

# 4

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## Ethnic American Modernisms

John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) opens with an image of immigrants to the "world's second metropolis" emerging from the dark interior of a sailing vessel, as if born into a vast new space of "opportunity" as they take their first uncertain steps down to the ferry slip and into the light of the city.<sup>1</sup> This opening moment precedes the birth of one of the novel's protagonists, Elaine Thatcher, an infant likened to a "knot of earthworms" (15) and held aloft by a nurse who regards the child with the disdain usually reserved for the handling of a bedpan. Both "births" are anticipated by an epigraph, almost prophetic in its tone and its depiction of the contemporary urban wasteland, which compares the immigrants' arrival in the city to the processing of apples down a chute – cored, pulped, juiced. These concurrent moments of arrival, the optimism of which is dented by procedure, ill feeling, and mechanization, indicate the antipathy with which many immigrants to New York City were greeted in the first decade or so of the twentieth century. On board the immigrant-laden ship, those on the lower decks break into an impromptu rendition of "Yankee Doodle" in celebration of Independence Day. Upon dry land, however, the mood is less than celebratory: Bud Korpenning is unable to find the "center of things" (16) that might offer some stability to his situation, Susie Thatcher hysterically rejects her baby as a changeling, Jimmy Herf is disconnected from his mother in meeting the unwelcoming Harlands, and Ed Thatcher is defrauded of the cost of a few drinks by a German New Yorker wetting the head of his newborn baby "poy" (19). Each instance bespeaks a kind of disappointment on the part of the incoming New Yorker, but each moment also depicts a native suspicion of the other, a wariness and distrust of the vulnerable newcomer, who is reduced to a mere quantitative value.

To gauge the quantitative value of the immigrant, one merely needs to look at the hard facts of the United States' population explosion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In New York alone, 27 million immigrants arrived between 1880 and 1930. Prior to this, of course, the United

States had been a prime destination for European immigrants seeking a better way of life. From 1845 to 1852, for instance, during the years of the Irish Potato Famine, over one million people crossed the Atlantic. By 1850 the Irish represented a quarter of New York's population. Other national groups immigrating to the United States during this time included Germans, French, Italians, and Scandinavians. This wave of immigration reached a peak in the 1850s, although it was curtailed by the American Civil War, which brought further demographic changes. While some of these immigrants moved beyond the cities of their arrival to the West, most stayed in the urban hubs at which they had debarked. New York, in particular, was the metropolitan magnet for immigrants arriving after the war, and it expanded exponentially in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The United States Census of 1890 revealed the population of the city to be 1.5 million people, with approximately half foreign born; a decade later the figure had leapt to 3.5 million, representing a growth of 126.8 percent. And by 1930 New York was home to just under 7 million inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

Across the United States as a whole, the foreign-born population exceeded 9 million people (an extraordinary figure given that the overall population was then just 63 million). In 1890 alone almost half a million immigrants entered the United States, with almost a quarter arriving from Eastern and Southern Europe. Thus the types of immigrants entering American ports were no longer primarily Protestant Northern Europeans or Irish Catholics, but Jews, Orthodox Greeks, Italians, and Slavs who brought with them their respective customs and beliefs as well as the idiomatic dialects that would come to characterize the diverse tang of the modern New York cultural scene in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> The working and living conditions of these immigrants are well known: most came to escape religious persecution and the abject poverty of their homelands only to be confronted by joblessness, overcrowded conditions, and antagonistic landlords. Writers such as Anzia Yeziarska, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Henry Roth, and Willa Cather would come to recreate the conditions faced by such people in modernist novels that blend experimentalism with searing social criticism. All in all, migration and immigration had a profound effect on modern American art and literature. They engendered a fusion of cultures and ethnicities that would feed into the dazzling polyphony of modernist experimentalism. Immigrants also contributed to the labor movement and the socialist-inspired art that would be written by the likes of Mike Gold and John Steinbeck. Finally, postbellum migration liberated the African American folk cultures and art forms that would be so crucial to the New Negro Renaissance.

