

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*: Gender, Love, and Work on the Queer Prairie

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Abstract

This thesis concerns Willa Cather's 1913 novel *O Pioneers!*, which revolves around a farming community on the Divide in the Western United States during the early twentieth century. The story primarily revolves around Alexandra Bergson, as she takes over her father's farm, learns to cultivate it, and interacts with the other farmers. This thesis reads *O Pioneers!* from the viewpoint of queer theory and queer ecology, in an attempt to uncover the ways in which the novel can be said to articulate a politics of queerness. This, then, is done by examining how the concepts of performativity and queer intimacy are represented. The main line of argument concerns the relationship between Alexandra and Frank, in which Frank functions as a foil character used to emphasize Alexandra's politics of queer (ecological) intimacy and care. Furthermore, this thesis also addresses the ways in which discourses that dictate gender and discourses that demarcate the natural world interact and cooperate to create the lived experience of the characters in *O Pioneers!*.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Queer Theory and Queer Ecology.....	6
1.1. Introduction.....	6
1.2. Performativity.....	7
1.3. Intimacy.....	8
Chapter 2: Performance, Punishment, and Intimacy in <i>O Pioneers!</i>	10
Chapter 3: Performances of Nature, and the “Mesh” in <i>O Pioneers!</i>	14
Chapter 4: “Crazy Ivar” and the Queer Ecological Synthesis.....	18
Conclusion.....	22
Appendix.....	24
1. Plot Summary.....	24
2. Conflict between Alexandra and Lou and Oscar.....	25
3. On Ivar.....	25
Works Cited.....	27

Introduction

Originally published in 1913, American author Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* tells the story of a farming community on the Divide, an area in the Western United States around the beginning of the 20th century. The 2016 Penguin Classics version of the novel, however, describes the plot in a distinctly different way. Besides *O Pioneers!* being about the life and work of its main character Alexandra Bergson, the Penguin Classics' back cover reads, it is also "the story of what it means to be American." In doing this, Penguin not only makes a normative assumption about Americanness—in the sense that it considers rural Americanness directly indicative of Americanness more broadly—it also firmly situates *O Pioneers!* within the 1920s US culture wars, in which the meaning of Americanness became highly contested and politically charged. As an increasing amount of Americans came to live in the cities rather than in rural areas, conflicts regarding, among others, race, immigration, and sexual politics came to be inscribed within a larger cultural struggle between the modern urban spaces and the supposedly more traditional rural areas (Lindemann 4). Within this environment, then, the nation came to constitute "a space of ... profound instability" (Lindemann 4).

The main topic of this thesis is characterized by a similar instability, given that it concerns Willa Cather's connection to queerness, queer theory, and the subsequently articulated, relatively new field of queer ecology. This thesis aims to examine to what extent *O Pioneers!* deconstructs supposed binary distinctions between gender, gender performance, and nature/culture. It is primarily guided by the following research question: In what ways does Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* give expression to queer theory and queer ecology, principally exemplified by the notions of performativity and intimacy, in regards to the relationship between the characters, and between the characters and the farmland?

The first chapter serves as the theoretical basis of the interpretation. In it, I outline the general politics of queer theory and queer ecology, as well as more closely examine two of their key concepts: performativity and intimacy (Butler, Mortimer-Sandlilands, Morton). In the second chapter, I examine ways in which *O Pioneers!* gives expression to performativity and intimacy as phrased by queer theory, examining how characters in the novel perform a certain understanding of gender and build queer communities. In chapter three I also look for signs of performativity and intimacy, but

then as these concepts are understood by queer ecology. Interpretive chapters three and four revolve primarily around the characters Alexandra and Frank, who I argue function both contrastingly and complementary, given that they are confronted by the same constraining forces of sexist and heterosexist discourse but respond to it in a significantly different manner. Within this relation, Frank functions as a foil character for Alexandra, emphasizing Alexandra's queerness and the strength of will with which she continues her transgressive politics. In the fourth chapter, the connection between queer theory and queer ecology is made explicit through a renewed reading of Alexandra and Frank, as well as an inclusion of the character Ivar, who I argue challenges hegemonic discourses of gender and of nature simultaneously, and whose punishment combines the two discourses as well. In the conclusion I answer the research question, as well as hypothesize additional interpretive points of entry. Lastly, this thesis includes an Appendix that provides a plot summary of *O Pioneers!*, as well as more detailed descriptions of key passages in the novel.

Willa Cather's work has received academic attention in the past, some of which already ties it to queer theory and practices of queering. This is most notably done in Marilee Lindemann's book *Willa Cather: Queering America*. In it, Lindemann explores several key ways in which Cather's work relies upon and contributes to processes of queering. These include queering through "examining the axes of difference – psychosexual, racial/ethnic, economic, and literary" (4), and writing novels that are "stubbornly antinovelistic" (5), characterized by de-emphasis of heroic storylines and a general disinterest in the "drama of heterosexual desire" (5). Other connections between Willa Cather and queerness include Christopher Nealon's "Affect-Genealogy: Feeling and Affiliation in Willa Cather," and the book *Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space, and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison*. This thesis seeks to add to the interpretive framework already laid out by focusing on queering with a more specific emphasis on gender, as well as by adding the dimension of queer ecology to reading *O Pioneers!*

