaluated in terms of how deep and successful their relationships to the land are. In an attempt to evaluate Cather's treatment of two different "Western" landscapes, I will focus first on *My Ántonia*, one of her most famous Nebraska novels, and second on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, whose narrative unravels on the New Mexican landscape. I argue that Cather treats these spaces differently. In *My Ántonia*, she maps a horizontal space and a land that is shallow, with little room to acknowledge the Native American history that existed in Nebraska before the characters in her novel arrived. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she writes a vertical space that allows for greater degree of visibility of all that is naturally inherent in the land. Throughout both novels, I track a phenomenon that I call the ecogothic, which serves to disturb and unsettle the pastoral and romantic expositions of the land that Cather is known for. These disturbances make us aware of a diverse and oftentimes troubling history in both spaces.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Sherri and Barry Stowe, who have always expressed wholehearted support and excitement towards my love of literature and my decision to pursue its study.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Annette Trefzer, who has so kindly worked with me this year. She has provided me with incredibly helpful feedback and responses, as well as a good attitude, and the drive to continue to challenge myself with this project. I have learned a great deal about writing, thinking, and Willa Cather thanks to her.

I'd also like to express my gratitude to my committee members Kathryn McKee and Jaime Harker, two inspirational professors who I've enjoyed learning from during my time at the University of Mississippi. Thank you for your time spent on this project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT -----	ii
DEDICATION -----	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS -----	iv
LIST OF FIGURES -----	vi
INTRODUCTION -----	1
<i>MY ÁNTONIA</i> -----	10
DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP -----	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY -----	79
VITA -----	83

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
1. Movement of Native American Tribes in Nebraska 1800 .....	27
2. Land Cessions of the 1830s and 1840s .....	27
3. The Otoe-Missouria Reservation in 1861 .....	28
4. The Otoe-Missouria Reservation in 1870 .....	28



## INTRODUCTION

The October 2nd, 2017 issue of the *New Yorker* includes an article entitled “Cather People.” Its author, Alex Ross, reports on a trip to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Willa Cather spent her adolescent years as a transplant from Back Creek, Virginia. Six miles up the road from Red Cloud is the Cather Memorial Prairie, a parcel of land that has never been plowed, and “with careful cultivation it preserves the prairie as Cather roamed it” (Ross). Ross writes that being in this space, one can easily visualize *Ántonia* Shimerda, the heroine of Cather’s novel *My Ántonia*, running over the top of the hill from where he stands. He continues,

When I was last there, in June, the sky was a blaring blue and the hills were a murmur of greens. The air was hot and heavy enough that thoughts evaporated from my mind. I lay under a cottonwood tree and listened to leaves and grass swaying . . .

Et cetera, et cetera.

I smiled both at Ross’ attempt to wax poetic in Cather fashion, and at his pause before yielding to the inevitable “et cetera, et cetera.” In this I read an acknowledgement that no one can render this prairie landscape in quite the way that Willa Cather can. The “et cetera” likewise connotes the droning quality of Cather’s landscape prose—it almost lulls one to sleep. Her descriptors become impressionist, leaving fainter, paler images in the mind as she moves forward. She rolls on, giving her sentences the same amount of motion that she attributes to the land (one of the oft

quoted lines from *My Ántonia* being that the land is “full of motion”). Alex Ross goes on to the talk about Cather’s history in Red Cloud, and about the diverse groups of people who visit to pay her homage. I empathize with the fact that Ross could not move on with his article until he had acknowledged what practically every Cather scholar has noted at some point—that the writer has a unique relationship to space and the environment, and has a commanding and impressive way of rendering a landscape into literature. I wanted to begin by making the same gesture.

Willa Cather was born in 1873 in Back Creek, Virginia, a place where her family has a long history (O’Brien 12). At nine years old she moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, making her a “participant in the great American story: moving West” (O’Brien 60). She went on to attend the University of Nebraska, and in her adult life moved back east to New York City. Sharon O’Brien writes in *Willa Cather*, her biography of the writer’s life, that “although we think of Willa Cather as the loving painter of the prairie landscape, her attachment to her new land coexisted with a fear and alienation she never fully transcended” (59). In a letter to Elizabeth Sergeant, Cather tells that “there is no place to hide in Nebraska. You can’t hide under a windmill” (59). Inherent in these two sentences is a sense of nostalgia, a longing to assimilate with the land, and fear over the openness of the land. All such ideas appear time and time over in Cather’s fiction. Cather wrote three novels and a number of short stories set in Nebraska during her career, all while living in New York City. She wrote her memories, perhaps as an attempt to recover experiences in this space that was never quite hers to begin with. In my thesis I will discuss *My Ántonia*, the famous Nebraska novel published in 1918. In this novel, the narrator Jim Burden tells the story of his relationship to Ántonia Shimerda, an immigrant girl who arrives at the prairie from Bohemia on the same day that he arrives from Virginia. Jim, the narrator, who also tells this story from New York City, writes about Ántonia and the land as if they were made of the same

exact substances. In his telling of *Ántonia's* life, the immigrant woman achieves assimilation into the land, and Jim does not.

Ten years after the writing of *My Ántonia*, Cather published *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), a novel that begins in 1848 about the Southwestern landscape of the then-newly-acquired New Mexican territory. Cather came to the Southwest initially in 1912 for a period of respite from her writing job at *McClure's* in New York. She wanted to rest and think about what direction her life would take next. Like many Americans at the time, Cather saw the Southwest as a place of recuperation and return (Stout 139). She visits her brother Douglass who has a job with the Santa Fe Railway in Winslow, Arizona and becomes entranced with the landscape. Edith Lewis, Cather's partner for much of her life, writes about this trip in her biography, *Willa Cather Living*, indicating that their excursions were often dangerous—that they were stranded for hours atop large formations while their guide went to find help. Lewis notes that despite these scares that could have muddied their view of the place, her admission is that it was “beautiful” (141). Janis P. Stout notes that “we see in Cather's emphasis on visual delight, quiet, and the restoration of health a turning away from the Western's traditional interest in violence and conquest” (157).

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, we follow the progress of the French priest, Father Latour, from the start of his appointment to the Bishopric of New Mexico all the way to his death. The novel is highly episodic and anecdotal. While it contains the same kind of sweeping landscape passages as *My Ántonia*, it also catalogues Latour's travels between various distinct pueblo dwellings as he visits the remnants of old colonial Spanish parishes in an attempt to reorganize and correct the behaviors of the priests in charge. His primary job, one could argue, is to know the land. He spends his entire life running over it, coming to know intimately the many

diverse aspects of the land and those who live on it. The novel is not so much concerned with Latour's proselytizing (we do not see him even attempt to convert a single person) as it is with his job of coming to understand what already exists on the landscape, religion, culture, and the environment all together.

Thus I argue first what is obvious—that Cather retains her sincere interest in rendering landscape into fiction. In my thesis, I examine her crafting of these two different versions of the West—the Midwest and the Southwest—and attempt to track the changes in Cather's vision of these landscapes in the ten years between the two novels. In *My Ántonia*, Cather's prose emphasizes a horizontal Nebraska prairie landscape that is expressed in highly pastoral and nostalgic language. It is also a landscape that throughout the course of the novel undergoes a plating and grid-making process that attempts to make the land organized and readable. In contrast, the New Mexican landscape of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is depicted primarily in vertical terms. Bishop Latour struggles to contend with the steep arroyos, canyons, hoodoos, and mesas that make travelling through the land challenging and oftentimes terrifying.

In my examination of both the horizontal and vertical landscapes that Cather recreates in her two novels, I pay close attention to phenomena that interrupt the sweeping pastoral language of her natural descriptions. I use the term “ecopastoral” to describe such depictions as it directly articulates the pastoral expression of the environment. I use the term “ecogothic” to help articulate presences in or around the land that disturb notions of the ecopastoral or the nostalgia often associated with it. Though these disturbances and disruptions are perhaps not the first thing that readers will notice in Cather's prose, they are vital to a true reading of it. In my thesis, I will show that such disturbances gesture towards the Native American presences on both the Nebraska and New Mexican landscapes that are seemingly forgotten or expunged from Cather's

depiction of the spaces. These historical presences are hardly alluded to in *My Ántonia* and given much more space in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. If the ecogothic intrusions do not directly gesture at past presences, they at least provoke the kind of discomfort, violence, or terror that American Indians underwent during periods of colonization and removal in the Nebraska and New Mexican territories. I am tracking the ways in which Cather maps these spaces.

The pastoral is “a term that can be applied to any work with a rural setting” and that “generally praises as rustic way of life” (Murfin et al. 331). Examples of pastoral writers of the past include the Roman poet Virgil, who provides the epigraph to *My Ántonia*, and whose writing Jim grows to nostalgically identify with as he separates further from life on the land during his college years and onwards. In *A Poet’s Glossary*, Edward Hirsch defines the term as “an urban poet’s “nostalgic image of the simple, peaceful life of shepards living in idealized natural settings” (Hirsch 447). It is undeniably true that the pastoral has its presence in *My Ántonia*, where sunsets and other bucolic illustrations of the landscape fill in much of the novel where plot might otherwise be unraveling and structuring the narrative. Cather is a master of this writing that contains sweeping movement to such an extent that it is possible for a reader to overlook the fact that there is relatively little narrative motion. The text is filled, rather, by said illustrations and additionally, by asides that provoke both unease and often terror that have little to do with plot—their job appears to be in contributing to a *feeling*, to an *atmosphere*.

Traditional pastoral verse often includes a monologue that praises or laments the loss of someone or something. *My Ántonia* in its entirety is a pastoral memory, a sort of letter from Jim to the lost “realities” of his childhood on the vast Nebraska prairie, in the company of a young and “wild” girl who to him, represented everything about life and the land in that specific place. Jim moves from the prairie in late adolescence, and from the small prairie town of Black Hawk

before college, never again to return in full. Though he seems to long for it viscerally and makes promises to return, he becomes a lawyer and takes a job in New York City representing the Western railroad system. His occupation, even, denotes the sort of refracted and removed way in which he associates himself with Nebraska's land after his departure. He, like Cather herself, works in relationship and association with memory of a childhood on the prairie, yet neither choose to enact their work in that seemingly longed-for space. One can see that *My Ántonia* is likely a highly personal novel for Cather, imbued on the surface with a pang of longing for something irretrievable.

In his 1939 piece, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson works to expand the definition of pastoral to include any work that “contrasts the simple and the complicated life, praising the former at the expense of the latter” (449). Empson applies this framework to texts as recent as modern proletarian novels of the Great Depression, and as distant as Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden.” He writes that the pastoral mode is a “puzzling form” in which highly educated poets and writers choose to valorize poor people and their connection to the land. The form implies “a beautiful relation between the rich and the poor” by writing “simple” characters who express “strong feelings.” Therefore, the pastoral mode tends to draw at least vague attention to class differences. The invocation of class difference is likewise abundant in *My Ántonia*. Even preceding Jim’s actual separation from Black Hawk, the Burden household acts generously towards the Shimerdas, who struggle as new immigrants to a harsh landscape. Mr. Shimerda, who was considered talented, educated and refined in Bohemia, struggles with his lifestyle in Nebraska where he’s removed from the niceties and culture of his former life. He, too, sees the land and its vastness as being empty. As Jim grows older, he notices an increasingly present divide between the social demands and allowances of his life, as compared to those of the “hired

girls” (read: the European immigrants). In the very final lines of Book I, *Ántonia* says to Jim as they gaze up at the sky, dreamily, “If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us” (Cather 69).

I hope that the above connections between various definitions of the pastoral tradition and Cather’s novels serve to show how easily one *could* place Cather primarily as a pastoral writer, and *My Ántonia* a novel entrenched in the pastoral tradition—interested in nostalgia for the simple, stunning land, and those who are able to live in tandem with it, and whose primary relationship is to the land. In what follows, I wish to pivot from this reality—to go a number of layers deeper into the ground in order to show *what else* Cather might be pointing us towards in her masterful rendering of landscape into prose. To do so, I must address the term, “ecogothic.”

The ecogothic is, “in its broadest sense....a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic, and it typically presupposes some kind of ecocritical lens” (Keetley et al. 1). It focuses the ecocritical, that is, any literary or cultural relationships “of humans to the nonhuman world—to animals, plants, minerals, climate, and ecosystems” through a gothic lens. This lens serves to illuminate the “fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervade those relationships: it orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies” (1). Keetley and Silvis note that instances of the literary ecogothic are abundant, as “in truth, the dominant American relationship with nature, whatever else it might have been, has always been unsettling.” (1)

Keetley and Silvis reference very early American texts, such as Garcilaso de la Vega’s 1605 account of the adventures of conquistador Juan Ortiz, who, located in Florida’s thickly vegetative landscape, experiences, looks on as a panther feeds on the remains of a child. He notes likewise writers John Smith and William Bradford, who writes of “hideous and desolate”

wildernesses. In another sense, Keetely and Sivils note that “the ghosts born of colonialism” haunt the “very soil” of North America's “contested ground” (1). Thus, any additional horror that might unfold on the land is only ever an addition to this always-already haunting reverberance.

Refuting the idea that the gothic is merely a transplanted mode of expression carried over from Europe and placed upon the Northern American landscape, Keetely and Sivils posit that due to the country’s engagement in colonial objectives, the gothic, and specifically the *ecogothic*, have always been detectable; “the American gothic is less a genre than a fluid, ubiquitous literary mode, sewn into the very warp and woof of American literature” (1).

The *ecogothic* can also express fear and dread over the land’s agency, and the comparative lack of control that human life has in the face of our entire natural ecology. It is “born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or lack thereof, is central to the gothic” (3). Fear embedded in issues of control is a phenomenon that Cather’s characters face as they deal with the harsh realities of their ecosystems.

While the pastoral mode is alive and well in Cather’s work—a blanket over the entire sweep and operation—I want to posit that the awareness and fear of one’s ecological home has its own presence. Furthermore, it interrupts the novel, coming up from out of the ground to trouble notions of pure beauty and nostalgia in Cather’s two renderings of the West. Furthermore, I posit that such disturbances point our attention, at least vaguely, towards the history of violence against Native Americans in both spaces.



## CHAPTER I

### *MY ÁNTONIA*

#### **Critical Readings of *My Ántonia***

Richard Dillman maps Willa Cather's landscape in *My Ántonia* through five distinct images of the western American landscape. These five ways of describing and understanding that landscape are tied closely to Jim's inner life as ages through novel. They are a way of looking into Jim's consciousness and his understanding of the land. Together they create a mythic view of the west—one that has a continued appeal to readers. For example, Jim's early renderings of the landscape describe it as being full of horizontal spaces and open sky, a place that seems unmade yet contains all the "material out of which countries are made" (Cather 12).

The sense of potential and future prosperity that Jim feels upon arrival in Nebraska is replaced by winter's coming, the death of Mr. Shimerda, and the general hardships of those living on the prairie. The third version is the "romanticized landscape of sunsets, aesthetic contours, and imagined metaphorical qualities" that appear mostly in the first half of the novel. Dillman notes that clearly this is Jim's "creative and sensitive intelligence acting willfully on the landscape" (Dillman 31). The fourth image is the classic pastoral image of the landscape (perpetual youth, swimming scenes, his intellectual awakening, etc). In these descriptions, the landscape becomes a "place without winter" (32). It also takes place during an advanced stage of frontier development.