The net result of the unprecedented surge of immigration was a profound reappraisal of American identity. With the ghettoization of many immigrant

groups, progressivist notions that new immigrants would adapt and assimilate to the codes of Anglo-Saxon gentility and adopt the lingua franca were not always realized. And large enclaves of immigrant communities, whose values and ambitions could be at odds with those of the nation, caused consternation amongst many of the Anglo-American intelligentsia. In Charles G. Gould's polemic of 1922, *America: A Family Matter*, the author makes the case that immigrants can never be "Americanized," as such qualities could not be taught but "must come to us from the mother's milk, the baby's lisping questions, and grow with our nerves and thews and sinews until they become part and parcel of our very being."<sup>4</sup> For Gould and others of his nativist persuasion, naturalization was an impossibility and the influx of immigrants represented a threat to national "purity." On the other hand, for intellectuals such as Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen, immigrant communities embodied a cultural pluralism that was true to the original ideals of the nation. Nonetheless, the expansive demography of New York City brought about political changes such as the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, which limited immigration from each nation to the 1910 quotas, and the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, which brought quotas back to the 1890 limit. The effect was to lower the number of new arrivals, but by this stage the immigrant stamp had been imprinted indelibly on the city, and it was the very fact of this surge in immigrant communities that contributed to New York's reputation as a center of modernism. As Werner Sollers has observed, "ethnicization and modernization go hand in hand."<sup>5</sup> And, indeed, a novel such as *Manhattan Transfer*, with its deliberate interpolation of the tenets of cubism and Russian constructivism in a text of competing ethnic voices and experiences, perfectly encapsulates this idea. Dos Passos, though not an immigrant writer per se, was fascinated by the immigrant experience – a fascination perhaps attributable to his own "outsider" status as the product of an extra-marital love affair between the wealthy lawyer John Randolph Dos Passos and Lucy Addison Sprigg Madison, and certainly evident in his staunch defense of the executed Italian-American immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In many ways *Manhattan Transfer* offers a spatial portrait of the ethnic American city, and its presentation of the ways in which newcomers interact with established American families offers a deliberate meditation on contemporary debates about the name and nature of American identity, fears of miscegenation carried over from the antebellum South, and the impact of ethnic communities upon core American values.

Two writers who also address these themes, albeit in very different contexts and from vastly different perspectives, are Willa Cather and Anzia Yezierska: the former a Virginia-born prairie writer of Irish extraction; the

latter an Eastern European-born city dweller. What these writers share is an interest in the female immigrant's story, along with the accompanying concerns of gender inequalities, the tug of family and spousal/sibling responsibility (which seems especially relevant to the female immigrant), and, above all, the special relationship between the female immigrant character and geographical space. For each writer, space is particularly pertinent as an entity that can define identity; but it is also something fluid and eventually conquerable. It is in the mastery of space that the female immigrant subject can take control of her identity, rather than having it conferred upon her by an environment shaped by others. For Alexandra Bergson and Sara Smolinsky, of *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *Bread Givers* (1925), respectively, the acquisition of geographical space is not unlike Woolf's notion of the necessary "room of one's own" in which the female subject can create an identity for herself beyond that created by patriarchal representations of womanhood. While admittedly Sara and Alexandra's interest in spatial proprietorship is more prosaic – domestic and entrepreneurial, respectively – than that described by Woolf (since neither demonstrates any literary aspirations), the principle remains that the self can be created and shaped by the attainment and mastery of geographical space. This notion of space as a determinant of identity goes beyond mere notions of ownership conferring power. In the case of each character, there is a clear relationship between the female subject and the space she inhabits. The modern city and the spaces within it are the crucible for Smolinsky's transformation; it seems that there is a symbiotic relationship between the protagonist and the evolving modern space, with the congruity of the Jewish ghetto and the glittering skyscraper engendering the protagonist's social and intellectual ascent. In the case of Bergson, the mere acquisition of the Great Plains landscape is insufficient to her aims. The land must yield to her hand, become fertile and receptive to her inventive agricultural methods: it must engender the future.

Though Anzia Yezierska is rarely celebrated as a modernist writer, her novels and short stories, tracking the lives of young female Jewish immigrants, engage with similar ideas to those tackled by the likes of Dos Passos, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. Her characters strive to extricate themselves from the social difficulties brought about by poverty, femininity, and their Jewishness. Criticized in her lifetime for a prose style that was unapologetically melodramatic, sentimental, and thin in terms of characterization, Yezierska was also praised for her powerful portrayals of ghetto life, her own personal tenacity to succeed as a writer, and her success in highlighting of the plight of immigrant women on New York's Lower East Side (an area of twenty blocks south of Houston Street and east of Broadway). Above all, the novel *Bread Givers* sealed Yezierska's reputation as a writer

devoted to uncovering the complexities of immigrant life in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The story of Sara Smolinsky's rise from the crowded tenement blocks of Jewish New York and her concurrent loss of familial loyalty appeared in an auspicious year for American literary fiction and touched on the themes and issues that preoccupied Yeziarska's fellow modernists. These are, namely, the sacrifice of one's individuality in the name of American success, the alienating capacity of the American city, and the social impact of the emerging "New Woman," as well as the modernist literary experiments with verisimilitude.

