

## THE NATIVE AMERICAN VOICE IN WILLA CATHER'S *THE SONG OF THE LARK AND OTHER WRITINGS*

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Contrary to the prevailing criticism which generally ignores or dismisses her exposure to the Native American influence, Willa Cather was sensitive to the orality of Great Plains' minority groups. She was as responsive to, and curious about, Native American oral traditions as she was to those of the immigrant peoples, whose homes she often visited. In this article, I argue that Cather incorporated the story-telling strategies of indigenous peoples into her own work, with no intention of writing conventional historical novels.

### EARLY INFLUENCES

The early influences of the oral tradition on Cather range from exposure to the mountain story-tellers of her early years in Virginia to the narratives heard on the Divide, a small height of land between the Republican and Little Blue rivers. Cather's ready receptivity to story-telling made her empathetic to the legends of those Native Americans who had once inhabited her region and it sparked an interest in Indian cultures which culminated in her 1912 trip to Arizona; other trips to the Southwest would follow. These influences, coupled with her reading of clearly biased historical texts and essays, like Winchell's *Sketches of Creation* (1870)<sup>1</sup> and Taylor's *Between the Gates* (1888)<sup>2</sup> [from her private library]; Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* (1891)<sup>3</sup>; Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893)<sup>4</sup>; and Paxson's *The Last American Frontier* (1910)<sup>5</sup> shaped her fiction. They romanticized, to some degree, her accounts of native cultures and they tapped into the spiritual center of these cultures.

"In 1990," historian Gerald Nash writes, "Western historians number more than 2,000—compared to the two hundred or so of 1890."<sup>6</sup> The American historians of Cather's time, in the 1890s, viewed "humanity advancing on an irreversible path of progress, whereon tyranny inevitably gave way to freedom."<sup>7</sup> The Romantics shared this view of history, grounded in Hegelian logic, that "human history is the progress of reason. . . ."<sup>8</sup> As an adolescent, Cather likewise

shared this Hegelian view which she undoubtedly read in Alexander Winchell's *Sketches of Creation*, Book No. 42, in her private library.

In viewing her high school graduation speech of 1890 which begins "All human history is a record of an emigration, an exodus from barbarism to civilization,"<sup>9</sup> we observe the Winchell influence as well as the views of romantic historians of her age such as Bancroft, Motley, Prescott, and Parkman, whose works Woodress writes, "Cather must have known then at least by reputation."<sup>10</sup> Winchell's text, however intellectually stimulating it was for the young Cather, unfortunately patronizes and denigrates Native Americans. The opening line in Cather's graduation speech rings of such a view. Winchell writes, "the Esquimaux and the North American Indians generally are still in their Stone Age. The Age of Stone is simply the stage of infancy [akin to barbarism]."<sup>11</sup> The native cultures, therein, are reduced to a barbaric and savage status. They were given derogatory names by historians and the names stuck.

American historians of this period were aware of the power of naming and the type of being that naming conferred upon people; they used disparaging terms to persuade readers to their own views. These writers of histories were often university professors who were influential in shaping young minds like Cather's. Winchell, himself, was a University of Michigan professor, and, for the impressionable Cather, was credible enough to be believed.

More racist "digs" at minority groups persist in Benjamin Taylor's travel book *Between the Gates* (1888). The reader is taken on an American's journey from Chicago to California's Pacific coast. Taylor sprinkles his experiences in travel with sardonic wit, while quoting pedantically from Shakespeare and resorting to Latin phrases. Cather's love for both Shakespeare and Latin may have propelled her into adding Taylor's book to her private library, numbering it "Book 11." And the young girl's stereotypical view of Indians as savages was likely fostered by this book.

In his Chapter VII, Taylor belittles a Chinese laborer of San Francisco. The Chinese man is called, "John, the Heathen." John is portrayed as most historians portrayed the American Indian. Taylor writes:

John is a problem that never got into Euclid. We speak slightly of him, we despise his effeminate look, his insignificant stature, his [untucked] shirt, his slouch, and the three feet of heathenism in his black-hair [pony-tail]. . . . Somehow he had gotten into every crack and crevice of the Pacific Coast. Like an invasion of ants, he is everywhere under foot. He is born into this country, not one at a time, but five hundred at a birth.<sup>12</sup>