In the final and fifth stage, the landscape is textured and cultivated. It blends art, nature, and physical and intellectual effort as a result of years and dedication and shaping, like a garden that has come into bloom. The final rendering is described as such by Dillman:

Ántonia, her husband Anton, and their children have taken the raw clay of the frontier prairie and molded it into a patterned, tamed, cultivated landscape—one of prosperous farms characterized by quilt-like sections, healthy crops, and a well developed system of fences. The landscape appears tamed, sculptured, symmetrical, reflecting the efforts of its ambitious inhabitants. (32)

Dillman maps the progress of the land both in terms of its development (in its long history it transforms from plains, to reservations, to “empty space” and into townships and structured space) alongside Jim’s attitude towards it, which is heavily informed by his desire to see the prairie as romantic and pastoral. Towards the end of the novel, when his marriage is “arid” and his career is unsatisfying, Jim returns to a landscape that he sees as symmetrical, placid, prosperous, one that offers him something that is absent in his personal life. When it comes down to it, Jim lacks roots.

In contrast, Dillman argues that Ántonia’s attitude towards the landscape is much more realistic and is acquired through hard work, which helps her to understand its potential and malleability. For example, she views the trees as her “children.” She is a “farmer-artist” (33). “Ántonia has little reason to romanticize the landscape; she has to accept it on its own terms, learning to exploit its potential and accommodate its power” (33-4). It’s important to note Dillman’s way of mapping Jim’s emotional relationship throughout the novel. Jim is the narrator, and thus it's important to understand that everything we hear is being filtered through his memory, which I argue is highly colored by a pastoral nostalgia. The way he reads the land

throughout the novel is not quite objective. I posit that Cather almost functions as an opposing force to Jim—she is the one who infuses the novel with its ecogothic disturbances while Jim attempts to see his past and the landscape as romantic and nostalgic.

Keith Wilhite argues that *My Ántonia* is imbued with a sense of regional instability and displacement, and furthermore that Jim is never able to overcome his particular sense of displacement. But in order to see this instability operating within Jim, Wilhite believes we have to look for murmurs of the South present in this novel about one version of the American West. He writes that regions are both sites of alienation and identification in turn, but that ultimately characters in the novel seldom recover from the sense of “obliterating strangeness” that the prairie landscape provides (284). “Bohemian, Southern, Midwestern, and even quasi-mythical landscapes co-exist within the narrative as shifting sites of alienation and identification for Jim and Ántonia” (270). However, the urge to emplace their itinerant consciousnesses “seems as indispensable to Jim and Ántonia as the displacements that impel their aesthetic acts” (284). I agree that there is a tension between Southern and Western regional identities in this novel, and furthermore that any Southern disruption is a function of the ecogothic.

Anne Goodwyn Jones’ essay, “Displacing Dixie: The Southern Subtext in *My Ántonia*,” is a search for coded Southern speech and ideology in *My Ántonia*, especially where race and masculinity are involved. She asks, if we can “find traces of the South troubling the Midwestern terrain of *My Ántonia*? Does Jim not grieve his losses? Are there no figures from his past to haunt the present? If not, how can we understand what comes to seem an emotional misstep, a deliberate erasure, on Cather’s part as his author?” (89). Though Jim’s grief for his parents is not obvious, there are other ways by which Southernness makes its way into the novel. She too focuses on Blind d’Arnault, for example, as a distinctly Southern and racially portrayed character

that embodies so much of what Jim left behind. I argue that Blind d'Arnault enters the narrative as a reminder of a tragic, ecogothic past that serves to disturb the apparent bliss of the narrative.

In his article, “‘That Obliterating Strangeness’: The Prairie as Sublime Landscape in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*,” Barry Hudek contends that *My Ántonia* embodies an aesthetic that he coins the “prairie sublime,” which departs from traditional notions of the sublime (in Romantic literature, for example) that include associations with vertical, mountainous spaces—one that can also be associated with imperialism. The prairie sublime lacks mountains, offers no vistas or vantage points from which one can see its vastness. Rather, it is “unrelentlessly horizontal” (30) and is more “conductive to democratic principles” (28). Descriptions of this particular kind of landscape are rare in American literature, Hudek argues, likely because they were, especially over the course of western expansion, not thought to be conventionally beautiful or awe inspiring. I too, argue for a horizontal landscape in this novel. But instead of attaching it to notions of the sublime, I argue that the horizontal landscape that Cather draws attention to serves as a site for shallow excavation of some of the land’s darker histories that are *seemingly* omitted by Cather. I argue that while Jim paints over the land with his romanticism and nostalgia, Cather finds ways to bring certain realities to the surface, no matter how covertly. And I argue that she does so by invoking ecogothic images and instances, rather than through the sublime.

Rachel Collins draws attention to the ways that Cather tries to assimilate structural settlement with the landscape. She begins her article by describing the kinds of domiciles that were prevalent during the time of Willa Cather’s arrival in Nebraska in 1883, that is, semi-subterranean dwellings with timber frames, covered with earth. Such residences are described in *My Ántonia*—burrows, tunnels, dugouts, and basements. Notably, subterranean dwellings were

commonly used by the American Indians that go unmentioned in *My Ántonia*. Collins writes that Cather had an interest in bio-regionally appropriate construction, much like the architect Frank Lloyd Wright who believed that spaces should be “harmonized with local environments” (44). Over the course of European settlement in the region, however, as well as over the course of the novel, these kinds of homes were replaced by a more European-style architecture. Collins’ argument opens up a space for my point, which is that these structures symbolize and emulate what one’s relationship with the land is meant to be—submerged in it—but the people who lived in these structures originally are hardly ever alluded to. I assert that hauntings and murmurs and reminders of the violence inflicted upon American Indians come back to disturb and disrupt the narrative.

Collins makes a second point when she writes that *My Ántonia* depicts a frontier family that continually alternates between having a sincere regard for the non-human world, and employing “a rhetoric of animality as a weapon against immigrant families whose habitations resemble those of non-humans” (44). This dynamic creates something that Collins refers to as an “ethics of cultivation,” which operates on two levels: first, it leads the Burden family to strongly prefer and value cultivated, tamed, and altered environments over “unimproved land.” Second, the ethics of cultivation “works at the level of cultural refinement, positioning those who have strongly internalized classed behavioral codes as superior to others who lack such social cultivation” (45). Thus, she argues that the narrative often switches between a social and environmental ethics and value judgments. An example of this kind of switch is Mrs. Burden, who often condemns within the Shimerda family the very behavior she finds positive in other animals.

Lisa Marie Lucenti makes a related point about the intrusion of the gothic in “Willa

Cather's *My Ántonia: Haunting the Houses of Memory*," where she posits that the gothic is present in Cather's construction of memory—that it works in the novel to create irresolution, just as gothic literature communicates two incompatible desires in the same gesture. Memory is gothic in *My Ántonia* because it occurs across unstable boundaries and in dubious and ambivalent relationship to domesticity. Additionally, because the gothic is an eruption of chaos, it questions stable definitions and clear categories that are the basis for individual and communal identities. It carries with it divergent meanings. Another primary feature of the gothic is that "its horrors emerge, in part, from our failure to categorize signs and events" (Lucenti 197). Lucenti notes a number of instances in which Jim struggles to contain his memories in a way that is comfortable to him—for example, Jim notes that hearing the stories of Peter and Pavel gives him a "painful yet peculiar pleasure." Lucenti notes that it is "in the spaces that separate Jim and Ántonia, we find a shocking variety of memories that recount disturbing racial violence, stories of 'violent deaths and casual burials' that give Jim this conflicted feeling (194).

Lucenti goes on to focus on the character of Blind d'Arnault, as will I, who acts as a Southern reverberation and is also a figure that is interestingly contained by white characters due to his race. It is said of Blind d'Arnault that his music is both "barbarous and wonderful" thus, he is highly desired "by the same people to whom he is 'only a negro'" (205). Additionally, "the danger he poses is tenuously contained by his blindness, his docility, and his attention to music" (205). Lucenti insists that in *My Ántonia*, there are larger structures at stake. Thus, we are not simply "visiting the plagued house of one man's nightmares," but as individuals, cultures, and nations, we are "unquestionably at home in this sometimes shocking, often painful, and always peculiar embrace of remembrance" (194). I do not so much argue that we are "at home" in the ecogothic in this chapter. Rather, I argue that it is easy to escape the novel without an awareness

of it because of Jim's nostalgic view of his childhood. I will argue that Cather discreetly asserts its presence, but not so much that one could feel at home in it. It is too buried to be acknowledged outright.

## **The Prologue**

We enter Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* two degrees separated from its subject: Ántonia Shimerda, the Bohemian girl who in the mind of her childhood friend Jim, comes to stand for the west of his upbringing. We learn quickly that, to Jim, she embodies and stands for all that the place contains. The novel opens with a conversation between an unnamed narrator and Jim as they careen through the prairie landscape of Iowa by train. Both were raised in Black Hawk, Nebraska (Cather's rendering of Red Cloud), and now reside in New York City. Well into their adult lives, they are happy to have encountered one another and to have the opportunity to speak about the land they are travelling through with a familiarity that not all possess. They reminisce and agree that "no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it" (Cather 1). This prologue is important in that it gives an ecopastoral direction to the trajectory of the novel as Jim looks back on the years of his youth.

I'll begin by discussing the very first page of the novel, this meeting between Jim and the novel's first unnamed narrator, where we are given a prime example of the kinds of tactics readers can expect from Cather moving forward. In the first paragraph our narrator tells that,

We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and the strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with

little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it.

(1)

This passage includes a somewhat contradictory (or at least multitudinous) mix of facts about the landscape: the summers on the prairie are “burning” yet the world still “lies green”; one is “stifled” under vegetation yet the world remains “billowy beneath a brilliant sky” (1). There is an abundance of striking color, the weeds are “strong,” the harvests are “heavy,” but during the winter months the whole country is “stripped bare” and gray like “sheet-iron” (1). Cather alternates between the pastoral, pleasant “billowy,” “green,” and an ecogothic realization of a landscape that is harsh “heavy,” “bare,” “stripped.” This sentence is long, rambling, yet delicate—it cascades. It flows so quickly that one can see how it is easy to leave its grasp with an impression that there is “motion in the landscape” (11)— a theme that repeats itself—beautiful and sweeping, while perhaps letting the harshness get away. This motion also makes the ecogothic elements of this passage easy to skim over.

I will attempt to show how Cather folds in the unpleasant and dangerous (the ecogothic) into idyllic scenes of prairie and town life in *My Ántonia*. Cather sets us up to expect the burial and burrowing of the ecogothic within the pastoral moving forward in the novel. I will attempt to show what I showed in the prologue but on a larger scale.

Jim does not experience an adjustment period to life in Nebraska. Even though, when his telling of the story begins, he has just become orphaned and has been transplanted from Virginia to Nebraska, he seems to ease into the landscape seamlessly. During his first day in Nebraska, he lays against a pumpkin, resting, and thinks to himself, “I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy” (12).



This is a perfect example of the pastoral—Jim feels assimilated into the land, at one with the world, dissolved into its fold. He proclaims, “this is happiness” (12). Jim builds upon his first impressions of the prairie, giving it not only the pastoral sweetness but also the blurry sweeping nature. Waking on his first morning at his new prairie home, Jim reflects that,

Perhaps the glide of long railway travel was still with me, for more than anything I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping... (11)

This passage gives us the sense that phenomena exist underneath the land and provide a complicated layered history. In this case, the land as a herd of buffalo. In Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils’ Introduction to *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, they write that “the dominant American relationship with nature, whatever else it might have been, has always been unsettling” (Sivils et al. 1). This mode of thought is meant to illuminate “the fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervade those relationships: it orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with non-human ecologies” (1).

Thus, I would argue that animal references in *My Ántonia*, especially when they are attributed to human subjects, are signs of the gothic presence buried underneath the horizontal space of the plains. Especially in this case, because by the time of Jim’s arrival in Nebraska, the buffalo were not there anymore as they had been hunted almost to extinction by rapacious and money hungry frontiersmen. These sweeping passages are lovely, and set up the novel with a certain level of speed and motion and that has the capacity to carry readers over both the land and the narrative in a way that allows readers to gloss over certain occurrences, colonialist histories and violent circumstances.

## **Animal Imagery and the Ecogothic**

The animal imagery continues when we meet *Ántonia*'s family, the Shimerdas. While *Ántonia* is described as being a full and pleasant, "wild" embodiment of the land, her family members are described in animalistic terms. Ambrosch, her brother is described as being "short and broad-backed, with a close-cropped, flat head, and a wide, flat face. His hazel eyes were little and shrewd, like his mother's, but mores sly and suspicious..." (14). His character is attributed with animal-like features, and he is painted with suspicion. He is described unfavorably throughout the novel—he displays stubborn and often volatile behavior.

*Ántonia*'s second brother Marek is regarded with a similar caution; "As he approached us, he began to make uncouth noises, and held up his hands to show us his fingers, which were webbed to the first knuckle, like a duck's foot. When he saw me draw back, he began to crow delightedly, 'Hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo!' like a rooster" (14-15). Marek, we understand, has a mental disability. Jim, who is afraid of him and will continually shy away in his presence, calls him a "crazy boy" (40). Later, Jim will comment that "I knew he wanted to make his queer noises for me—to bark like a dog or whinny like a horse—but he did not dare in the presence of his elders. Marek was always trying to be agreeable, poor fellow, as if he had it on his mind that he must make up for his deficiencies" (40).

*Ántonia*, on the other hand, is part of the ecopastoral—she is described as having eyes that are "big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood" (14). She seems to contain something that the others don't possess. Jim remarks that "her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark color. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking," essentially primitivising her. When the two of them meet there is an instant

connection, and they are “off running” instantly like the landscape itself. In one of their first interactions, *Ántonia* wants Jim to teach her the word “blue” in English—motioning back and forth between his eyes and the sky, communicating the vastness of the “dome overhead” as also contained within him. Jim describes *Ántonia* as being “brown” and exotic, and soul mate to him, while the rest of her family retain their status as suspicious, animal-like people who have various difficulties making ties to the land and surviving on it. Though *Ántonia*’s wildness arguably gives her animal status as well, *Ántonia* is more accurately identified with the land in a positive sense in Jim’s consciousness. However, we must remember that the bliss of *Ántonia*’s association with the land is checked by the unsettling animal characteristics of her family.