Yeziarska's interest in realistically representing the lives of her immigrant characters in all their ethnic particularities is very obvious to anybody who opens one of her books. For example, she used Yiddish names (for instance, Shprintzeh Gittel in *Bread Givers* and Motkeh Pelz in "Wings"); she inserted transliterated Yiddish, German and Russian phrases throughout ("Oi wei" and "Blut und Eisen" recur frequently throughout *Bread Givers*); and she wrote in an English that is syntactically altered to reproduce the inflections of an immigrant speaking in a second (or third) language. Moreover, her fiction documents the historical conditions endured by the Lower East Side's 135,000 Jews, from the constant threat of eviction to the dank apartments that often sheltered families of ten or more people. These cramped experiences are reflected in *Bread Givers* in terms of the novel's abiding preoccupation with space. Smolinsky's life can, in fact, be mapped out by the gradually more expansive spaces she comes to occupy: from the cluttered tenement room she shares with her family, to finding her voice selling herring in the street, the ghetto, the suburban space of the college, the city, and, finally, the corridor in which she ambivalently agrees to take her antagonistic father back into her life. Sara's quest for an uncluttered room of her own is undoubtedly part of a wider tradition of conquering geographical space in the making of an American identity; furthermore, the upward ascent of New York City, symbolized by the vertical rise of the skyscraper, mirrors Sara's success. However, the acquisition of space is also part of Yeziarska's feminist agenda, enabling the female subject to be educated, to think, and to write. Notably, Yeziarska emphasizes the small, enclosed, private spaces of feminist discourse rather than the public, architectural spaces associated with American success.

Sara's journey begins in the crowded slums of Hester Street where there is no room for personal expression or for neat American maxims on cleanliness: "The school teacher's rule, 'A place for everything and everything in its place' was no good for us because there weren't enough places."<sup>7</sup> Defying her "Old World" father, who insists on claiming the largest room in the apartment for himself and his religious books, Sara rents a room of her own, a

filthy “dark hole” that at least has “a door I could shut” (158). From this room Sara moves to a suburban setting, forsaking the cityscape as she attends college among “quiet streets, shaded with greens” (210). She tries out a number of different rooms in an attempt to fit in with her teachers and fellow students, but all of her choices seem self-negating and ill-fitting, perhaps due to her trying to shape herself into an alien space. It is only upon completion of her college course that Sara finds a room that mirrors her newfound independence and status:

I had selected a sunny, airy room, the kind of a room I had always wanted . . . No carpet on the floor. No pictures on the wall. Nothing but a clean, airy emptiness . . . I celebrated it alone with myself. I celebrated it in my room, my first clean, empty room. . . I had achieved that marvelous thing, “a place for everything and everything in its place.” (267)

With the acquisition of the new apartment, far removed from the cluttered room on Hester Street in which the novel opens, Sara conquers not only geographical space but at last possesses a room that reflects her own sense of selfhood and her personal achievement.

This strong sense of selfhood is evident from the very outset of the novel. The narrative voice is characterized by an insistence upon an individualistic “I.” For instance, in struggling with the family detritus in the kitchen on Hester Street, the narrating “I” battles heroically against the smothering rags, tables, chairs, and unclean windows. For Yeziarska the “I” is a site of uncertainty. Traditionally the “I” is hewed to a unified, coherent, male selfhood and manacled to the autobiographical genre. In *Bread Givers*, the “I” is the nexus where real and imagined selves collide, thus opening up a new narrative space between the autobiographical and the fictional. This new narrative space ideally fits Yeziarska’s hitherto untapped subject: the position of the immigrant woman in an early twentieth-century urban environment.<sup>8</sup> This space, between the autobiographical and the fictional, allows the female subject (and indeed the writer herself) to move into and out of “controlling” generic structures. Thus the invention of this new literary space is a deeply political act of self-expression and self-definition, but it also allows Yeziarska to play with the boundaries of genre in exploring both the liminality and the “in between-ness” of her subject – a woman outside both Jewish and American patriarchal cultures yet also caught between them.<sup>9</sup> The final scene of the novel, in which Sara stands in the corridor deciding her father’s fate, is a physical, spatial representation of this bind. While this “in between” space can be liberating, allowing the subject to move between worlds and identities without being contained by either, it can also be a site of limbo, a no-man’s land in which the subject is locked until she decides which way to turn.