This xenophobic thinking echoes the words of one Indian fighter, whose memoirs were written in the *Webster Country Argus* newspaper on December 25, 1890. Cather likely would have read the account while home for Christmas break from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The *Argus* was one newspaper of five

that circulated in Red Cloud in the 1890s. Titled "Custer's Death Revenged," the article is laden with the horrific genocidal practices of General Harney on the Indians:

The soldiers had killed every buck Indian they could find, but spared the children. General Harney rode in among us shouting, "kill'em all, kill'em all, nits make lice." and his orders were literally obeyed.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Nebraska State Journal*, Cather wrote an article dated November 19, 1893, that reeks of a similar distaste toward minority groups. The Chinese man described in a patronizing fashion reflects Taylor's "John, the Heathen":

His queue hung down his back, and his wrinkled face was lifted toward the painted image, and his narrow eyes glittered bright and brown as beads of opium. There was a weirdness about him and his red deity that made one shudder. They are an unearthly people, these Chinamen who steal quietly about in our great cities, dressing and living as men did in the days of Noah. All other peoples at least affect the ways of civilization, but the son of the celestial land goes his own way among his own people. . . . [C]ivilization cannot reach him; . . . He is out [of] place in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

In 1893, Cather's view of certain minorities in the United States was demeaning and racially biased, but was not atypical for her day. This was the same year that saw the publication of Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner's "frontier hypothesis" explained the distinctive features of the nation's civilization; it refused to acknowledge the Old World's impact on the New; and it advocated an intellectual-American-isolationism that persisted as the accepted American history paradigm until the 1930s. The young Cather often sounded Turner's white-clitist words of 1893, "[T]he frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization."<sup>15</sup> Turner, not surprisingly, depicts the Indians as "savages" and the pioneers as those who are bringing "civilization" to the frontier. However, upon first meeting the wilderness, Turner believed, the pioneer may have to take on barbaric ways like those of the Indians:

The wilderness . . . takes from him the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. . . . Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.<sup>16</sup>

In the influential Parkman and Paxson histories, we find more of this same type of racist rhetoric. In *The Oregon Trail* (1891), Parkman tells the reader,

"Trust not an Indian. Let your rifle be ever in your hand. . . . War is the breath of their nostrils."<sup>17</sup> Paxson's portrayal of Indians, however, is not as hard-hitting as Parkman's, and he does attempt to take a more neutral stance. Nevertheless, Paxson still resorts to using words like "savages" and "half-civilized"<sup>18</sup> to describe indigenous peoples. Of the histories of the late 19th century, Cather's view of Indians in her early fiction best reflects these worlds of Parkman and Paxson. At this point in her career, there is no evidence to suggest that she grasped the reality of Indian cultures.

The young Cather likely held distorted images of Indians because she had not the opportunity to meet them while growing up in Red Cloud. By the 1880s, most Indians were hundreds of miles removed from her hometown. By 1881, before Willa Cather and her family had even arrived in Nebraska, most of the state's eastern tribes had been removed to Indian Territory in Oklahoma.<sup>19</sup> Bernice Slotte is correct when she writes, "[Cather] lived in Nebraska in the 1880s and 1890s, when Indians were noticed in the newspapers chiefly as warring tribes with dirty living habits."<sup>20</sup> Cather's short-story written in 1894, "The Fear that Walks by Noonday," is one of several of her early pieces that depicts the Native American as a filthy animal.

Cather collaborated with Dorothy Canfield-Fisher on this prize-winning football story about the ghost of a dead player that comes back to win the big game by scaring the opposing team to death. Canfield supplied the plot and Cather wrote the story that would net them a ten dollar prize in 1894.<sup>21</sup> One team is the Marathon team; the opposing team is called the "Injuns" and the name appears nine times in the story. Cather tells us that their "coach is an idiot"<sup>22</sup> and she describes the "Injuns" with words such as "growled," "darned excitable," and "cherishing their wrath." She has the Marathon team say, "Start the yell . . . that will fetch them."<sup>23</sup> One senses that the 21-year-old Cather too easily falls into the bad-guy-Indian / good-guy-White man trap of her time and views the Indian as a dirty animal. She expresses the typical biased view about Indians in the talk of two of the home players. The Marathon players' conversation mimics a 19th century Indian fighter's fearful notion of Indians—particularly those of the Plains cultures: "The Injuns insist on playing [or waging war with] us . . . for blood [and] . . . to break our bones. . . . [T]hey are going into us today for vengeance." Even Cather's portrayal of the Marathon player, Horton, reads like he is going into mortal combat: "His eyes flashed and he threw his head back like a cavalry horse that hears the bugle sound a charge." The visiting "Injuns" team is referred to as "western men [who] gave their Indian yell . . . [and their] captain sang out his signals, and the rushing began." "I don't see where they get the face to play us at all," says one of the home-team.<sup>24</sup>