The pastoral sweep of the novel continues much the same, with ecogothic undercurrents surfacing occasionally to disrupt the romance of the landscape. One such instance has to do with the two Russian immigrants, Peter and Pavel. Jim rides with Mr. Shimerda and *Ántonia* to see Pavel at Peter’s request. He injured himself on the farm but is in agony over the sounds of some wolves nearby their home. Every time the wolves send out a howl, Pavel answers them back with a “high whine” so painful it seemed as though he were “waking to some old misery” (29). Peter explains that Pavel is terrified of the wolves. Pavel pulls Mr. Shimerda close and speaks to him softly but wildly in Bohemian, telling him a story that *Ántonia* then relays to Jim. She tells the story of Peter and Pavel’s practical exile from their village in Russia. On their way home from driving their friend and his bride back from their wedding on a night in the dead of winter, they encounter a vicious pack of wolves who chase their sledge at a rampant pace. They catch up to the sledge, and Pavel, in a moment of urgency and terror, pushes the bridegroom and his wife off of the sledge, throwing them to the wolves. so that he and Peter might escape unharmed. The pair were then driven out of their village, estranged from all they knew. Eventually, they come to

Nebraska, finally escaping the damning information that follows them from town to town. But Pavel continues to suffer immensely from the guilt of his actions, and thus the crying of the wolves on the prairie drives him mad (31-33).

Jim writes that after hearing this story, he and *Ántonia* talk of nothing else for days. In the nights following, “before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia” (32). The horrific, gothic tale comes back to haunt Jim repeatedly in his sleep. It’s an intrusion of violence and terror into his subconscious, and in his mind he figures the site of such terror as being a melding of Virginia and Nebraska. Such an intrusion perhaps gestures at the fact that Virginia and Nebraska *are* both sites of gothic terror in reality. While these specific sites of exploitation and horror go unmentioned by Cather, she does supply the narrative with this substituted sense of terror that has a Russian source. It is transplanted over what might otherwise be the knowledge of the violence enacted on Native populations in Nebraska or African American populations in Virginia.

### **Gestures Towards a Native Presence**

The novel continues to unfold with an alternating emphasis on the pastoral and the ecogothic that I have attempted to lay out. The narrative is carried along by a succession of memorable, sweeping images of the prairie with interspersed moments that pause the flow significantly, yet briefly, to jolt readers into an understanding of the ecogothic facts of the land. One such moment comes during the chronicles of winter months of the novel, when the Native American past on the land surfaces. The snow has just fallen over the prairie to reveal a “faintly marked in the grass, a great circle where the Indians used to ride” (33). Jim notes that “Jake and

Otto were sure that when they galloped round that ring the Indians tortured prisoners, bound to a stake in the center; but grandfather thought they merely ran races or trained horses there (33). Here, Jake and Otto display stereotypical ignorance about this marking on the landscape—while their knowledge of its native origin is correct, they assume an exotic sort of violence in American Indian life where none existed. Jim’s reasonable grandfather benignly corrects the children’s misconceptions, noting that the markers are the remnants of an old training circle for horses. This moment is comparable to Jim’s earlier imaging that the surface of the land is a buffalo hide, a thought that gestures at a Native past. This time, it’s not buffalo, but horses, but again that Native American past briefly comes to the surface.

This conversation reveals Cather’s awareness of American Indians presence on the land, but only in the past tense. When Jim looks upon the markings, he sees, “with wonderful distinctness,” “the strokes of Chinese white on canvas” (33). He adds “the old figure stirred me as it had never done before and seemed a good omen for the winter” (33). His reference to the Chinese symbol tells us something about Jim’s worldview—mainly that he is equipped with the knowledge to understand and recognize such a symbol when he sees one. Jim’s reading suggests that he, like Cather, will paint the history of an altogether different heritage over the one that actually existed.

### **Native American History in Nebraska**

In his book, *An Unspeakable Sadness*, David Wishart writes that there were five major Indian nations inhabiting eastern Nebraska in 1800: the Pawnee, Otoe, Missouriia, Omaha, and Ponca. Of these, only the Pawnee had the deepest historical roots in the region. The others were eighteenth century immigrants (Wishart 4). The Pawnees’ ancestors would have likely lived

along the Platte and Loup rivers from 1600-1750, and originated in the southwest region. It's difficult to trace the exact pathways and routes that these groups took on their way to and upon arrival in the Nebraska prairie landscape—they split off and rejoined one another like tributaries over the course of many centuries. By the late eighteenth century, Nebraska was seen as a dangerous place for Indians to live, as a number of American Indian nations were compressed and reorganized by the presence of Americans and Europeans, causing schisms and outbreaks of disease. Pawnee Indians sought the protection of larger settlements at this time.

Lewis and Clark's journey across the trans-Missouri West began after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Jefferson's charge to them included that they gather scientific information on all aspects of the environment, and that they assert the American presence throughout. When Lewis and Clark came upon the eastern Nebraskan Indians, they found them reeling from the smallpox epidemic of 1800-1801. Lacking labor and energy due to illness, and the gradual interference of Americans, Indians could not participate at usual capacity in the fur trade (and almost all eastern Nebraskan Indians participated). Their subsequent deficiencies left them vulnerable to attack, which caused their numbers to fall even more drastically. "The deaths of Indians, especially chiefs, priests, and doctors, eventually left holes in the cultural memory—visions were no longer explicated, ceremonies no longer performed." (7). All foundations of native life were gradually undermined in the half-century between the acquisition of Louisiana territory and the opening of the Nebraska Territory to American settlers. Even preceding the opening of Nebraska territory to settlers, hundred of thousands of migrants to Oregon, California, and Utah "cut a swath across Nebraska," disrupting native populations residing there, causing conflicts between different native groups, and between Indians and settlers. David Wishart writes that "the world of Nebraska Indians had never been stable but before 1800 change had generally

been slow enough to accommodate without major disruption. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the changes were occurring virtually overnight, and the shock waves were increasingly difficult to absorb” (35).

Wishart devotes a chapter of his book to an explication of the customs and ways of living that the eastern Nebraska Indians were engaged in before the Louisiana Purchase, and before Lewis and Clark entered the scene. I think they’re worth noting here in regards to their connection to place and space. He writes, for example, that “Their history was etched in the landscape in place-names commemorating people, deeds, visions, and disasters....Nebraska Indians were deeply committed to place” (13). He notes that although the environment at large was revered for what it provided and represented, certain landmarks stood out, specifically burial grounds, as well as other physical features such as caves, springs, rivers, and hills that were known to be sacred (12). He notes that the class system in place among Indian tribes was easy to read on the landscape—one could intuit the importance of a particular person based upon the size of lodges. Those on the outskirts of society (who were never left completely untended to or fed) lived on the edges of the village, in small tipis and dugouts (21).

All four peoples continued to hunt and raid until the 1870s, despite concerted efforts by the United States government to stop them. Yet from the mid-1820’s and onward it had become difficult to live in traditional ways (94). Factors contributing to the demise of the population and the disruption of normal life included continued disease, hunger, warfare, government injunction, as well as government annuities and rations that could not replace bison meat and agricultural self-sufficiency (94). The new school system and the banning of certain ceremonies contributed heavily to loss of culture.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 granted Nebraska statehood after a decade of political

negotiating due to conflicts and differing opinions about slavery and the western railroad route (101). This new conception of Nebraska as a state gave American Indians even less claim on the land than they held before. Beginning in 1853, delegates from the five nations were sent to Washington D.C to discuss and sign various treaties, and were told that they had a year to vacate the land (102). In 1854, the Otoe-Missouria and Omaha parted with the bulk of their land in exchange for annuities that were meant to relieve much of the population from near starvation. They were followed by the Pawnee in 1857 and the Ponca in 1858.

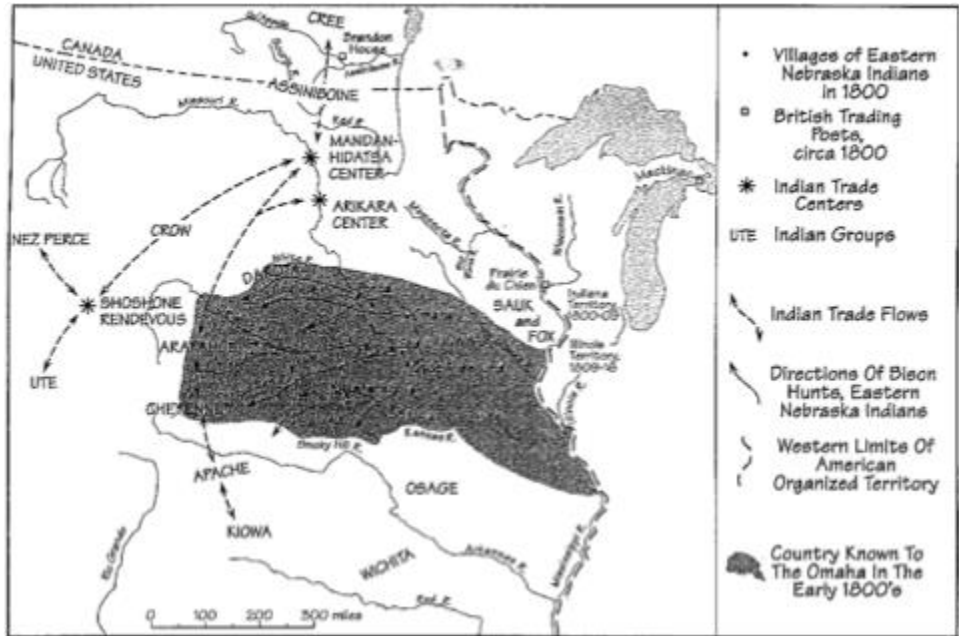
Initial reservation policies were continuously altered throughout the second half of the 19th century. Government officials repeatedly decided that an excess of land had been granted to a particular group, and gradually reservations became increasingly condensed. In 1859, Commissioner Albert Greenwood is quoted as saying,

At present the policy of the government is to gather the Indians upon small tribal reservations, within the well-defined exterior boundaries of which small tracts of land are assigned, in severalty, to the individual members of the tribe, with all the rights incident to an estate in fee-simple, except the power of alienation” (103-4).

The repeated use of “small” and “well-defined,” as well as the quantifying space based upon the individual rather than the whole brings to mind the structure enforced on the Nebraska landscape of *My Ántonia*. Jim will describe the town of Black Hawk as geometrical and evenly spaced, open and clear. Throughout the course of the novel the prairie landscape will become subjected to the creation of well-defined boundaries. Jim will, in a way, lament this fact. It will provoke nostalgia within him, and while the nostalgia does not recognize this original (and ongoing) process of removal, we know it is present at some level. Below are a number of maps that show how the landscape became extremely organized, square, contained, easy to read and to navigate,



whereas prior to European and American settlement, boundaries were hard to discern due to the fact that they were ever shifting. Given that *My Ántonia* is set in roughly the 1890s, it is important to know how Native groups were forced out of the space of the novel, and how the land underwent these organizational and geometric mapping processes that left it ready for



pioneers from the East to settle. The very organization of this newly structured land makes it difficult to see the complexity and history of the space.

Fig. 1. This map shows the movement and crossover of various tribes around the year 1800. From *An Unspeakable Sadness*, page 10.

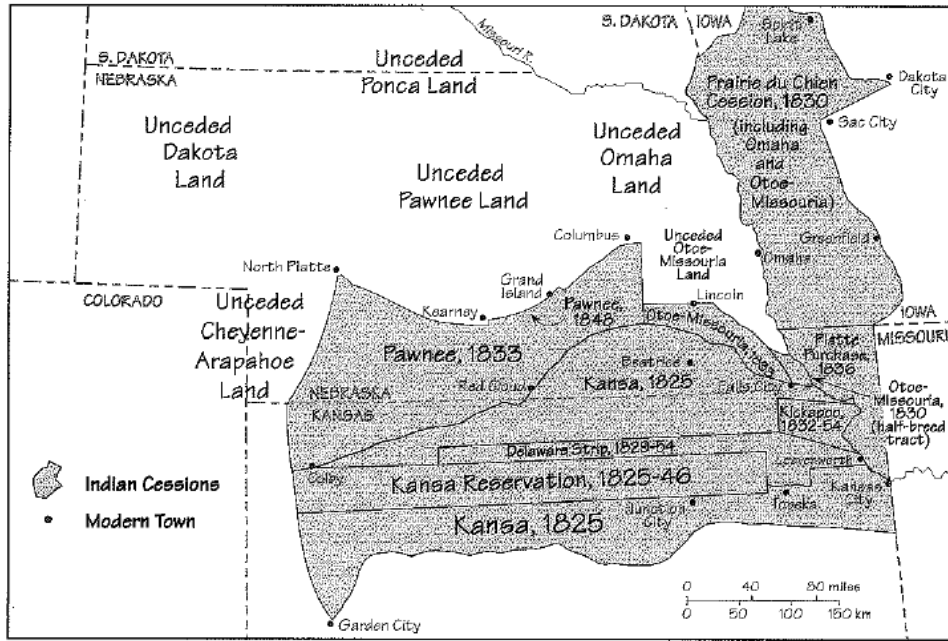


Fig. 2. This image shows the land cessions that occurred the 1830s and 1840s. Notice the straight and geometrical arrangement of the state boundaries in contrast to the still-as-yet less boundaries shape of the Native American territories. From *An Unspeakable Sadness*, page 60.

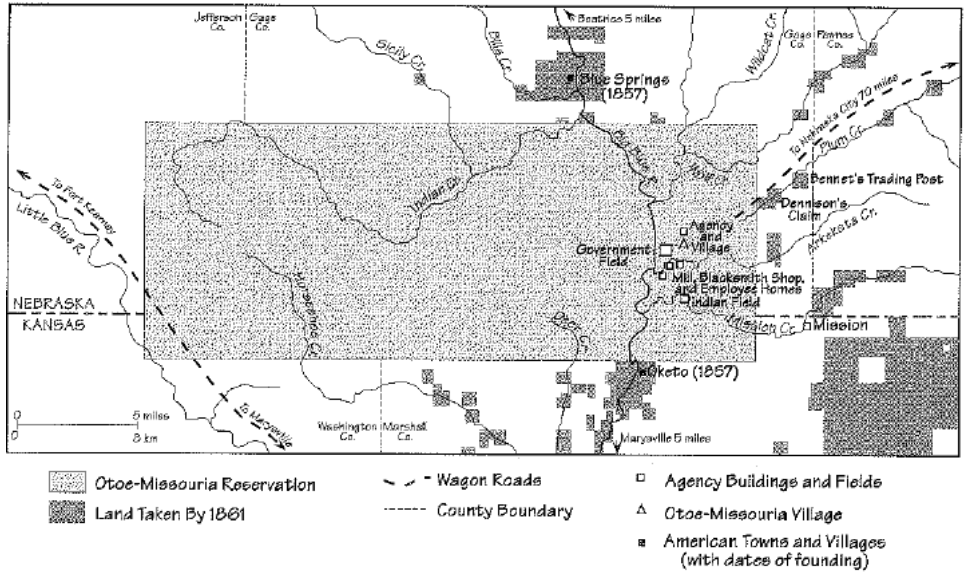


Fig. 3. This is the Otoe-Missouria Reservation as it was organized in 1861. It is easy to see how the structure of the state no longer adheres to natural boundaries, and is organized geometrically. From *An Unspeakable Sadness*, page 114.