While undoubtedly linked to a feminist tradition in terms of the female subject's relationship with various physical spaces, Yeziarska's deceptively simple novel also exhibits an immersion in the debates about ethnicity that permeated early twentieth-century American culture. For many readers, Yeziarska's writing actively encourages the assimilation of Yiddish culture into the United States, and there is clearly some truth in this. After all, Yeziarska's primary aim in her early life, echoing the aim of most of her characters, was to become a "real" American:

Then came a light – a great revelation! I saw America – a big idea – a deathless hope – a world still in the making. I saw that it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished. And I, the last comer, had her share to give, small or great, to the making of America, like those Pilgrims who came in the *Mayflower*.<sup>10</sup>

However, Yeziarska's work is undeniably critical of the processes of Americanization and assimilation, as exemplified in the subtitle to *Bread Givers: The Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New*. The relationship between first- and second-generation American Jews is presented as an ordeal, a tortured emotional process for both parties. Ron Ebest convincingly argues that Yeziarska's overwrought style and frequent use of what might be construed as anti-Semitic stereotypes (for instance, the selfish scholarly father as personified in Reb Smolinsky) are better understood as the products of the context in which she wrote. For example, Yeziarska's stories appeared in periodicals that ran nativist, anti-immigrant articles and ongoing debates on the so-called "Jewish Question." Ebest observes that "Yeziarska's stories engaged this debate in the space it was already occupying. . . . Thus the stories may be understood as arguments, offered by one of the Jews under discussion, and interjected into an ongoing, often ugly, frequently nativist, many voiced debate."<sup>11</sup> So while Sara may celebrate the success embodied in her empty female space, her freedom is compromised by her willingness to accept her misogynistic father back into her life after she finds him hawking matches in the ghetto: "I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (297). As a result, Sara's independence from the "Old World" remains an unrealized dream, and her articulation of this at the very end of the novel denies the reader the closure or the happy ending one expects of the rags-to-riches story. In a way, therefore, the conclusion depicts a subject in an indeterminate state of limbo. Stuck out in the corridor between rooms, Sara is caught between worlds and learns that she cannot fit into either. But it is a space in which she has finally achieved some mastery in her relationship with the father who once controlled her fate. Here, in this in-between space, she holds the power over his

destiny. Whereas once he controlled domestic space with his scholarly books and matchmaking proclivities, now she will decide the space he is to occupy. She will decide his future.

In contrast to Yeziarska, Willa Cather often intervened directly in the nativist and political debates of the day. Though she is frequently derided as a curmudgeonly regionalist, her writing exhibits a deep interest in experimenting with representations of the lives of the various immigrant communities that occupy her prairie novels, as well as an abiding concern with geographical space. As for the “regionalist” tag, as Guy Reynolds has observed, Cather was conscious of her reputation and willingly embraced it. Alas, although it was this label that first brought Cather national success, it has also served to restrict her literary reputation. The misconceptions associated with Cather’s supposedly nostalgic Nebraska style have often blinded readers to the author’s deep immersion in a wider cultural context, both at the national and international levels.<sup>12</sup> Yet scholars have long explored her literary influences, both American and European, her taste in the visual and the culinary arts, and her deployment of Greek and Latin epic conventions and allusions throughout even the earliest of her fiction.<sup>13</sup> Yet the assumption of parochialism persists.<sup>14</sup> One of the reasons, of course, is the success of Cather’s earlier fiction, namely, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), which were deeply rooted in her Nebraska settings. Another is her fascination with the processes of memory and recovery, as well as her lifelong interest in origin, purity, and identity.<sup>15</sup> However, even in these early novels, Cather’s world is much wider than the prairie. Certainly the prairie location and context are cardinal for the stories, and Cather’s poetic descriptions of the landscapes her protagonists inhabit are crucial to these novels. However, the world Cather presents in these earlier books is distinctly modern and multi-cultural, teeming with immigrant voices and stories in all their discordant polyphony.