Other Cather short stories that depict the Indian in disparaging ways are "Eric Hermannson's Soul," "A Wagner Matinee," and "Tommy, the Unsentimental." The latter even makes mention of the Sioux Ghost Dance. The portrayal of the Plains Indians as "hostiles," "half-breeds," "squaw men," "crazy,"

"savage hordes," "bucks," "recalcitrants," "revengeful," "nits," "hard to civilize," "not . . . good until dead," "turbulent," "cunning," "malcontents," and "men who . . . massacre" is found in 12 articles taken from Red Cloud newspapers in December of 1890, many of which Cather would have certainly read.

## THE COMING OF CHANGE IN CATHER'S THINKING

In 1912, Cather's perspective of indigenous peoples began to change. No longer did she spew forth the Jackson Turner "frontier hypothesis" that described Indians only as obstacles to western expansion. For the first time, Cather saw the humanity in the Southwestern cultures. These people were real and not some Fenimore Cooper characters to be trodden upon and conquered. One senses that Cather, at this point in her life, had begun to empathize with Indian cultures and had begun to look at them as respected artists, respected human beings.

As David Stouck writes, Cather discovered a different kind of existence than she had ever known, "a way of life lived in intimate harmony with nature."<sup>25</sup> Here were cultures "unlike the European settlers with their romantic dreams of individual power and conquest" which "adjusted their lives collectively to the laws of nature."<sup>26</sup> In *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather fuses her knowledge of Pueblo creation stories as well as classical allusions, such as the Orpheus myth. "The Ancient People" section is at the center of Cather's apology for art and defines Cather's own art of story-telling and the direction in which she was headed. The legends and tales of the Southwest are alive in this section and stem from Cather's travels with a local priest who took her to visit several missions [likely Navajo] around Winslow, Arizona.<sup>27</sup> Woodress writes, "they had talked about the country and the people, and [Father Connolly] had filled her full of Spanish and Indian legends."<sup>28</sup> From Cather's postcards to her sister, Elsie, we have another glimpse of what she was seeing:

. . . a seventeenth-century Spanish mission church at Acoma; adobe huts, Hopi Indian pueblos discovered by Coronado's army in 1540; and an Indian village on the Rio Grande [likely the Isleta Pueblo's], thirteen miles south of Albuquerque, with a mission church.<sup>29</sup>

For Cather, all of this provided, as Hermione Lee observes, "a more ancient version of the interweaving of cultures which so arrested her at home" on the plains—"one that had fascinated her since childhood."<sup>30</sup>

The "Ancient People" section in *The Song of the Lark* begins with a Whitmanesque description of land and language that rivals *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a book by her mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett:

The great pines stand at a considerable distance from each other. Each tree grows alone, murmurs alone, thinks alone. They do not intrude upon each other. The Navajos are not much in the habit of giving or of asking help. Their language is not a communicative one, and they never attempt an interchange of personality in speech. Over their forests there is the same inexorable reserve. Each tree has its exalted power to bear.<sup>31</sup>

One immediately feels the human-nature connection. And at the heart of the passage is the silence of language as creator and also the respect for all life-forms. Cather's poem, "Prairie Spring," whispers here in the background "Singing and singing, / Out of the lips of silence, / Out of the earthy dusk." The poem's free verse style suggests something natural and organic as does the descriptive passage. The desire to be born lifts from the page and foreshadows what is to happen in Panther Canyon to Thea Kronborg, Cather's lead character in *The Song of the Lark*.