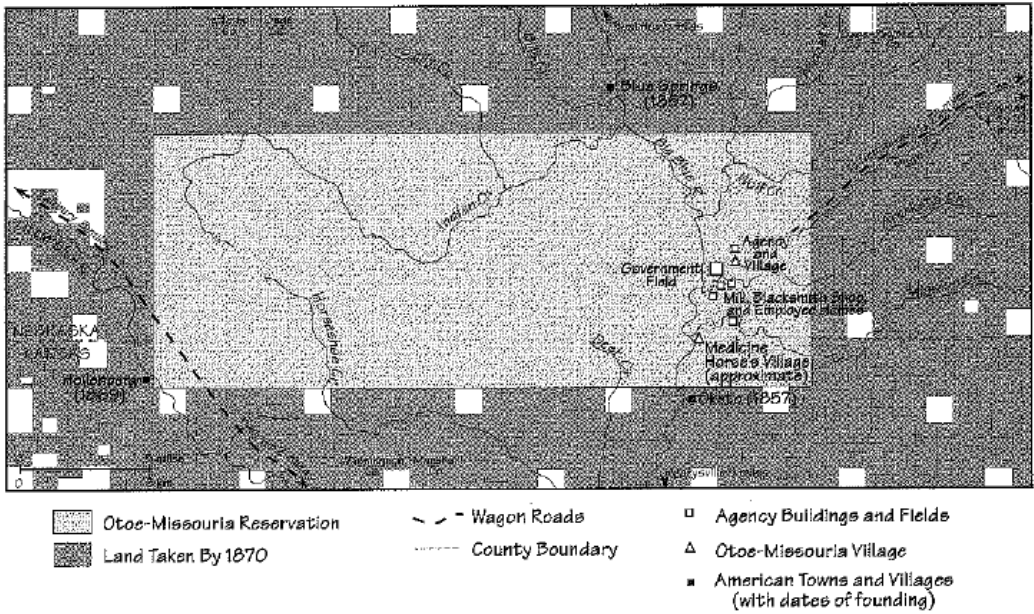


Fig. 4. The Otoe-Missouria Reservation and surrounding areas in 1870. From *An Unspeakable Sadness*, page 168.

## **Violence and Death Under the Surface**

Mr. Shimerda tragically commits suicide during the winter months on the prairie, and we are made to understand that it is because of his intense longing for the “old country” compounded with his difficulty assimilating himself onto this new landscape. William Barillas writes (with an echoing consensus of critics behind him) that the “fundamental task” of the fictional characters from Cather’s Nebraska novels is to “become physically and emotionally attached to the landscape,” a task that is necessary for both financial and spiritual reasons (Barillas 20). He explains how much of the dramatic tension stems from characters who, for one reason or another, cannot attach to the new prairie landscape. Though Cather celebrates sense of place in her work, she sets it up against an “opposing placelessness as a force pulling those of the rural society both back in time to origins in Europe and forward into the materialistic modern world” (20).

Characters like Mr. Shimerda who do struggle against an opposing placelessness meet tragic ends.

His buried body contends with the structured landscape that served to force out the presence of American Indian groups on the Nebraska plains. There is a disagreement over where he should be buried. Ambrosch worries that his father’s body will be plowed over by the construction of a road in years to come. But Mr. Burden, Jim’s grandfather, explains to Ambrosch that “when the country was put under fence and the roads were confined to section lines, two roads would cross exactly on that corner” where they decide to bury him (56). Jim describes the movement and organization of the land as such:

Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been

ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. (59)

Ambrosch's worries that future roads will run over his father's resting place are thus quelled. We know that in the future, the newly constructed roads just miss the gravesite, bending around it. The grave, "with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island" that stands out from the rest of the more formatted landscape (59).

Mr. Shimerda's body is a reminder of a number of things. His body becomes part of the land, and is thus subjected to its mandated changes, including those mentioned above—the history of removal and reorganization of the territory. His buried body, whose marker becomes so obvious after the construction of the two roads that cross around it, also serve, simply, as a reminder and memorial of the tragic suicide of a man who could not merge with the land while living. Mr. Shimerda, while he could not be on this land the way a first generation farmer would, is completely encompassed by it in his death. Future infrastructure on this land bends to him and his story. He becomes the land.

Just as Jim locates the spirits of his deceased parents—failing to locate him on the Virginia landscape—he likewise has a vision of Mr. Shimerda's spirit trying to find his way back to "his own country" (51). As a way of making peace with this death, Jim has to imagine the spirit's physical trajectory. Jim traces the spirit's presumed path: "I thought of how far it was to Chicago, and then to Virginia, to Baltimore,—and then the great wintry ocean," but believes that Mr. Shimerda could not stand such a long journey so soon: "Surely, his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow, was rested now in this quiet

house” (51). Jim imagines Mr. Shimerda’s soul as retaining its physical location. If nothing else, this fact stresses the importance of the physical organization in the world of the novel as important. One fact of the land is one that no one ever quite leaves it. This is a sign of the prairie ecogothic—the land traps him not unlike a gothic castle, but in this instance, with wide-open spaces that expose him to weather and vulnerabilities.

### **The Domestic Ecopastoral**

The ecopastoral follows Jim and his family out of the prairie and into the town of Black Hawk three years later in Book II, “The Hired Girls.” The pastoral descriptions of the prairie take on a new form in this book, and reveal themselves to be malleable. Rather than language that evokes the vastness of the prairie, we have lush descriptions of domestic, orderly tranquility of gardens and homes. Jim sees his new surroundings as such:

Black Hawk, the new world in which we had come to live, was a clean, well-painted little prairie town, with white fences and good green yards about the dwellings, wide, dusty streets, and shapely little trees growing along the wooden sidewalks. In the center of town there were two rows of new brick ‘store’ buildings, a brick schoolhouse, the courthouse, and four white churches (72).

This world is systematically organized by fences and by institutions. Mr. Burden becomes a deacon at a local Baptist church and Mrs. Burden joins several missionary societies. Jim goes to school, and learns a great deal from his interactions with their neighbors, the Harlings. Mr. Harling, who operates grain elevators, is considered to be the most enterprising businessman in town, and his wife Mrs. Harling runs the household. Notably, she is “short and square and sturdy looking, like her house” (73). Mrs. Harling assimilates well with her environment in that she is

orderly. The Harling household runs like a machine.

Mr. Harling and his grown-up daughter Frances run his business together; “[Frances] had few holidays and never got away from her responsibilities” (74). In keeping with the orderly spatial layout of the town, Cather writes that “most Black Hawk fathers had no personal habits outside their domestic ones; they paid the bills, pushed the baby carriage after office hours, moved the sprinkler about over the lawn, and took the family driving on Sunday” (77). While Jim misses the prairie, and especially *Ántonia* before her move into town, he enjoys the order and domestic tranquility of this pastoral scene.

### **Blind d’Arnault and the Racial Ecogothic**

A stark interruption comes to disrupt town life in this book in the form of the black pianist from the “far south” named Blind d’Arnault. He comes to interrupt the tranquility of the town. Cather introduces racial dynamics into the novel at this point to disrupt the harmony of Black Hawk life to show that even in this newly crafted landscape, one cannot get away from the history and knowledge of slavery, from disability, and from inequality. The presence of Blind d’Arnault carries special significance for Jim, for it is the one time in the novel where he references his association with Virginia. He writes that d’Arnault comes from the “far south,” “where the spirit if not the fact of slavery persisted” and finds the musician’s voice to be “the soft, amiable negro voice, like those I remembered from early childhood, with the note of docile subservience in it” (90). He continues, “He had the negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool. He would have been repulsive if his face had not been so kindly and happy. It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia” (90).

Jim's language in the above passage brings the discomfort of his primitivization of d'Arnault into the fold of this novel to disrupt the orderly, pastoral town life. He describes d'Arnault in highly diminutive and oftentimes animalistic terms. He provides a detached rendering of the South and of slavery. Below, Jim describes how d'Arnault, the son of a plantation slave, finds his way to the home's piano.

Through the dark he found his way to the Thing, to its mouth. He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. Then he began to feel it all over, ran his finger tips along the slippery slides, embraced the carved legs, tried to get some conception of its shape and size, of the space that it occupied in the primeval night. It was cold and hard, and like nothing else in his black universe. He went back to its mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. He seemed to know that it must be done with the fingers, not with the fists or the feet. He approached this highly artificial instrument through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him. (92)

Blind d'Arnault's discovery of the piano is described in animalistic, instinctual terms. He sniffs and feels it out, gauging its shape and size "in the primeval night." It strikes him because it is like nothing else in his "black universe." He approaches the instrument "though mere instinct" and it makes "a whole creature of him" (92). When he plays, he looks "like some African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood." (93). The music that he plays again, is instinctual to him, it is "already his," it "under the bones of his pinched, conical little skull, definite as animal desires" (92). For any reader of any time acquainted even the least bit with slavery and its legacy, this passage would had to have sent chills.



He could never learn like other people, never acquired any finish. He was always a negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses,—that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly. To hear him, to watch him, to see a negro enjoying himself as only a negro can. It was as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped up on those black and white keys, and he were gloating over them and trickling them through his yellow fingers (92).

The pianist is described as this figure bursting music and talent, but the description is nonetheless deeply uncomfortable, and a bit disorienting. He's a prodigy but plays "barbarously," his music is "real" but "abominable." While his sense of rhythm is stronger than any other impulse of his, it troubles his "dark mind" and "worried his body incessantly." Ultimately, he enjoys himself "as only a negro can" (92). This performance is so titillating and interesting to Jim and *Ántonia* that Jim tells, "We were so excited that we dreaded to go to bed. We lingered a long while at the Harlings' gate, whispering in the cold until the restlessness was chilled out of us" (94). Anne Goodwyn Jones writes that "the ambivalence of [Jim's] descriptions—*d'Arnault* is repulsive but kindly, brainless but amiable, sensual but subservient—testifies to the contradictory Southern blend of abstract racist theory and actual human relationships, of paternalism and intimacy" (Jones 92). Relatedly, she notes that Jim's treatment of the *Shimerdas* post-suicide "can be explained in terms of all-too-familiar Southern values: class superiority and related gender expectations" (Jones 97).

After the excitement of this evening, all goes back to normal in town. *Ántonia* and Jim become temporarily enthralled with the establishment of some dance tents that enliven the social

life of Black Hawk. Jim graduates from high school and begins preparing himself to go off the University. This section of the novel closes out easily. There are no future mentions of Blind d'Arnault. As I've mentioned previously, d'Arnault is a force in the novel that shakes the pastoral tranquility of the town, and brings into the fold of the novel a sense of darkness, slavery, racism, and disability.

### **Coronado and Colonial Traces in the Land**

The summer preceding Jim's departure for university is quiet. His last days in town with the Antonia and the other hired girls, Anna, Lena, Antonia, Tiny, pass idyllically. They travel out of the town together for an outing that represents a juncture that occurs before the divergence of Jim from the hired girls. In discussing their plans for the future (Lena's to buy her mother a wooden rather than sod house, for example) it becomes clear that Jim's life is going to look quite different. As Anna Hansen says to him at his graduation, "It must make you happy, Jim, to have fine thoughts like that in your mind all the time, and to have the words to put them in" (112). The outing, before Jim leaves for school to pursue his "fine thoughts," is the last of its kind. Jim will return to Black Hawk and to the prairie, but he will rely increasingly on memory as a conduit to feeling and assimilation with the land. Jim's ecopastoral description of the place goes as follows:

I followed a cattle path through the thick underbrush until I came to a slope that fell away abruptly to the water's edge. A great chunk of the shore had been bitten out by some spring freshet, and the scar was masked by elder bushes, growing down to the water in flowery terraces....I was overcome by content and drowsiness and by the warm silence about me. There was no sound but the high, sing-song buzz of wild bees and the sunny gurgle of the water underneath. (114)

Before quitting the place, *Ántonia* asks Jim to tell the group a story about the Spanish conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, who in his search for the “Seven Golden Cities” is rumored to have passed through Nebraska, and possibly along the very river they are sprawled by. Jim tells the girls that a farmer once dug out of the ground a sword with a Spanish inscription on its blade, and that the Harling family now has the relic in their possession. This instance contributes to the story a sense of wonder at what is buried in the land. The sword, which carries with it associations of the violence of Spanish colonial efforts, is what is buried in this spot. Images abound of the “riches and castles” that Coronado left behind in Spain, coupled with the rough realities of his expedition in the West. He stands for the same violent wave of western expansion that one might connect to the frontier thesis. But his character is intermingled with a magic that glosses over the violence of European conquest. Cather renders this conquest as a romantic story in an attempt to write the pastoral over a space that is in reality burdened with unsettling histories.

The final scene in this chapter happens as they gaze “off across the country” and see the image that appears on most front covers of *My Ántonia*: the plow massively superimposed on the sun. This is one of the most frequently discussed images from the novel, generally connoting both Cather’s impressive ability to convey the land in writing, and the suggested harmony between humanity and the land. Here is the ecopastoral passage in full:

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just

behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (118).

This is Jim's last view of the land before his departure. It is a glorious one that makes farming appear heroic and grand. It celebrates the land, optimism among the settlers, and the glorification of the plow. The image arrests time and history, and the difficult labor that is involved in breaking sod and farming the land—it just skims the surface of reality.

### **Wick Cutter: An Episode of Sexual Violence**

The final event that occurs before Jim quiet Black Hawk and the prairie for the last time is the almost-rape of *Ántonia*. *Ántonia* works for Wick Cutter, who is considered a dubious figure in town. He and his wife are notoriously volatile, and Cutter is known for his adulterous behavior. When he and his wife leave Black Hawk for a few days, Cutter is insistent that *Ántonia* stay at their home to guard his belongings. This directive doesn't sit well with *Ántonia* or Mrs. Burden, who persuades Jim to spend the night at the Cutters' home in place of *Ántonia*. She fears that Mr. Cutter is "up to some of his old tricks again" (119). On the third night of sleeping in *Ántonia*'s place, Jim awakens, startled, to see the "detestable bearded countenance" of Wick Cutter bending over him. They tussle, and later Jim remarks, "truly, I was a battered object" (120). Though Jim knows that he saved *Ántonia* from Cutter's assault, he becomes highly embarrassed and resentful of *Ántonia* for putting him in this vulnerable situation in the first place; "I felt I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let

me in for all this disgustingness” (121). He hides himself away from town, fearing what the old men at the drugstore would do with “such a theme” (121). The next we hear of Jim, he is settled at University, the brush with disaster for both him and *Ántonia*, rather than that magnificent image of the plow inscribed on the sun, is the moment that served to close off his time in Black Hawk. Once again, moments of disaster intrude on the pastoral trajectory that serves to unsettle assumptions about this space.

### **“Brownness” as a Native American Reverberance**

In Book IV, “The Pioneer Woman’s Story,” Jim returns to the prairie after two years, before he begins law school. We find ourselves oriented quite differently in space at the opening of this book—much has changed on the landscape.