During Cather’s lifetime, one of her most sympathetic reviewers was the antiwar intellectual and sometime writer for *The Dial*, Randolph Bourne. In his review of *My Ántonia* in 1918, Bourne described Cather as belonging to the international group of modernist writers – a seemingly curious ascription when one considers that this is supposedly one of the books that most firmly situates Cather in the prairies. However, a closer look at Bourne’s writing reveals a conception of region, indeed even of nation, as distinctly cosmopolitan. For Bourne, the term “trans-national America” referred to “a federation of cultures,” “a cosmopolitan federation of national colonies, of foreign cultures” with “an intellectual internationalism . . . [interested in] different cultural expressions.” He envisaged the United States as a nation of immigrants who could “retain that distinctiveness of their native cultures” and



hence be “more valuable and interesting to each other for being different,” a nation of “cosmopolitan interchange . . . in spite of the war and all its national exclusiveness.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, on numerous occasions in the years before World War I, Cather championed immigrants’ rights against the forces of Americanization, and, when asked about the importance of immigrant communities in her work in an interview for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1924, she remarked:

They have come here to live in the sense that they lived in the Old World, and if they were let alone their lives might turn into the beautiful ways of their homeland. But they are not let alone. Social workers, missionaries – call them what you will – go after them, hound them, pursue them and devote their days and nights toward the great task of turning them into stupid replicas of smug American citizens. This passion for Americanizing everything and everybody is a deadly disease with us.<sup>17</sup>

The key term here is “Americanizing,” and it is worth reflecting on the author’s condemnation of it as a procedure that threatens to iron out the idiosyncrasies of immigrant and, by implication, regional cultures (after all, Cather’s prairie fictions are populated by Germans, Scandinavians, and Czechs).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, what have come to be regarded as Cather’s mythic pastoral visions of American identity at the beginning of the twentieth century can also be viewed as narratives of dislocation and social isolation, while her regionalist proclivities are no less a social critique than the experiments of the urban avant-garde.<sup>19</sup> For Cather, any kind of Americanization, including the notion of the melting pot, presents precisely the cultural (and racial) homogeneity she abhors. And while certainly elegiac in tone, her novels offer not so much a lament for some stable American or regional identity as a repudiation of an Americanized identity that threatens to eradicate diverse cultures. Indeed, in her 1938 essay “On *The Professor’s House*,” Cather writes that she deliberately engaged with French and Spanish forms to present an antithesis to the stifling conformity of Godfrey St. Peter’s American house: “In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter’s house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies – until one got rather stifled.”<sup>20</sup> Thus the world of Professor St. Peter and his daughters is less the protected and vulnerable space identified by critics such as Walter Benn Michaels than it is a space that threatens to infect, commodify, and eradicate immigrant and indigenous cultures.<sup>21</sup> Far from being introspective, backward, and parochial, Cather’s methodology and her themes reveal a writer attuned to the wider dangers of cultural conformity.

*O Pioneers!* which takes its title from Whitman’s homage to westward expansion, very deliberately focuses on the immigrant experience. Like

*Bread Givers*, it concentrates on the story of a willful female immigrant within that traditionally male spatial context. Alexandra Bergson is portrayed as a manager of men from the outset of the novel, rounding up Carl Linstrum to rescue her young brother's kitten in the midst of running errands for her dying father. Watched by a traveling salesman as she battles with an inhospitable landscape of "tough prairie sod" and a town "which was trying not to be blown away," Alexandra is a "ray of hope," a purposeful and resolute force.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Yeziarska's novel focuses upon the appropriation of urban space in the development of a Jewish-American female subjectivity, *O Pioneers!* ties its heroine to the rural landscape of the Nebraska Divide. Shrewd and resourceful, Alexandra is Cather's heroic woman, dressed "like a young soldier" (5) in a man's ulster and a woman's veil. With her imposing physique and golden plaits, surrounded throughout her life by "little men" (105), she is like a character from an old Scandinavian epic. It is perhaps no coincidence that Alexandra can recite long sections of the Icelandic *Frithjof Saga*, at the heart of which is a heroine, Ingeborg, who is shuttled between "little men" while she awaits the return of her larger-than-life lover, Frithjof. Ingeborg, whose name suggests a stronghold, is certainly a model for Alexandra, the stalwart of the family who too dreams of being "lifted and carried by a strong being who carried from her all her bodily weariness" (102). Much like the Icelandic princess, Alexandra is buffeted by the demands of her brothers and denied her lover. But she resists the pressure exerted by Lou and Oscar Bergson, and by the end of the novel she has maintained her stronghold and the love of Carl. As a result, Cather's intertextual deployment of the saga within that most American of stories, the expansion of the West, reveals an authorial sensibility committed to the preservation and adaptation of myths and stories carried from the Old World. Indeed, Cather's deployment of the Norse epic, alongside the references to Longfellow's "Golden Legend" and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, evokes the "intellectual internationalism" described by Bourne.<sup>23</sup>