Stouck contends that Cather "seems to have been moving toward something like the modern writer's stance to his art" and "this direction is reflected in her concern for organic form in her narratives, her reflection of American materialism, and her fiction renunciation of personal ambitions."<sup>32</sup> In her book *Ceremony*, modern day Laguna Pueblo writer, Leslie Marmon Silko, strikes a sympathetic note to Cather's attitude:

There were stories about the dragonflies too. He turned. Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if you knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes almost imperceptible, like the motion of the stars across the sky.<sup>33</sup>

Both authors express nature as the artist, forever creating; in this sense nature is the ultimate story-teller. For individuals like Thea Kronborg, The Ancient People, Willa Cather, and Leslie Silko, who strive to understand nature's stories, a new artistic sense of living, dynamic and alive, is theirs. An immediate appreciation for the past is also gained in the process, as Thea learns in the Canyon.

For the Hopis, the Grand Canyon, where Cather visited for the first time in 1912, is sacred ground "because deep in the bottom of the gorge is the original 'sipapu,' the mystic opening joining the two worlds of the quick and the dead."<sup>34</sup> As Cather traveled the Canyon and the Arizona country, she must have learned of the Hopi belief that they emerged from the Underworld at this sacred place. The story told is that "the dying Hopis return to this chasm as wisps of vapor drifting downward into the canyon on their return to the Underworld."<sup>35</sup> Some Hopis reported eerie tales as they ventured to bring back salt from around the "sipapu." "Laughter and singing of happy people could be heard" as one traveled

around the last bend to the "sipapu;" however, as one approached it, the voices faded and "only the sound of the river remained."<sup>36</sup> Likewise, at the canyon's bottom by a stream, Thea listened to the "ironical laughter of the quaking asps" and "a song would go through her head all morning . . . and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged."<sup>37</sup>

Cather's use of Panther Canyon reminds one of the Hopis' sacred Kivas, those mysterious underground ceremonial chambers that are the entrance to the spirit world.<sup>38</sup> In the Hopi ceremony, usually conducted after the winter solstice, the kachinas appear, rising along the ladders of the kivas, and they become believable as other-world beings whose spirits inhabit the bodies of ordinary men of the Hopi villages. The kiva ceremony opens a doorway to the Underworld, allowing for spirits to pass freely between the two worlds of spirit and mass.<sup>39</sup>

Cather writes that "Panther Canyon was like a thousand others—one of those abrupt fissures with which the earth in the Southwest is riddled."<sup>40</sup> This canyon is Thea's kiva. Cather then places the Underworld, represented by the Ancient People's "dead city," within the canyon: "The Cliff Dwellers liked wide canyons, where the great cliffs caught the sun."<sup>41</sup> Barton Wright observes that "Kivas are places of mystery and drama at night. The light emerges from below, and figures of men and kachinas passing through it assume heroic proportions by its reversed glow."<sup>42</sup> Thea's voice is like this sacred light that emerges from Panther Canyon with heroic purpose and vitality.

It is important to know that kivas are the only structures that belong to the men, whereas the village homes are owned by the women.<sup>43</sup> Only the men are allowed in these ceremonial chambers. Cather certainly knew this, and perhaps this is why she portrays Thea as a tomboy explorer, similar to herself as a youth, who is allowed inside of nature's kiva. Thea and her friend, Fred Ottenburg, are described like a Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, as they throw stones off a cliff: "They looked like two boys. Both were hatless and both wore white shirts."<sup>44</sup>

Cather's youthful relationship with Julio, her Southwestern male guide, provides the friendship paradigm for that of Thea and Fred as the two explore Panther Canyon. Sharon O'Brien describes Julio as a "mysterious, androgynous being" who "loved music and dance," as does Thea, and who "combined traits Victorian America divided between 'male' and 'female.'"<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note that in the Hopi ceremonies, "if the dance requires women, these parts are assumed by the men and boys."<sup>46</sup>

Thea's wanderings in the canyon mirror those of Julio and Cather and Thea's descent to the canyon's stream parallels that of the Hopi men descending the ladder into the lighted kiva chamber:

Thea went down to the stream by the Indian water trail. She had found a bathing-pool with a sand bottom, where the creek was dammed by fallen trees. The climb back was long and steep [as is the ascent from the kiva on the long ladders], and when she reached her little house in the cliff she

always felt fresh delight in its comfort and inaccessibility. By the time she got there, the wooly red-and-gray blankets were saturated with sunlight. . . .<sup>47</sup>

Wright points out that in the kiva ceremonies of winter, on top of the ceremonial chambers, the women and other people of the Hopi village may "doze on the banquettes awaiting the arrival of the kachinas" from below.<sup>48</sup> When Thea ascends from the bathing-pool, her "sipapu" or nature's womb, she feels more connected to life than ever before and awaits nature's spiritual powers that shall infuse her artistic soul with new life:

And now her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas.<sup>49</sup>

Thea's voice transforms into a receptacle for sound, for music; and this music will sustain her artistic existence. Her music is like the water contained in the Indians' bowls, for it, likewise, sustains the Cliff Dwellers in their artistic lives in the arid Southwest.