The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards, and big red barns; all this meant happy children, contented women, and men who saw their lives coming to a fortunate issue. (145)

Though the premise of this book is to communicate the sad fate that *Ántonia* has suffered at the hands of Larry Donovan, who proposes to her and consequently abandons her, Jim’s attitude towards the landscape retains its nostalgic and tranquil bliss. As Richard Dillman notes, the wish for “control over the land creates conditions for such renderings,” ones that are symbolic, romantic, with the dangerous and unruly winter world tamed and conquered (Dillman 32). The passage above is infused with an upward motion—what once were sod dugouts, partially submerged under the earth, are now European-style wooden homes. The expansive pasture has

been drawn in, gathered up almost, and the wildness suggested by the long red grass is becoming rare. This passage echoes the docile domesticity of the Harling household, only this time transposed onto the prairie. Jim writes that “The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea” (Cather 145). Here again Jim banishes the ecogothic, and refuses to see the prairie as anything other than romantic.

He visits the Widow Stevens, who looks like “brown, Indian woman” who lives in the Burdens’ old home, to hear the news about *Ántonia* (145). She is a single mother working the land, isolated from most people out of sheer embarrassment. Jim also learns in this conversation that Marek has been sent to a mental institution, just one more intrusion of the uncomfortable into his image of prairie life. The description above of the Widow Stevens is one of the only uses of the word “Indian” in the novel. In calling the widow (and *Ántonia*, at points) “brown,” the narrative alludes to “native” people. I propose that Cather inserts the use here, over the woman who now lives in Jim’s old space, in an attempt to remind readers of the history of this place, though Jim will not acknowledge it specifically.

Jim goes to see *Ántonia* the following day and finds, though, that she “has a new kind of strength in the gravity of her face” (151). They connect immediately (“I found myself telling her everything: why I had decided to study law and to go into the law office of one of my mother’s relatives in New York City...”) and *Ántonia* seems to understand immediately that Jim’s life is taking a course that will keep him far away from her. She tells him that her deceased father is much more real to her than most things, just as Jim will be. Jim confesses “I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me” (152). As Jim and *Ántonia*

walk back home across the fields, Cather writes that,

The sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose color, thin as a bubble or ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on the opposite edges of the world. In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the old solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could have been a little boy again, and that my way could end here. (152)

This passage is highly lyrical and pastoral. It is as though the pair watch an environmental theater of sorts—a rare sighting of these two “luminaries confronted” with one another across the expanse of the land. While it is a sweeping, beautiful, still passage, one cannot help but wonder if there is a suggestion of the kind of splitting off of paths that *Ántonia* knows is happening. The sun and moon arriving at the same time for a brief collection of minutes, only to cycle on in their separate ways. Everything on the land raises its head to see such an occurrence, and Jim wishes that “my way could end here,” as though this moment were too perfect and too final to carry on from (152). Before they part Jim holds *Ántonia*’s “brown hands” and remembered “how many kind things” they had done for him (152-3). He walks on down the road alone.

### **“A Veritable Earth Mother”**

Book V, “Cuzak’s Boys,” begins immediately following the above-mentioned scene. Twenty years have passed, and Jim expresses that he did not wish to return to see *Ántonia*

because “In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again” (155). At this point in his life most of the important drama and memory of his life lives on a layer above the real. Jim is unwilling to see *Ántonia* without a pastoral and romantic lens.

The house is “set back on a swell of land” with a “wide farmhouse, with a red barn and an ash grove, and cattle yards in front that sloped down to the high road” (156). The kind of orderly compartments that make up Jim’s impression of the prairie at his return in Book IV exist twenty years later on *Ántonia*’s land, too. Jim’s ride up to the home is sprinkled with children who ride alongside him, and show him the way to the house. The abundance of this place is already evident. *Ántonia*, though she does not recognize her childhood friend at first, is overjoyed at his presence, and “pants” with delight upon the realization. The motion of the children that at first pulled Jim towards the house, directs him next to the fruit cave, whose abundance they are all so proud of. Coming up from the cave, Jim turns to see all the children “running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment” (160). As Susan Rosowski says, *Ántonia* is a “veritable Earth Mother” (Rosowski). What comes out from under the earth at this time in the narrative is a dizzying swarm of life. Jim will later reflect to himself that, “She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (167).

Jim is satisfied and pleased with his visit to *Ántonia*. He talks at length with her many children and meets her husband Anton Cuzak, whom he is relieved to discover he is fond of. There is something fear inducing about Anton’s character, though—he displays a similar lack of



assimilation for the land to Mr. Shimerda, and we remember that this lack resulted in tragedy. Anton confides to Jim that, “It was a pretty hard job, breaking up this place and making the first crops grow” and that “Sometimes when I read the papers from the old country, I pretty near run away....I never did think how I would be a settled man like this” (173). He describes *Ántonia*’s encouragement of him—she says, “we better stick it out” (173). Jim observes that,

He was still, as *Ántonia* said, a city man. He liked theaters and lighted streets and music and a game of dominoes after the day’s work was over. His sociability was stronger than his acquisitive instinct. He liked to live day-by-day, night-by-night, sharing in the excitement of the crowd. Yet his wife managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world. (173)

The life he lives now is “a fine life, certainly, but it wasn't the kind of life he wanted to live” (173). Finally, Jim notes that it seemed like Anton had been “made an instrument of *Ántonia*’s special mission,” which is concerning because that was likewise the dynamic between Mrs. and Mr. Shimerda. *Ántonia* is obviously thriving in this space, she is absolutely in her element, and that is the main sense at the close of the novel.

The ecogothic, though often hard to identify in Cather’s writing, still persists. The dangerous aspects of the land have not disappeared, but they are buried in the pastoral language of the prose. I’ve attempted to identify the violence, gestures towards American Indian violence, colonialism, and vague indications that Native Americans used to dwell in this space, all as disruptions to the ecopastoral flow of the text. Jim’s optimism and romantic visions are the elements of Cather’s narrative that are easy to latch on to, but there is always something under the surface of the prose threatening to trouble the peace.

## CHAPTER II

### *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*

#### **I. Critical Readings of the Territory**

In her chapter entitled, “How to Recover a Bishopric: Cather’s Recovery of the Imaginative Territory in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” Demaree C. Peck notes that writing the novel was one of the most exciting and enjoyable experiences of Cather’s life, as she was able to “work with her protagonist as an alter ego who could successfully enact her own desires” (Peck 218). Peck asserts that we could feasibly read *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the character of Bishop Latour as a stand in for Cather and her imaginative writerly process. She posits that it’s easy to see Cather’s love for arrangement and organizing in her writing in Bishop Latour’s character. In Peck’s words, “safe at his desk from the embroiling perils of human conflicts, the Bishop wages his war on paper—as Cather was waging hers. He, too, has omnipotent power as an author over his experience, rearranging and eliminating the figures in his diocese as if they were characters on a blank page” (228-9). Peck emphasizes the fact that the mission of organizing the diocese of the New Mexican territory is the issue on the table in the prologue of the novel—and Cather shows time and again that her prologues are important keys to understanding her intentions for the entirety of the work. Thus, we know to watch for organizational acts moving through the novel.

Peck writes that it’s easy to see Cather in Latour’s character, and the image is

unflattering. Peck is ultimately uncomplimentary of Latour's character, as she writes that while "we can understand the Archbishop's spiritual conversion of others in the name of the church as a disguised expression of an imaginative assimilation of others in the name of the self", "In the guise of redeeming the landscape, the Archbishop appropriates it..." (219). Latour's journey is set up to be an epic like that of Dante's *Inferno* and eventual reach of paradise—the whole endeavor is an allegory for his own journey. Latour and his guide, Jacinto's, relationship, Peck writes, is a terrain on which Latour can "assert his omnipresence over [him]. The native Jacinto so fades into the background that he is unrecognizable as a personality. In fact, Cather most often describes him indirectly by analogy to the landscape" (233).

While Peck writes that Cather uses this landscape and Latour's mission as a way to practice her writerly organizational skills, and in the process undervalues and overwrites the diverse elements of the land, Astrid Haas writes that Cather enacts a similar vagueness on the entire concept of history—that Cather includes some historical touchstones that in reality are fascinating but that she uses them purely for the sake of moving her narrative along.

Haas notes that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* briefly alludes to the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 by which the US acquired another stretch of Mexican territory—in the novel Cather refers to the purchase as being a part of "the march of history" (Haas 2). But her opinion is that Cather treats the purchase and the political events of 1848 (The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) as apolitical instances that function narratively to disrupt and rearrange church jurisdictions, ignoring the details of the dramatic changes of such treaties and purchases. She suggests that Cather is interested in these events insofar as they can bolster and move her narrative. Haas highlights a similarity in the crafting of *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* when she notes that Cather chooses in both instances to cover up Native presences with European ones.

For example, the two orthodox French priests are sent to reestablish the Catholic church in their diocese to replace abusive Mexican clergy. This means that their view of the New World, from which readers experience the novel, is Euro-centric rather than even Anglo U.S-centric or Native-centric. With all of this in mind, the question becomes, then, to what extent do these European colonizers impose themselves on this space, and on the many diverse cultural layers that already exist in the spaces they are entering? I agree with Haas that Cather places transplants on her landscapes that write over the Native presences that have existed in these spaces for thousands of years. However, I hope to track a change from *My Ántonia* to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (which is published ten years later in Cather's writing career) in terms of including Native groups in her fiction. I want to track specifically Bishop Latour's evolving attitude towards the land, which is tangibly colored by the presence of various American Indian tribes that he will encounter during his life in the New Mexican territory.

Caroline Woidat makes a related point in her article in "The Indian-Detour in Willa Cather's Southwestern Novels," where she puts forward the concept of the "Indian-detour"—a phrase that would have appeared on railroad brochures at the time of the novel's writing. The Indian-detour is a "detour train" by which passengers could tour antiquated Native American dwellings (often, ones that had been pushed out to the margins of the railroad by its building). Woidat ultimately applies this term to Cather's fiction in more metaphorical sense—Cather chooses to take the Indian-detour in her work: "Cather's writing and experiences in many ways exemplify the spirit of the Indian-detour: the Southwest is a mere side-trip in a larger story grounded in the perspective of her own class and ethnic prejudices" (Woidat 41). She writes, "It is my contention that Cather's relation to the Southwest as an artist embodies the same contradictions inherent in the tourist/discoverer's experience of the land, and that these

contradictions are revealed in her treatment of the cliff dwellings as a kind of “detour” in the texts” (36). However, my thesis will show that in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather does not take an “Indian-detour.” While there is always more to hope for when speaking about Native representations, Cather gives readers the character of Latour, whose creative process in the New Mexican territory is less about the assertion of his own ways onto the land and people, and more about how much he is able to learn from history and from the landscape which cannot help but reveal the diverse presence of Native Americans in the space.

Max Despain also sees that Latour has a profound response to the New Mexican landscape, yet retains his identity in the face of this influence. He is a person who acts alongside both the landscape and the community—he understands that he must be acquainted with the social and physical structure of his diocese before he can influence any change. Likewise, regarding Cather’s treatment of Native American history in the novel, Despain writes that Latour knows that he cannot “impose his own creative perspective” on those who have been existing in this space for thousands of years (Despain 166). Unlike my perspective, his reading of the novel focuses on the relationship between Latour and his cathedral—his journey is all about his quest to find his own place in the unfinished landscape. I agree with the fact that Latour’s experience in this space is a learning experience, but will push against the idea that the end result is that Latour carves any kind of religious or imperialist space for himself.

I highlight the fact that Latour’s cathedral essentially does not make it to the end of the novel—the topic is raised only in the second to last book, and its attempted construction is not the culminating preoccupation of the novel at any point in time. Rather than working towards assimilation with the Southwest landscape, or an attempt to impose himself onto it, Latour’s approach in the end is more hands-off. He leaves things as they are.

Patrick K. Dooley notes Cather's land ethic, acknowledging like other Cather readers mentioned above, that "the natural world made to fit human desires is a recurring theme celebrated by Willa Cather," and especially in *My Ántonia* (Dooley 67). However, when we come to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, he argues that Cather contends with a different kind of ethics—one that is presented through Cather's writing of Navajo who embody a "wise-use" and "leave no trace" approach to the land. Bishop Latour will reflect in the novel that "it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything" (Dooley 70). This kind of ethics is so often romanticized, though, especially because of its native associations, as Dooley points out.

I argue that Cather values Bishop Latour's character in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, who at the end of the novel does not enact his own desires on the land, but acknowledges the various religious and historical presences that are inherent to the landscape. Dooley speaks extensively about Bishop Latour's mode of "festina lente" ("make haste slowly")—a mode that allows him to understand (to the extent that he can) the indigenous way of life. Inherent in his mode of being is likewise Latour's understanding that he will never fully understand the Native cultures. I agree that the land itself and its cultures remain mysterious and many layered, and that Latour progresses toward accepting the beauty and terror of the New Mexican landscape.

## **II. The Prologue: Introducing Layered Space**

In the prologue of the novel, which describes the meeting amongst the clergy, Willa Cather directs her readers to watch for vertical space. Much as the prologue of *My Ántonia* set a precedent for the kind of shallow digging and excavation dominated by pastoral imagery and the

occasional intrusion of the ecogothic from below the surface, here our eyes are trained to watch for steepness, vertical enclosures, and layering. In this novel, too, we note the ecogothic horror that these landscape features can inspire. The ecogothic is also connected to New Mexico's layered history.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* begins in the summer of 1848, at a villa in the Sabine hills north of Rome. A Catholic missionary Bishop who has been living in America meets with three Cardinals—Europeans all of them—as a direct result of the acquisition by the United States of a large territory comprising much of what is now New Mexico. They discuss the church's consequent need for a Bishop to sit in the empty seat of the newly expanded Diocese of New Mexico. There exists an incredibly diverse cultural ecosystem in this territory as a result of the many changes in acquisition that the land has undergone throughout the centuries, and this is evidenced in the novel.

While the New Mexican territory had been occupied for thousands of years by various Native peoples, it was settled by the Spanish in the 1500s, and Santa Fé, the centerpoint and touchstone place in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, was founded in 1610, making it the oldest state capital in the United States. In 1821, this same territory becomes part of Mexico, until 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo mandated that a large portion of land (encompassing California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, and roughly half of New Mexico) would now be in the possession of the United States for the price of 15 million dollars. This is where we are in time as the novel opens—three main and distinct cultural layers exist in one territory as both political and religious colonial powers transfer, shift, and expand.

The opening scene is lush and quiet. Cather communicates such richness in the landscape in the two opening paragraphs alone, with attention to the way in which the men are situated in

relation to the Italian landscape, and the villa's enclosure. We hear that the men dine in a "hidden garden" twenty feet below the villa's terrace that is famous for its view. The garden is "a mere shelf of rock, overhanging a steep declivity planted with vineyards" (3). A flight of stone steps connects the garden to the terrace above, and "beyond the balustrade was the drop into the air, and far below the landscape stretched soft and undulating; there was nothing to arrest the eye until it reached Rome itself" (3). This space is stacked—the vineyards lie right below the garden, and the garden is located below the terrace. From the terrace, the eyes can skim the surface of the city below just barely—it is "indistinct except for the dome of St. Peter's, bluish grey like the flattened top of a great balloon, just a flash of copper light on its soft metallic surface" (3). The vertical space creates a sense of isolation—in this image, we can see clearly only the space of villa, and a hint of the basilica—arguably, the spaces that matter most to the characters who open the novel, and all else—the busyness of Rome is left unseen and undescribed.