The novel reflects at length on language. Alexandra and her brothers maintain their mother tongue, but American-born Emil, the youngest of the Bergson children, understands no Swedish despite speaking (as a child) in an English that bears the hallmarks of a nonnative speaker: "My kitten, oh, my kitten. Her will fweeze" (4). When the children converse with Crazy Ivar, they translate his Norwegian for Emil, while later in the novel Alexandra employs a series of girls from the old country largely because she likes to hear them chatter in their own language while performing household chores. As the Bergson family spreads and marries, the emphasis upon respectability and speaking English becomes more of an issue:

The conversation at the table was all in English. Oscar's wife, from the malaria district of Missouri, was ashamed of marrying a foreigner, and his boys do not understand a word of Swedish. Annie and Lou sometimes speak Swedish at home, but Annie is . . . afraid of being "caught" at it. . . . Oscar still has a thick accent, but Lou speaks like anybody from Iowa. (59)

Again, Cather makes a subtle appeal for the preservation of immigrant cultures and languages. The un-Americanized world of Alexandra's homestead, filled with Swedish chatter and the nightly Norwegian readings of Old Ivar, is a great deal more interesting and, indeed, liberating than the homes of Oscar and Lou. Mrs. Lee, Lou's mother-in-law, enjoys her annual visits to Alexandra precisely because it "be yust-a like old times":

She enjoyed the liberty Alexandra gave her, and hearing her old language about her all day long. Here she could wear her nightcap and sleep with all her windows shut, listen to Ivar reading the Bible, and here she could run about among the stables in a pair of Emil's old boots. (110)

For old Mrs. Lee, the freedom to speak in her own tongue and wear her outmoded nightcap is something she associates with the past and with the Old World. The New World and the lifestyle choices of her daughter and son-in-law curtail those liberties and deny the essence of a culture that in its openness and flexibility has, in fact, facilitated their new, modern identities. There is an implicit contrast here, of course, with Americanization programs such as those organized by the Colonial Dames of America or the Sons of the American Revolution, and who can deny that Cather was remarkably prescient in her prediction of the loss of immigrant languages among settlers' descendants? Even so, her portraits of the immigrant communities of the prairies have often been cast as folksy, nostalgic, and, as noted, parochial. A nostalgic streak certainly runs through her work, but, rather like *Yeziarska*, Cather purposefully deploys this to make a fundamental (and eminently modern) point about the curtailment of individual liberties and the possible eradication of ethnic cultures and communities.

By setting a woman at the heart of this pioneer story of conquering the West, at one level at least Cather engages with Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that the harsh conditions and poverty of the untrammelled landscape and developing towns engendered a kind of necessary equality – in this instance a gender equality.<sup>24</sup> Yet, Alexandra's achievements in spite of her gender are rarely easily won. While her father acknowledges that she is the quickest and the brightest of his children, he wishes that one of her brothers had her attributes. Even when presenting her plans for the development of the farmstead, she is called upon by her mother to complete her domestic chores. Perhaps most significantly, once the family has prospered under her

care and management, Alexandra is expected to sacrifice her share of it to her brothers, who have become suspicious of her relationship with Carl Linstrum:

The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title. If anything goes wrong, it's the men that are held responsible. . . .