In Carl Jung's understanding of the Pueblo Indian ceremonies, he observed the interesting role that water played in the healing ritual:

The water symbolizes the entrance to the underworld. The healing process in this ceremony is clearly analogous to the symbolism which we find in the collective unconscious. It is an individuation process, an identification with the totality of the personality, with the self.<sup>50</sup>

Thea's bath in the canyon is "a baptism of the spirit,"<sup>51</sup> as Ryder asserts, but seen in Jungian terms, the bath also emphasizes Thea's ability to identify with, and to confront for the first time, her elusive "other self," that which comprises Jung's "totality of the personality." When she was a young girl studying music with Wunsch "she knew . . . that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. . . . The something came and went, she never knew how."<sup>52</sup> By sacrificing herself to the waters of Panther Canyon, Thea undergoes a healing process that allows her to hold onto what she thought of in her youth as "a warm kind of sureness."<sup>53</sup>

Thea's new personality imitates the Hopi kachina, "Maswik'china, who

represents the spirit of youth and hoped-for fertility of the tribe. . . . It represents the good and the beautiful of new life that can be achieved with the cooperation of Masau'u, the deity who controls the land. . . .

Mawsik'china is one of the many Hopi kachinas, and it shares a symbolic interpretation of springtime with several other kachinas.<sup>54</sup>

Thea, likewise, represents a new youthful order of springtime and brings hope to a world caught up in "the lie" of a new and modernized world of art. Cather, in the preface to the 1937 edition of *The Song of the Lark*, remarks that Thea is the artist who reawakens "to something beautiful" and who tries to combat the "smug, domestic, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance."<sup>55</sup>

Eventually, Thea comes full circle in understanding her "second self," that "feeling," that "something" she has "protect[ed] even from herself."<sup>56</sup> By making a journey like that of the Hopis to the Underworld, Thea emerges as a new artist who realizes that indeed "so much had begun with a hole in the earth." Panther Canyon unlocks her artistic powers, and Thea knows now that her thoughts in Chicago were true: "It was to music, more than to anything else, that these hidden things in people responded." And Cather describes Thea as clearly identifying with the functional art of the Ancient women potters. She thinks that "The strongest Indian need was expressed in those graceful jars."<sup>57</sup> She sees herself as one of these women, sincere to their art like the famous 19th century Hopi potter, Nampeyo, whose pottery Cather surely saw in her Southwest travels to various museums.

#### THE LATER CATHER PERSPECTIVE

By turning to indigenous stories and oral histories, Cather rebels against the modernized world of art—"the lie that destroys the language of nature; of the ultimate artist"—and she mimics nature's language by creating an artist who "signifie[s] women's primordial transformative and creative force."<sup>58</sup> Thea strikes a chord of hope for a society dominated by the patriarchal order. Ultimately, she sacrifices herself to her art in her "desire" to become the perfect artist, not unlike Willa Cather. As the story ends, one can hear Cather's own artistic spirit speaking through Thea's voice:

If an artist does any good work he must do it alone. No number of encouraging or admiring friends can assist him. . . . He must go off alone with his own soul and they too must labor and suffer together.<sup>59</sup>

Both Cather and Thea learned of the creative energy of the artist by rediscovering an integration of self with a larger whole. This integration embodies the spirit of Native American philosophy and story-telling. One becomes the words one speaks. Cather found much to admire in the Indian cultures as their values become Thea's.

*The Song of the Lark* stands alone as evidence of Cather's ability to transcend the bias to which she was exposed in her reading and to assert an admiration for

a value system which was rapidly disappearing before the onslaught of modern civilization. Cather came as close as any Anglo-American writer had come in her day to recovering the spiritual energies of the land and its Native American peoples. In this respect she succeeded in understanding the power of the Southwestern peoples' language.

#### ENDNOTES

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