The missionary Bishop and European Cardinals gather to discuss who the most fitting man for the job of Bishop of New Mexico is—a challenging post, we learn, as this is an "enormous territory" which has been, the Bishop asserts, "the cradle of Faith in the New World" (6). Whoever should undertake the task will see the beginning of "momentous things" (6). Here again, as in *My Ántonia*, our characters turn a blind eye to the historical richness and diversity of the landscape in question, and think of it as a "New World"—a new beginning and a blank space in which to craft a civilization or a new religious empire, while in reality there is so much at play already.

Cather writes the New Mexican landscape as an unfinished one; "the mesa plain has an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being



brought together” (166). Thus, there is room for Bishop Latour to enter this picture and to impose himself on the space—there is room for his European influence. He brings all the materials set down for world-making to fruiting in his building of the cathedral. However, “before he can conceive of his own cathedral, he must first experience the Spaniards’ previous attempt at influencing an indigenous community through construction and then a Native American example of a holy shrine” (166). The missionary Ferrand tells the cardinals that the man for this job must be one “to whom order is necessary—as dear as life” (8). He mentions that a Frenchman would do best, as they are known as being the “great organizers” and have “a sense of proportion and rational adjustment” (9). The man for this post will have to *shape* and *organize* this space into something discernable, orderly, Christian, and arguable, white. This, however, is a difficult task.

Not only is the space described as vast, unmade, and uncharted—it is also described as being uncommonly treacherous. The missionary, Ferrand, who describes the job of the new Bishop makes it clear that this landscape is dangerous, and that the man for the job must be willing to assimilate to its ways. He describes that, “there are no wagon roads, no canals, no navigable rivers. Trade is carried on by means of pack-mules, over treacherous trails. The desert down there has a peculiar horror; I do not mean thirst, not Indian massacres, which are frequent” (7). The horror doesn’t rest with the phenomena we might expect—violence of Native Americans and the heat on the desert. Rather, Ferrand continues, “the very floor of the world is cracked open into countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand” (7). The verticality of the space is the horror, rather, the ecogothic—the unexpected drops and fissures that expose human life to the unsettling depths of the earth’s floor. One can practically see to the very beginning of time by gazing down into the

vastness of this space. This land is the danger that the new Bishop must be ready to accept and to wrestle with.

Ferrand further asserts that this new Bishop must be ready to fully embrace the ways of life that this space demands; “He will eat dried buffalo meat and frijoles with chilli, and he will be glad to drink water when he can get it. He will have no easy life, your Eminence. That country will drink up his youth and strength as it does the rain. He will be called upon for every sacrifice” (9). In this sense, whoever takes the post must be able to contend with the land, and also to assimilate with what it can provide. We will see that those who fail to do so—like those who live too verdantly in this desert landscape—are brutally punished. There is a didactic and fable-like quality to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and the novel will show us examples of ways not to live as a missionary priest. Latour tracks failures to assimilate well with the demands of the land and the space.

### **III. The Depth of a Tri-Cultural Landscape**

The novel is imbued with a number of poor examples of behavior—cautionary tales—for anyone attempting to settle a Bishopric in the new territory. In this prologue, (the significance of which is heightened by virtue of its placement at the beginning of the novel) Cather gives us our first instance: the Cardinal from Spain who reveals himself to be both self serving and astoundingly ignorant of and racist towards the Native population of New Mexico. The Cardinal hijacks the conversation with a tale about an old portrait of St. Francis that his grandfather grudgingly gave to a Franciscan missionary who lived in this now annexed territory. He wishes to recover the painting because, after all, “what would St. Francis, of almost feminine beauty, mean to the scalp-takers?” (11-12). He imagines that it may still be hidden away in some

“crumbling sacristy” or “smoky wigwam” (12). We see the cultural fissures in the Cardinal’s speech—he has a good deal of trouble conceptualizing what meaning a Native American could ever intuit in the “feminine” saint, St. Francis. Here Cather is also introducing the misconceptions about Native Americans that get introduced through American popular culture.

This character is disliked by Ferrand for his inability to see beyond racist and romanticized caricatures. Father Ferrand corrects the Cardinal’s description of the Native dwellings, saying that the Indians “down there” do not dwell in wigwams, to which the Cardinal replies that “I see your redskins through Fenimore Cooper, and I like them so” (12). Father Ferrand is irritated by the Cardinal’s narrow and sensationalist view of this western space, and seems to roll his eyes at his incorrect knowledge of Native American dwellings in the area. The Cardinal supports a colonialist vision, believing that American Indians have no religion and furthermore that they lack an understanding of fine art.

Cather goes so much further in her dealings with cultural layers and interactions on the land in this novel than she did in *My Ántonia*. By showing us this unflattering and uninformed attitude in the beginning, I wonder if she is trying to debunk and re-map these commonly held stereotypes and colonialist rhetoric. Thus it is early on that we learn that to have knowledge of the land and of those who inhabit it is something to be venerated, while ignorance is not tolerated. In this way, I should point out, she does something so different from her work *My Ántonia*. It is almost as if she endeavors to correct some cultural oversights that are allowed to infuse the readers’ understanding of the southwest landscape, here finally giving us a glimpse into the presences that we lacked and wondered about in her Nebraska novel. She gives us yet another example of a western landscape with European and Native contenders—but this time, more space and voice is given to Native populations.

Cather is not doing the shallow digging and excavation that she performs on the Nebraska space in *My Ántonia*—here she is scaling up and down hoodoo and chimneys staring down into the canyons, looking up at the highest mesas and down into arroyos. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* we have a complicated, deeper view of cultural space.

Cather “un-makes” the flat land. In the early pages of the novel the Cardinal speaks of “un-making” to the Bishop, saying, “You are *distract*, Father Ferrand. Are you wishing to unmake your new Bishop already? It is too late. Jean Marie Latour—am I right?” (14) The use of the word un-make cannot be overemphasized. It is related to issues of refinement, and it connotes a backwards motion. What can we expect from the novel, having heard such a thing as this? What kind of making or unmaking is going to ensue? And whose unmaking will it be—the Bishop’s or the land’s? Bishop Latour will think to himself upon arrival that his proposed “problem” in the New Mexican space is how to “recover” a Bishopric. I pose that “unmake” and “recover” have dual meaning.

#### **IV. My Mapping Project**

In this chapter I argue about the presence and meaning of a vertical landscape as opposed to the horizontal one from *My Ántonia*. The New Mexican landscape is one of the most diverse in the United States. It is home to the Rio Grande rift, whose presence, along with the dry air that blows in from the west coast, makes for one of the most complex grouping of geological structures to exist together in one place. There are deserts, active volcanoes, mountain ranges, arroyos, caverns, and canyons all within close proximity. The exposed sandstone of the mesas and hoodoos are oftentimes up to a billion years old. I want to focus on the vertical structure of the hoodoo as a way of explaining my methodology moving forward in examining *Death Comes*

*for the Archbishop.* Hoodoos are extremely tall and relatively thin spires or chimneys of rock that often have their base in an arid drainage basin. They are created by a combination of geological jointing and erosion, and their seemingly precarious shape is preserved because they typically consist of soft rock topped by harder rocks. They are stunning to view, as their many layers of strata—sandstones stained all kinds of red and orange by iron deposits and hematite minerals—that make up their lengthy structures are strikingly visible. In this sense, the unfathomably old geologic history of the structure is laid bare for all to see. The same is true of mesas and canyons, of course, whose strata reveal countless years of life.

Bishop Latour will at times bemoan the terrifying aspect of this intensely vertical landscape when he arrives in Santa Fé. As he travels through the intense vertical terrain of New Mexico he will often find himself at the mercy of its many crags and steep places. In the meeting described above between the three Cardinals and the missionary Bishop, Father Ferrand warns that whoever should take the new post of Bishop of New Mexico will have to contend first and foremost with the land, and secondly, with its poly-cultural presences. The appointee will have to contend with the supposed violence of the Mexicans and Native Americans, now with added confusion of the Americans and other European representatives. In the meeting at Rome the missionary Bishop paints a picture of the way in which the different cultures in the territory interact with one another, and how these crossovers will present a challenge for the new appointee. “Some thirty Indian nations,” Ferrand notes, “each with its own customs and language, many of them fiercely hostile to each other. And the Mexicans, a naturally devout people. Untaught and unsheperded, they cling to the faith of their fathers” (8).

It is for this reason that I want to circle back to the hoodoo’s many stata as a way of thinking about the people who belong and came to belong on this land. I want to think about

each strata as representing a layer of cultural history—Native Americans and Mexicans, Spaniards, the Americans, and most recently the new Bishop Latour and his church. I furthermore would like to posit that one of the more terrifying things about the landscape is the high level of knowing and visibility that one can have as they read the land. Latour gazes out into his territory and can see the (often messy or confusing) overlapping of cultures, and in all of this, his job is to organize it. As Ferrand prescribes, a Frenchman would do best, as they are known as being the “great organizers” and have “a sense of proportion and rational adjustment” (9). I want to evaluate Latour’s job as an organizer—to track his progress and thinking regarding his organizational mission—and to use this to make the claim that Cather rethinks her mapping of space in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather has three ways of mapping. The first is to map space as “empty” for the sake of Christian and European world-making. The second is to see space as unnaturally transformed by the previous colonial efforts of the Spanish. The third is to see space as native and geological—to truly keep in mind its history, broadly.

**a. “The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape”**

Bishop Latour is attuned to shape, climate, and landscape patterns. He is someone who is “sensitive to the shape of things” (18). In his first moments of the novel, he is lost and trying to find his way back to the trail that will take him on to Santa Fé. This is a difficult task, he notes, because this country is “crowded with features, all exactly alike” (17). He is struck by the vastness of the land that is filled with conical red hills that he decides look like Mexican ovens. Latour is essentially annoyed and puzzled by the repetition of these hills. His first impression of this place is that he’s found himself wandering in “some geometrical nightmare” (17).

I posit that his job is to discern the shape of this New Mexican space. His problem in this

vast space is “how to recover a Bishopric” (20). There is something in the word “recover”—to go over, to cover again, that connotes the presence of layers. And it’s not that he’s creating something here, he’s going over, passing over, running his hand over, something that has already happened. He thinks to himself that “New Mexico lay in the middle of a dark continent” (20)—a place obscured in his mind, and clouded by the shapes and features he sees in the landscape in front of him—these hills that crowd his way that are unknowable and unreadable to him. The image of New Mexico as a “dark continent” brings to mind Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, in which the Congo, which covers the center of Africa, is described continuously as dark in conception and in character. In both novels, we open with a colonizer en route to a territory that he considers to be savage, in need of organizing, needing to be read and categorized, civilized.

“Recover” can mean two things: to repossess, to find something that has been lost. In Latour’s case, to dig down into the earth and reach for what he is searching for—the way to have a church, to live as a church in the new world. In another sense, to re-cover is to write over, to add a layer. I posit that Latour does both of these things.

In the chapter entitled “The Mass at Ácoma,” we learn that in the Bishop’s first year overseeing his diocese, he actually stayed rooted in Santa Fé for a mere four months. The remaining time is spent travelling, usually over treacherous landscapes in order to solve an issue in a far off parish. This gives Cather the opportunity to map the larger territory for her readers. One of his first trips takes him to the Ácoma pueblo. He takes his guide, Jacinto, with him, without whom he couldn’t manage to navigate the space. The journey is his introduction to the mesa landscape, and it’s unlike anything he’s seen prior. Latour remarks that,

This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with

all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape. (94-95)

This is neither the first nor the last time that Father Latour will refer to this landscape as empty, unfinished, unmade, or belonging to the most ancient past. As the pair of travelers ascends “the rock,” as Latour refers to the mesa, he thinks to himself that “the first Creation morning might have looked like this, when the dry land was first drawn up out of the deep, and all was confusion” (99). Later, at mass with the Ácomas, he notes that though they are situated high up on the mesa plain, “he felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures; for types of life so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells, that the sacrifice on Calvary could hardly reach back so far” (100). Karen E. Ramirez writes about a “nationalistic spatial understanding of western geography as empty space” as “one form of mapping that Cather draws on and responds to” in her literature (Ramirez 97). Though Ramirez speaks about a nationalistic rendering of the west as empty space (the Frontier Thesis comes to mind) we have a similar view espoused by the French bishop, who looks upon the New Mexican territory and sees something empty and incomplete, in need of his organizational powers.

We must give Latour some amount of credit, though. For all of the emptiness and antiquity of this landscape, he both has the desire to *know* and read it as it is, and he displays an early understanding that New Mexico is home to incredibly diverse groups of American Indians:

His great diocese was still an unimaginable mystery to him. He was eager to be abroad in it, to know his people; to escape for a little from the cares of building and founding, and to go westward among the old isolated Indian missions; Santo Domingo, breeder of



horses; Isleta, whitened with gypsum; Laguna, of wide pastures; and finally, cloud-set  
Ácoma. (81)

Latour will show a willingness to understand and learn from both the practices of old parish  
priests as well as from all of the American Indian groups mentioned above.

After mass he retreats to his loggia for the night, and looking down on the pueblo he feels  
that he was on a “naked rock in the desert, in the stone age.” This feeling prompts a  
homesickness “for his own epoch”—Latour feels his distance from France not only in miles but  
in time, in epochs. He longs for “European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams.”  
Furthermore, he notes that while his people had been “changing like the sky at daybreak” for  
centuries, “this people” had “been fixed, increasing neither in numbers nor desires, rock-turtles  
on their rock. Something reptilian he felt here, something that had endured by immobility, a kind  
of life out of reach, like the crustaceans in their armour” (103). Earlier on this journey, Latour  
observes to himself a “strange literalness” to Indian life. This deep layer in the land makes him  
uncomfortable.

His thoughts here connect back to his earlier reflections that the Ácomas are people who  
“share the universal human yearning for something permanent, enduring, without shadow of  
change,—they had their idea in substance” (98). The fact that the Ácomas still live and die on  
this rock suggests an “element of exaggeration” in their culture (98). Their religious practices  
speak to their behavior towards the land, and vice-versa. The fact that Latour can see evidence of  
the Ácoma people having existed in this spot for so long is disconcerting to him.

**b. Latour's second layer: "it is better not to go against nature"**

Max Despain thinks of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a novel principally concerned with Bishop Latour's reach towards creative genius in the New Mexican space. He notes that, as in *My Ántonia*, Cather writes the New Mexican landscape as an unfinished one ("the mesa plain has an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together" (Despain 166)). The unfinished quality of the land leaves room for Latour to enter the space with his European influence. He brings all the materials set down from world-making to fruiting in his building of the cathedral. However, "before he can conceive of his own cathedral, he must first experience the Spaniards' previous attempt at influencing an indigenous community through construction and then a Native American example of a holy shrine" (166). Latour's journey in the novel, he writes, is to learn from the people and practices already set in place on the land so that he can to the best of his ability carve out his own space. I argue that Latour does not observe with the objective of carving out a space for himself. Rather, he passes through these different parishes often to correct and critique the priests' leadership style, but more so to learn how one should interact with the land.