The property of a family belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible, and because they do the work. (98)

Indeed, as the farm becomes more successful and the family's material wealth increases, Alexandra finds it even more difficult to maintain her hold on the property and her position as the head of the family. Her brothers invoke the mores of traditional and established communities, assert notions of sexual propriety and female duty, and use the murmurings of the community to cast a pall over her friendship with Carl, urging her to hand the property over to them. Again, the issue comes back to the control and management of space, and the brothers' attempts to seize ownership of the land is coterminous with their attempts to reign in the unruly and expansive female. Alexandra is instrumental to the expansion of the family holdings; she enlarges the farm and makes it work. In doing so, in setting herself out-of-doors, she enters into a traditionally male territory, forsaking the comforts of the narrow domestic spaces that cannot contain her. Yet, having achieved success and facilitated the family's entry into society, she is impelled by the patriarchal rules of society to return to the socially acceptable domestic sphere of the household, indoors. And while she resists the efforts of Lou and Oscar to divest her of her property, the novel concludes on a note of ambiguity implicit in her decision to marry Carl, the man from whom as a girl she had taken the reins in setting out into darkness. Like *Yeziarska*, therefore, Cather offers a portrait of a female immigrant caught between the Old World and the New World, and also between a liberated feminine identity and a selfhood ensnared in a resilient culture of gender conformity.

Alexandra's affinity with the prairie landscape is perhaps the novel's greatest feminist statement.<sup>25</sup> Given charge of the homestead in her father's dying instructions, Cather's heroine is liberated from the usual trappings of domesticity and offered a new spatial framework. Shortly after her father's death, out of an instinctual feeling for the land, she remortgages the homestead to purchase part of the Linstrum, Crow, and Struble farms, making the family prosperous independent landowners. Alexandra's house is described as "curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort" (49); the cooking, cleaning, pickling, and preserving are handled by her three hired Swedish girls. But it is outside that Alexandra's "order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm." As the narrator observes, "you feel that, properly, Alexandra's

house is the big out-of-doors, and it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (50). Later, Alexandra recalls “days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination of the soil” (118). The convergence of Cather’s heroine with the soil presents a vision of ethnic womanhood as the exemplary pioneer; she is the bold and modern entrepreneur experimenting in new farming methods, testing new practices of animal husbandry, and introducing mechanical means of production. It is the immigrant woman who develops and expands the homestead, organizing its growth and wealth. It is she who breaks the land that her father describes as “like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness” (13). Cather offers a portrait not only of a woman who knows how to manage the land, but of a woman who is *of* the land. It is not simply a matter of property, as for her brothers Oscar and Lou, but of unity. Alexandra, the immigrant woman, is *the land itself*. Shaped by her hand and saturated by the blood of her family, the land is locked with Alexandra in a symbiosis of nurture and reproduction:

Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn . . .  
(180)

For Cather, therefore, it is the ethnic American immigrant communities – their stories, their histories, and their languages – that are the true stuff of the nation. Theirs are the stories that demand to be written and rewritten, told and retold. Theirs is the future that lies beneath the ridges of the prairie. It is no accident that Alexandra Bergson’s mind is described as a “white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things” (189). For her mind is the white space of the West that takes shape and develops as we read the book, culminating in the final section, entitled “Alexandra.” The “white book” is the land, it is Alexandra, and it is Cather’s modern literary experiment: the female pioneer novel.

#### NOTES

1. John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925; London: Penguin, 2000), 23.
2. See Campbell Gibson, “Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790–1990” (June 1998): <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html>. For more-general historical studies of immigration to the United States, see John E. Bodnar’s *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* (London: Little, Brown, 1973). See also Robert F. Zeidel’s *Immigrants, Progressives and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900–1927* (Chicago: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