The New Mexican space is worked by Spanish priests and parishes, and Latour's job is to correct their disorganized ways. There's a sense in the novel that the Spanish have done everything wrong—that they have exploited the land and the people, and have done so incorrectly. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* can thus be read as a string of cautionary tales that anyone planning to lead a parish in the New Mexican territory should hear in order to protect against the chances of making some horrible errors. One such tale is that of the Spanish priest, Friar Baltazar Montoya, the former priest of the Ácoma pueblo. He comes from a time in which

the “missionaries had come to take the place of the martyrs” (Cather 103). He is described as being of “a tyrannical and overbearing disposition and bore a hard hand on the natives. All the missions now in ruins were active then, each had its resident priest, who lived for the people or upon the people, according to his nature” (103-4). We see the choice in the language here—that a priest can live for or upon the people he’s meant to serve. Baltazar, we will see, is an example of living “upon” the people.

Cather presents a list of all the things that Baltazar does wrong, among them, exploitation of the land and its people. His first misstep is his belief that “the pueblo of Ácoma existed chiefly to support its fine church” and that this should be “the pride of the Indians as it was his” (104). He takes frequently from the community—using all the best corn, beans, and squash, and selects the best parts of the slaughtered sheep for himself. Additionally, he uses the best hides to carpet his home. Perhaps most importantly, he heavily exploits the labor of the pueblo people: “He was never done with having earth carried up from the plain in baskets” and made women carry water up to his garden daily to nourish the excessively and uncommonly verdant courtyard garden that he fostered; “Each woman owed the Padre so many *ollas* of water a week from the cisterns, and they murmured not only because of the labour, but because of the drain on the water supply” (104). He takes fertilizer for his garden from the corrals. He uses all of the pueblo’s people and resources for the benefit of his garden, and his own comfort. He did nearly everything “on behalf of his mission and his garden” (104). He travels far to procure the best peach seeds and grape cuttings. Seeds of all kinds, the narrator provides, would not have been commonly used by the Indians and Mexicans—they were satisfied with their “beans and squashes and chili, asking nothing more” (105).

“He took a great deal of trouble to make himself comfortable upon that rock at the end of

the world” (105). Here, the narrator’s voice interjects to agree with what we’ve been hearing from Latour and Vaillant, and Cather shows this garden, not in an ecopastoral mode like we might expect, but as a site of exploitation and the ecogothic. Ácoma can be characterized primarily by its rock-like stubbornness and its “antediluvian” quality—it’s at the very edge of the world, the edge of existence. Rather than travelling himself in service of his garden, the Friar sends his young assistants to Zuñi, Santa Fé, the Sandia mountains, and Bernalillo to procure the best seeds—all quite far from Ácoma. He “watched over his garden like a little kingdom” (106).

All the while, the Ácoma people begrudge the Friar for his frivolities, and were “sometimes at the point of revolt” (107). They resist deposing him because he is in possession of an old painting of St. Joseph that is supposed to bring rain to the people who venerate it. Because the Laguna and Zuñi people are suffering from intense bouts of drought, they want continued access to the painting. The Ácoma are afraid that without the painting they will suffer the same fate.

Balthazar lives in a kind of domestic bliss, and wants people (read: his European counterparts) to admire his garden, his ingenious cooking, and his decorated home, rather than sharing with the inhabitants of the pueblo. He invites the Padres from Isleta, Laguna, and Zuñi to come to his loggia. He serves them a very lavish and practiced meal, and opens the blinds just enough so that just a bit of the desert heat and sunlight are permitted to come through. The serving boy, distracted by the priest’s conversation, accidentally spills a full platter of gravy all over the Padre from Zuñi. Consequently, Baltazar hurls a pewter mug at the side of the boy’s head, and he dies instantly from the blow. What happens next is a quiet marvel. The visiting priests, without saying a word, flee the scene with “remarkable speed,” leaving Baltazar to manage the consequences of his “haste” (110). He thinks for a moment about fleeing the scene

himself, but decides against it, as his garden is doing so well, and he wants to continue to see it flourish. He walks up to his loggia, described as birdcage, and notes the eerie quietness of the pueblo below. He remembers the stories from the great rebellion of 1680, and realizing that there is now a guard stationed at the trailhead, wishes that he were “anywhere in the world but on this rock” (112).

He watches “with horror” as the moon rises, noting that “the moon was the clock which began things in the pueblo” (112). When the moon fully emerges, the Ácoma people do exactly what Fray Baltazar fears—they silently climb surround the rock up to the cloister, and appear at his loggia. Without speaking to him, they bind his arms and feet and carry him across the rock to the “most precipitous cliff” and it is here that they “cut his bonds, and taking his hands and feet, swung him out over the rock-edge and back a few times. . . . No sound but hissing breath came through his teeth. The four executioners took him up again from the brink where they had laid him, and, after a few feints, dropped him in mid-air” (113). Baltazar does not once struggle throughout his execution process, and this is because “he knew the Indians, and that when once they had collectively made up their pueblo mind. . . .” (113). This phrase indicates the same sense of prejudice and stubbornness that is alluded to in previously mentioned passages about the “rock” at the end of the world that is Ácoma. Fray Baltazar can exploit these labourers all he wants, but when they reach their tipping point, they become a force to reckoned with, being so completely unified. There is a sturdiness to his description of them. Funnily, the narrator adds at the end of this tale, “So did they rid their rock of their tyrant, whom on the whole they had liked very well. But everything has its day” (113). The underlying assumption here is that the Ácoma people are of one mind; while they can put up with some modicum of disrespect and exploitation, they have a barometer that, when it reads too high, will systematically eliminate the

threat.

After his death, “The women. . . .took pleasure in watching the garden pine and waste away from thirst, and ventured into the cloisters to laugh and chatter at the whitening foliage of the peach trees, and the green grapes shriveling on the vines” (114). The next priest, a Mexican, meets no resistance or animosity when he arrives at the parish. He is a man of unpretentious tastes, and is happy to eat the jerked meats and beans, to let the turkeys tread all over Baltazar’s old garden. The incredibly lush, pastoral space of this enclosed garden becomes ecogothic: sparse, tinged with death and exploitation, dead itself, wasted away. But this is how it should be, its natural state, one could argue, in this desert climate. The Mexican priest who follows Baltazar puts everything back into its natural state by allowing such wasting away to occur, being satisfied with the climate and the diet that one who lives in Ácoma must come to terms with if they wish to truly live alongside the people and in accordance with the demands of the land. We now have an understanding of what disaster can ensue from exploitation.

With this in mind, Latour travels to Albuquerque to see another Friar—Father Martinez. Little of the action in this novel takes place in Santa Fé—Latour spends most of his time travelling, usually to remedy the mistakes of parish priests who have been left unsupervised too long. Padre Martinez supplies Bishop Latour with adequate trouble. As a result of his self-profiting behavior, he causes unrest in and around his church—in one instance practically causing the deaths of numerous American Indians who had deeded the Padre their land. When we are introduced to him in the novel, we learn that he now cultivates that ill-gotten land and as a result has become one of the richest priests in the diocese. We understand immediately upon hearing of him that he is corrupt, and Latour’s attitude toward him is akin to that of a troublesome and unruly young child. Latour shows a rather severe modicum of disgust with

Martinez's appearance.

I want to draw attention to the ways that Latour's description of Martinez's face is infused with descriptors that might in turn be used to articulate certain features of the landscape—the New Mexican landscape specifically, and how these features disgust Latour. His “high, narrow” forehead reminds readers of the immense verticality of the cliff faces along which Latour and Jacinto must travel to reach Martinez. The aforementioned phrase, when attached to the landscape, indicates danger. Martinez's eyes that are a “brilliant yellow”—and here we might think of the intense heat of the sun on the sandy, rocky terrain. His eyes have “strong arches,” “full, floral” with few “blank areas” (“as in Anglo-Saxon faces”). “Arches” contrasts with “full” and “floral,” which harken back to the garden that Martinez grows on his stolen land, as well as the lush, enclosed, horrible, space of Friar Baltazar's garden—too lush and extravagant for its own good. His face, rather, is full of “muscular activity” and is “quick” to change with passion and feeling, which is perhaps the most obvious connection between Martinez's looks and the quality of the land, lest we forget the land that in Cather novels, is ever “full of motion” (*MÁ* 11). His mouth, Latour goes on, was “the very assertion of violent, uncurbed passions and tyrannical self-will” and his lips “thrust out and taut, like the flesh of animals distended by fear and desire” (*DCA* 140-141). These two final qualities are frightening ones to possess, and one fears immediately for Martinez's fate—the possession of “uncurbed passion” and “self-will” on this landscape, the novel teaches us, is extremely dangerous (again, we must remember Baltazar's failure to temper his passions well enough to live safely within his pueblo). In a sense, Martinez's face is a map of this landscape that represents on one hand, assimilation, and on the other, the horror with which he confronts many of the New Mexican land's most iconic structures.

Latour considers Martinez to be a symbol of a facet of the land's character that is dying out; "Father Latour judged that the day of lawless personal power was almost over, even on the frontier, and this figure was to him already something picturesque and impressive, but really impotent, left over from the past" (141). Martinez, for certain, is endangered by his seemingly limitless power over those within the confines of his parish, and Latour seems to know that this is not the way of the future. He sees Martinez as a picturesque "relic," a completely burdensome member of the church, who endangers both those he is meant to serve as well as himself.

Attention to carnal matters by parish priests is a mark of exploitation and trouble in this novel, which is why it is worrisome that, as they have an extravagant dinner, Martinez wants to discuss whether celibacy is truly necessary to those in the priestly profession. Latour's response is simply that this matter has been figured out centuries ago. Martinez is a bit indulgent here, but makes an interesting point: "St. Augustine himself says that it is better not to go against nature" (145). When Latour asks him from which passages of Augustine's writing he has concluded such things, Martinez responds that he doesn't have them handy, but is sure that Augustine once indicated such a thing.

Martinez's warning that it is better not to go against nature augments its meaning in this next passage, where he warns Latour that,

Nature has got the start of you here. But for all that, our native priests are more devout than your French Jesuits. We have a living Church here, not a dead arm of the European Church. Our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots. We pay a filial respect to the person for the person of the Holy Father, but Rome has no authority here. We do not require aid from the Propaganda, and we resent its interference. The Church the Franciscan Fathers planted here was cut off; this is the second growth, and is indigenous.



Our people are the most devout left in the world. If you blast their faith by European formalities, they will become infidels and profligates” (147).

Here, Martinez explicitly depicts the same layers that I am trying to track. But rather than describing them as layers, he speaks in a language of vines and gardens. He supposes that there was once a time when the Europeans had control here, but that their way of doing things (as it was not in accordance with the land, or with nature) was rejected and withered away. There is a new religion that will prosper, and it is “indigenous” (147). He brings this oldest indigenous layer up to the forefront, and proclaims that it is the way of the future. He warns further that, “If you try to introduce European civilization here and change our old ways, to interfere with the secret dances of our Indians, let us say, or abolish the bloody rites of the Penitentes, I foretell an early death for you” (147). He tells Latour to study native religion, and speaks against trying to impose any French fashions here. One colonizer to another, he says, “You are among barbarous people, my Frenchman, between two savage races. The dark things forbidden by your Church are a part of Indian religion,” a very unsettling remark that becomes complicated by the generally good advice to watch and learn the ways of the people who have belonged to the New Mexican space much longer (147).

### **c. “That hill, *Blanchet*, is my Cathedral”**

This section is a reading of the lowest, deepest layer of the landscape. In the second chapter of Book VI, entitled “Stone Lips,” Father Latour and Jacinto struggle on their way to retrieve a sick Father Vaillant as an intense snowstorm meets them in their path; “The wind was like a hurricane at sea, and the air became blind with snow.” Every marker on the land is “obliterated” (125). Jacinto, who knows the land, gets them out of their trouble due to his

knowledge of a cavern tucked into an overhanging wall of rock. Jacinto locates the cave's opening, which is described as having "two rounded ledges, one directly over the other, with a mouthlike opening between. They suggested two great stone lips, slightly parted and thrust outward" (126). David Porter in his book *On the Divide*, in addition to other critics, comments on the explicitly obvious feminine rendering of this enclosure. In a landscape that is mostly described as having masculine associations (obvious both in the fact that there are very few appearances by female characters, and general attributes of stubbornness, sturdiness, and permanence that the space has) this obviously female association with their place of shelter stands out. Notably, this shelter is ultimately horrifying to Bishop Latour. Out loud, he says to Jacinto, "it is terrible" (130).

The cave is enclosed space, native space, vertical space, and gothic space all in one. Jacinto feels worried about having brought Latour here, as it is meant to serve as a space for ceremonies that should remain unknown to those outside of his tribe. In this sense, the space is unreadable to Latour. He asks that Latour forget everything about it once they've departed, and Latour is more than eager to comply. He leads Latour through the "orifice, into the throat" of the cave (127). The cave is "lofty" and shaped somewhat like a "Gothic chapel" and there's a very "narrow aperture" through which only slivers of light can come through. The narrator writes that though Latour was in such dire need of shelter, he nonetheless meets the cave with an "extreme distaste," "the air in the cave was glacial, penetrated to the very bones, and he detected at once a fetid odour" (127). Here we have a direct mention of the gothic interspersed with the discomfort of the enclosed vertical space. This is an ecogothic landscape for Latour.

While Latour rests, Jacinto busies himself attempting to patch up the "orifice" located high on the cave wall, seeming to lead to another cavern room. He takes stones, pieces of wood,

and earth to close the opening completely, “without comment or explanation” to Latour (129). The Bishop, curious about Jacinto’s behavior but choosing not to ask a question, hopes to examine the orifice in the middle of the night while his guide sleeps, but Jacinto guards it all night long. There are some things that Latour simply cannot access because this kind of space, ancient and enclosed, is not his inheritance. Here, Latour takes a hands-off approach to this space—we see him realize that, though he has curiosity and fear, he knows that it’s not his place to know this space’s history and significance.

As they’re going to sleep, Latour “perceived an extraordinary vibration in this cavern; it hummed like a hive of bees, like a heavy roll of distant drums” (129). Jacinto leads him into the back cavern of the mountain when Latour asks about the noises. Jacinto bends down over a “fissure” on the stone floor, “like a crack in china” (129). Latour leans his ear against it, and

He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power. (130)

The magnitude of this image is striking. Like the cavern itself, it is cast as a vertical and deep space—so vastly deep and old that it predates the famous flood of the Old Testament. Latour knows that he is listening to something older than he can fathom, a phenomenon that has existed long before anyone dwelled on this land in the first place. In retrospect, Latour remembers the storm that led Jacinto and himself into the cave with a kind of “tingling sense of pleasure,” perhaps pride, while he remembers the cave itself “with horror” (133).

This instance serves as an instructional moment for Latour in which he comes to

understand with horror the depth of the land and its inaccessibility (to him), and I want to address a kind of foil example of an experience that Father Vaillant has before he goes out to Colorado to “hunt for Catholics” (206). Father Vaillant’s encounter with his own cave gestures back to the imperial Spanish layer of history—of mission churches and religious colonialism. This is what he ultimately sees in the land, and it is how he decides to move forward. As he breaks the news of his departure to Father Latour, he describes his entrance into the cave, saying,

Down near Tuscan a Prima Indian convert once asked me to go off into the desert with him, as he had something to show me. He took me into a place so wild that a man less accustomed to these things might have mistrusted and feared for his life. We descended into a terrifying canyon of black rock, and there in the depths of a cave, he showed me a golden chalice, vestments and cruets, all the paraphernalia for celebrating Mass. His ancestors had hidden these sacred objects there when the mission was sacked by Apaches, he did not know how many generations ago. The secret had been handed down in his family, and I was the first priest who had ever come to restore to God his own. To me, that is the situation in a parable. The Faith, in that wild frontier, is like a buried treasure; they guard it, but they do not know how to use it to their soul’s salvation. A word, a prayer, a service, is all that is needed to set free those souls in bondage. I confess that I am covetous of that mission. I desire to be the man who restores these lost children to God. It will be the greatest happiness of my life. (207)

When Father Vaillant goes down into the cave (likewise described as “terrible”—the ecogothic presence persists!), he finds remnants and relics of Spanish inquisitorial religion, and it is inspiring to him. It tells him that he needs to go forward to symbolically excavate other such layers of history—to lift them out of the ground, to bring them to the light again. Vaillant want to

“restore God to his own,” to make right, to put things back in their place—perhaps the kind of organizing job for which Bishop Latour was intended. He expresses also the opinion that this is a job for him, a European priest, as the native peoples of this region “do not know how to use” the spiritual materials already inherent in their landscape. Again, Vaillant diverges course from Latour here, as we see Latour move continuously towards a non-interference approach. If we recall his thoughts on Jacinto, that, “he didn’t think it polite” to question him on his thoughts and beliefs, as “There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him” (92). When Latour finds the perfect place to build his cathedral, he will espouse a similar view.

Fathers Vaillant and Latour go out riding down into the Rio Grande valley, lowering themselves into the foot of the Sandias. They come upon the western edge of the ridge, and notice that the “western face of the earth had been scooped away, exposing a rugged wall of rock—not green like the surrounding hills, but yellow, a strong golden ochre, very much like the gold of the sunlight that was now beating upon it” (239). Latour marvels over the color of the rock, noting that in all of his years on this landscape he has not seen a feature of the landscape that he marvels at as much as this one. He handles the rock like it’s sacred, and after a moment of pause, declares to Vaillant, “That hill, *Blanchet*, is my Cathedral” (239). Latour does not say that this hill *will be* his cathedral, rather, it already is. When Latour arrives in New Mexico, he reflects that it seems as though all the materials for world-making exist in the land, but they are simply not assembled, not actually made into anything yet—and we understand that he might see it as his job to do the making and the organizing—that he will be the one to bring significance into the space. But here, he shows us that, inherent in the land *is* the cathedral. He actually has no

work to do, and he gives back to the land its natural power. Latour rethinks his mission, and diverges from the path of exploitation exemplified by the Spanish. He accepts the spiritual landscape and the natural environment.

In his thinking about the construction of the Cathedral, Latour does make certain admittances, for example, that this space reminds him of home, that he “can almost feel the Rhone behind [him]” when he looks up at the rock (239). His wish to construct this church is mixed up with the same feelings of nostalgia for home that are so abundant in *My Ántonia*, espoused by the Shimerda family, for whom the Nebraska landscape brings a longing for Bohemia. Latour plans to bring in a French architect to build a “the first Romanesque church in the New World” (241). He wishes to merge his own aesthetic with the one that exists on the land already, essentially doing what Demaree C. Peck asserts that he does—to make something that asserts his creative genius over the land: “we can understand the Archbishop’s spiritual conversion of others in the name of the church as a disguised expression of an imaginative assimilation of others in the name of the self” (Peck 219). While this thought certainly deserves consideration, I’d like to depart from it by bringing in one more example of Bishop Latour’s understanding that “it was the white man’s way to assert himself in any landscape, make it over a little,” but that he makes steps towards distancing himself from this type of assertion. Latour does not bring the vision of this cathedral to fruition, and accepts that the hill is simply the cathedral.

Instead of a European cathedral, Bishop Latour, near the end of his life, lives in a Navajo dwelling called a Hogan. Hogans can be round or conical structures—they are wooden with mud packed around the outside to keep the inside cool. They are somewhat comparable to the sod houses on the Nebraska plains in *My Ántonia*. He does not contract a more western dwelling for

himself like the Americans on the prairie do; actually, he quite disdains “those horrible structures they are putting up in the Ohio cities” (240). Guy Reynolds, in his article, “Modernist Space: Willa Cather’s Environmental Imagination in Context,” aligns Cather’s architectural ethos with Frank Lloyd Wright, who believed that “buildings [should] all take on, in endless variety, the nature and character of the ground on which they would stand and, thus inspired, become component parts” (Reynolds). Bishop Latour finds his Navajo dwelling “favorable for reflection, for recalling the past and planning for the future,”

The hogan was isolated like a ship’s cabin on the ocean, with the murmuring of great winds about it. There was no opening except for the door, always open, and the air without had the turbid yellow light of sand-storms. All day long the sand came in through the cracks in walls and formed little ridges on the earth floor. It rattled like sleet upon the dead leaves of the tree-branch roof. This house was so frail a shelter that one seemed to be sitting in the heart of a world made of dusty earth and moving air. (229)

Here is an image of an inside structure that is hardly separate from the outdoors—the sands blow in and out of it, making it fluid and consisting of new materials all the time. It is like a ship’s cabin on the ocean, a phrase that brings to mind the many images of the antediluvian flood, and the feeling that to be in New Mexico is to be at the bottom of ocean, at the beginning of time. In this home Latour feels all the depth of the landscape, its deepest, Native layer, or even its geological layer. Latour’s feelings here also bring to light Patrick K. Dooley’s term, “theocentrism,” Cather’s type of environmental ethics that embodies a sense of futurism—the idea that the “future delimits the present and defines the past” (Dooley 74). A futurist thinker will view the past, present, and future, as having much to do with one another—it’s a cyclical way of thinking, in line with T.S. Eliot’s meditations on time in *Four Quartets*.

As *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Latour's life come to a close, we hear more and more about Latour's reflections on the "middle years" of his appointment to the diocese which, at this point has become an Archdiocese. The placement of the story of his middle life at the end of the novel once again asserts a cyclical and futurist line of thinking. However, the issue that occupies these years is the expulsion of the Navajo people from their own country. Though Latour does not mention it by its historical name, he refers to the "Long Walk of the Navajo" which occurred in 1864, and was the process by which the Navajo people were removed from their territory in what is now Arizona and made to cross the Rio Grande River into eastern New Mexico. The Long Walk was an attempt at deportation and ethnic cleansing. Bishop Latour becomes occupied with this situation due to his friendship with Eusabio (of whom Latour says, "Travelling with Eusabio was like travelling with the landscape made human" (232)). And because "he had become interested in the Navajos soon after he first came to his new diocese, and he admired them; they stirred his imagination" (290). He felt "a superior strength in them," they had purpose and a steadfast quality—something "active and quick, something with an edge" (290). Because of these qualities, and because the land from which they were forced to leave had been theirs "no man knew how long," it seemed the greatest injustice to Father Latour.

Latour's friend, the Navajo Chieftain Manuelito, pleads to Latour that he should go to Washington to make the Navajo case to the government officials, to which Latour replies that as a Catholic in a Protestant country, he has no voice with the people in Washington. He has a similar hands-off approach to interference in this political affair as he does to the idea of asserting himself too much on the land. For his part, Manuelito explains that,

They asked nothing of the Government, he told Father Latour, but their religion, and their own land where they had lived from immemorial times. Their country, he explained, was



a part of their religion; the two were inseparable. The Canyon de Chelly the Padre knew; in that canyon his people had lived when they were a small weak tribe; it had nourished and protected them; it was their mother. Moreover, their gods dwelt there—in those inaccessible white houses set in caverns up in the face of the cliffs, which were older than the white man’s world, and which no living man had ever entered. Their gods were there, just as the Padre’s God was in his church. (293)

Manuelito makes a point about the inseparable nature of spirituality from the land that we know Father Latour must understand to some degree when he asserts earlier that “that hill . . . is my Cathedral” (239). They share an environmental ethic that promises that the land is full already with a history that includes religious and spiritual importance. The language in this passage suggests Latour’s understanding of the fact that it’s not necessarily important that he (and the white men of the passage) come to see God in the land in the same way that the Native peoples are described as seeing God here. It is more of a respectful acknowledgement of difference—that what one person finds in the land the other will see in the gothic nave of a cathedral.

Latour emphasizes such a difference once more when he speaks of Shiprock, a crag formation near Canyon de Chelly, and how it came to be regarded by white explorers as compared to Native peoples. It is almost a dual creation tale, where Latour explains the way that white people name and describe history as compared to the Navajo, and casts the latter worldview as one that is embedded in the depth of land itself:

North of the Canyon de Chelly was the Shiprock, a slender crag rising to a dizzy height, all alone out on a flat desert. Seen at a distance of fifty miles or so, that crag presents the figure of a one-masted fishing boat under full sail, and the white man named it accordingly. But the Indian has another name; he believes that rock was once a ship of

the air. Ages ago Manuelito told the Bishop, that crag had moved through the air, bearing upon its summit the parents of the Navajo race from the place in the far north where all peoples were made,—and wherever it sank to earth was to be their land. It sank in a desert country, where it was hard for men to live. But they had found the Canyon de Chelly, where there was shelter and unfailing water. The canyon and the Shiprock were like kind parents to his people, places more sacred to them than churches, more sacred than any place is to the white man. How, then, could they go three hundred miles away and live in a strange land? (293)

Though I've been speaking of verticality in terms of layers that are deep in the ground, here, it reaches beyond those bounds and into the air. The origin story of the Navajo people is that this incredibly lengthy structure was once suspended in the air, and sunk down deep to found the Navajo presence in the region. This story shows us the kind of timeline we're working with when we talk about Native history—one that begins before certain formations were even present on the landscape.

This story that Latour tells to us at the end of his life, ends happily. “An unforeseen thing happened,” he tells, and the Government in Washington admits its mistake. After five years of exile, the Navajo are permitted to return to their sacred land (294). In the final pages of the novel, Latour reflects that “God has been very good to let me live to see a happy issue to those old wrongs. I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him” (295-6). He associates positively with the Navajo all of the sturdiness that he once spoke about in regards to the *Ácoma*. But with the *Ácoma*, he indicated a sense of puzzlement, fear, and mystery with their immobility—they are described in reptilian terms, like turtles upon their rock, never moving, never changing. Here, the same quality of duration and persistence is

praised, and furthermore, hoped for.

Cather re-envisioned the reality of Native American history that is important and everlasting onto the Southwest landscape in *Death Comes to the Archbishop*. She goes far beyond tourism and the “Indian-detour,” in her writing of a character whose purpose on the land ends up being to listen and watch for the layers of history present in the landscape. Cather advocates for a deep understanding of diverse, Native culture, and promotes a respectful way of being on the land.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barillas, William. "Placelessness against Place: Willa Cather's Nebraska Novels." *Midwestern Miscellany*, vol. 19, 1991, pp. 20–28.
- Cather, Willa. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Vintage Classics Edition. 1927. Print.
- Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1994. Print.
- Collins, Rachel. "'Where All the Ground Is Friendly': Subterranean Living and the Ethic of Cultivation in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 43–61.
- Dillman, Richard. "Imagining the Land: Five Versions of the Landscape in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Heritage of the Great Plains* Vol. 22, Issue 3. Pages 30-35. June 1989.
- Despain, Max. "Creative Genius: Willa Cather's Characters and the Influence of the American Desert Southwest." *Southwestern Literature*, edited by William Brannon, Salem; Grey House, 2015, pp. 158–171.
- Dooley, Patrick K. "Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." *Cather Studies*, vol. 5, 2003, pp. 64–76.
- Dooley, Patrick K. "Is Proselytizing Indigenous People an Act of Violence? Willa Cather's Missionaries in *Shadows on the Rock* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." *Cithara: Essays in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, vol. 46, no. 2, May 2007, pp. 25–34.
- Haas, Astrid. "Borderlands Identities and Borderlands Ideologies in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." *American Studies Journal*, vol. 57, 2012.
- Hirsch, Edward. *A Poet's Glossary*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.
- Hudek, Barry. "'That Obliterating Strangeness': The Prairie as Sublime Landscape in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational*

Foundation Newsletter and Review. Vol. 57 Issue 3. 2015 P. 28-33

Jones, Anne Goodwyn. "Displacing Dixie: The Southern Subtext in *My Ántonia*." *New Essays on My Ántonia*. Ed. Sharon O'Brien. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999 85-109

Lucenti, Lisa Marie. "Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*: Haunting the Houses of Memory." *Twentieth Century Literature* 46.2 (2000): 193-213

Miller, James E., Jr. "My Ántonia (Willa Cather): 'My Ántonia and the American Dream.'" *The American Dream*, edited by Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009, pp. 141–152.

Murfin, Ross C., and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2009.

Porter, David H. *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2008.

Rosowski, Susan J. "Willa Cather's Ecology of Place." *Western American Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1995, pp. 37–51.

Rosowski, Susan J. "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and A Lost Lady." *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, edited by William E. Mallory and Paul Simpson-Housley, Syracuse UP, 1987, pp. 81–94

Rosowski, Susan J. "Volume 5." WCA: Volume 5: *Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*, The University of Nebraska Press, [cather.unl.edu/cs005.html](http://cather.unl.edu/cs005.html).

Ross, Alex. "A Walk in Willa Cather's Prairie." *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker*, 4 Dec. 2018, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/02/a-walk-in-willa-cathers-prairie](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/02/a-walk-in-willa-cathers-prairie).

Rozelle, Lee. *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2006.

Steinhagen, Carol. "Dangerous Crossings: Historical Dimensions of Landscape in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the*

- Archbishop.” *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1999, pp. 63–82.
- Stout, Janis P. *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Austin and Cather*. Texas Tech University Press, Lubbock, 2007.
- Tally, Robert T., Jr, et al. *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2016.
- Wilhite, Keith. “Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2010, pp. 269–286.
- Wishart, David J. *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994.
- Woidat, Caroline M. “The Indian-Detour in Willa Cather’s Southwestern Novels.” *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2002, pp. 22–49.

## VITA

Anne Carter Stowe graduated from Sewanee: The University of the South in 2015 with a degree in English. She attended the University of Mississippi from 2016-2019 where she completed this thesis to receive an MA in English.