3. For an excellent study of the cultural impact of these immigrants' socioreligious backgrounds, see John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
4. Cited in Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 8.
5. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 246. Recent studies that have energized debates about the impact of immigration on American modernism include Sarah Wilson's excellent *Melting Pot Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Werner Sollors' *Ethnic Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Rita Keresztesi's *Strangers at Home: Ethnic American Modernism between the World Wars* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).
6. Indeed, Yeziarska's commitment to exploring new cultural modes is evident in her connection with early film history. She sold the rights to her first collection, *Hungry Hearts*, to Samuel Goldwyn. For an excellent appraisal of the commercialization of Jewish identity, see Lisa Botshon, "Anzia Yeziarska and the Marketing of the Jewish Immigrant in 1920s Hollywood," *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 287–312.
7. Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers* (1925; New York: Persea, 2003), 10.
8. Priscilla Wald is especially insightful on the anxiety of the self and the conceptualization of identity in literary texts, especially those narratives "suppressed and repressed by the official stories of We the People." See *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). For an interesting discussion of the distinctions among life writing, life narrative, and autobiography, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
9. Gay Wilentz makes a similar observation regarding the double bind of the Jewish female protagonist and, indeed, about the plight of the immigrant in the face of Americanization programs in her "Introduction" to *Salome of the Tenements* (1923; Chicago: University of Illinois, 1995), ix–xxiii.
10. Anzia Yeziarska, "America and I," *Children of Loneliness: Stories of Immigrant Life in America* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1923), 50.
11. Ron Ebest, "Anzia Yeziarska and the Popular Debate over the Jews," *MELUS* 25, no. 1 (2000): 3.
12. As Guy Reynolds, Richard H. Millington, Ian F. A. Bell, and Sharon O'Brien have observed, Cather is often neglected in literary anthologies and rarely considered in most accounts of Anglo-American modernism. During her lifetime, Cather was often the subject of debate in terms of her seeming conservatism and detachment from the modern American scene. Most notable among her contemporary critics were Granville Hicks and Lionel Trilling, who lamented the perceived nostalgia and celebration of rural values within her work. See Hicks, "The Case against Willa Cather," *English Journal* (November 1933), in James Schroeter, ed., *Willa Cather and Her Critics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 139–147.
13. A wide range of scholarship uncovers Cather's European influences. Some notable examples include: Helen Dennis, ed., *Willa Cather and European Cultural*

- Influences* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996); Ian Bell, "Re-Writing America: Origin and Gender in *The Professor's House*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 24 (1994): 12–43; Robert Nelson, *Willa Cather and France: In Search of the Lost Language* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Stéphanie Durrans, *The Influence of French Culture on Willa Cather: Intertextual References and Resonances* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); Janis Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (London: Virago: 1997); and Mary Ryder, *Willa Cather and the Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).
14. Reynolds argues persuasively against the negative and parochial connotations associated with Cather's regionalism, noting her representation of lost communities not as a retreat into the past but as "a form of regionalist commitment (and recommitment) to the 'beloved community' that once existed." Furthermore, Reynolds observes that Cather weaves a progressive reform derived from populism into her characters' lives and stories. See Reynolds, "Willa Cather as Progressive: Politics and the Writer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21.
  15. Bell makes a compelling argument for Cather as self-consciously and deliberately interested in the purity associated with the primitive in *The Professor's House* (1925), linking Tom Outland's excavations on the Mesa and St. Peter's recollection of Outland's story as "the romance of the elusive, unwritable other as a means of approaching the beginning of things." See Bell, "Origin and Gender in Willa Cather," 24. Millington also observes an interest in the primitive in Cather's writing and describes her interest in immigrant and ancient cultures as animated by the new perspectives offered by Boasian anthropology. See Millington, "Willa Cather's American Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 57.
  16. Randolph Bourne, "Trans-national America" (1916), in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, eds. Paul Lauter et al. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 1637–1648.
  17. See Rose C. Field, "Restlessness Such as Ours Does Not Make for Beauty," *New York Times Book Review*, December 21, 1924, 11.
  18. Here Cather's desire to protect regional cultures is borne out of opposition to the perceived monolithic versions of American identity coming from the East, which is linked to the grievances of the populists.
  19. For a reappraisal of Cather along these lines, see the authoritative work by Guy Reynolds, "Willa Cather as Progressive," and "My *Ántonia* and the Americanization Debate" in *Willa Cather in Context* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 73–98.
  20. Willa Cather, "On *The Professor's House*" (1938), in *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Bison Books, 1988), 31.
  21. For an alternative interpretation of Cather as a writer with nativist proclivities, see Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).
  22. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 3.
  23. Susan Rosowski and Hermione Lee have noted the various parallels between Alexandra's story and Virgil's *Eclogues*. Laird points out that Marie and Emil's

story of doomed love is a literary analogue of the Pyramus and Thisbe story of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

24. See David Laird, "Willa Cather's Women: Gender Place and Narrativity in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1992): 242–253.
25. It is worth noting that Toni Morrison cites Cather as among those who had tried to counter "a centuries-long, hysterical blindness to feminist discourse and the way in which women and women's issues were read (or unread)." See *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14.