Chapter 1

Queer Theory and Queer Ecology

1.1 Introduction

The early 1990s set the stage for the initial articulations of what would become the field of queer theory. Originally arising out of gay/lesbian studies and feminist theory, queer theory seeks to expand upon the political projects of both, as they originally focused too exclusively on sexuality and gender, respectively, without considering dimensions of class, race, and other possible intersections (Musser 243). A key part of the politics of queer theory concerns the practice of queering, which can be understood in two ways: First, as a project of finding and celebrating queer presences in whatever field is being examined, and second, as a challenge of oppressive, hegemonic structures that obscure, suppress, denaturalize, and pathologize queerness in general (Kosofsky Sedgwick 3). In this thesis, queerness is understood as a subject-position and a set of behaviours that do not adhere to the norms of proper sexuality and gender as dictated by heteronormative and sexist discourses.

An explicitly ecological perspective on queerness was first articulated in 1994, with the “Queer/Nature” edition of the journal *UnderCurrents*. Since then, the political project of queer ecology has been articulated as being twofold. First, as pointed out by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands in her introduction to the book *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, queer ecology seeks to uncover the mutually reinforcing discursive links between dominant narratives regarding nature and sexuality. Not only is the idea of nature instrumentalized to pathologize non-heterosexual desires, as is also argued by queer theory, but heteronormativity in turn helps shape dominant conceptions of nature. The natural world, Mortimer-Sandilands says, is traditionally gendered as female in the sense that it is understood “as a site for the enactment of a specific heteromascularity” (3) in the form of “hunting, fishing ... and other outdoor activities” (3). On top of this, heteronormativity has also greatly informed discourses on animal life and emphasized its presupposed complete heterosexuality. The second aim of queer ecology concerns the articulation of an environmental politics that does not serve to underlie heteronormative understanding of human relations, as well as a sexual politics that also includes a queering of traditional understandings of the natural world (5).

1.2 Performativity

In a continuation of earlier feminist politics, queer theory emphasizes the socially constructed nature of gender. Rather than an expression of a stable, inherent essence, queer theory argues, the notion of gender is largely informed by discourses that demarcate the limits for what is allowed as feminine and masculine behaviour. Not only is gender not an expression of an essence of femininity or masculinity, it is also not stable, but instead needs to be constantly reinstated by performances of a particular gender. The notion of performativity is most elaborately explained by Judith Butler, who argues that gender should be considered “an identity tenuously constituted in time ... through a stylized repetition of acts” (“Performative Acts” 519). These acts, then, produce the appearance of “an abiding gendered self” (519). Performances of gender can concern stylization of the body, as well as specific gestures and ways of movement, and serve the purpose of making certain gender expressions appear natural, logical, and unchanging (*Gender Trouble* xv).

The discourses that dictate proper gender performance, Butler argues, function on the basis of constraint (“Critically Queer” 23). The convincing power of the norm lies in that it threatens punishment for those who overstep the boundaries of proper femininity or masculinity. Gender performance is compulsory, enforced by discipline and punishment in the form of mockery, social exclusion, and disenfranchisement. Not only is approximation of gender norms a necessary prerequisite for social belonging and acceptance, but also for one’s general legibility as a subject. As argued by Butler, subject-formation is inevitably contingent upon “prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (“Critically Queer” 23), and thus unintelligible gender results in a broader illegibility that traverses beyond it.

Because gender is constituted in time, through continuous and repeated performance, there is also room for disruption. Normative heterosexist discourse is not totalitarian in the sense that, while it threatens to and does punish transgression, it has no way of completely eradicating the possibility of transgressive (gender) performances. As political intervention, subversive performances of gender serve not only to challenge traditional notions of stable, gendered essences, but also to show the reality and simply the possibility of gender expression beyond the norm.

Within queer ecology, performativity also plays a key role. Primarily, queer ecology focuses on the ways humans perform a presupposed understanding of nature. Informed by the binary distinction between human civilization, and the fundamentally non-human natural environment, human performances of nature often reinforce our understanding of the natural world in terms of its picturesque attributes and its distance from civilization. Generally, the natural world is conceived of as chaotic, dangerous, far removed from human civilization, and essentially non-human. This construction of nature is partially supported by human performances that build upon the premise that nature exists outside of human civilization, and can concern camping vacations but also forms of art like wildlife photography.

1.3 Intimacy

As addressed earlier, expressions of gender and sexuality that do not fall within the accepted limits are often punished in the form of social exclusion, disenfranchisement and other expressions of epistemic, administrative, but also physical violence. In the face of this, queer theory raises the question of how to productively challenge and unite against oppressive discourses and the day-to-day practices they authorize. Subsequently, it advocates for a politics of community, interdependence, and intimacy among queer people. When faced with constant delegitimization, queer community provides another way “of feeling possible, intelligible, even real” (Butler, “Is Kinship” 26). There are several key characteristics of queer political community: First, queer politics emphasizes the need for an appreciation, even celebration of difference and multiplicity. Because there is no authentic sexuality, there is no need for a hierarchy in which one sexuality is considered the norm and all others are derivations. Following this multiplicity, queer radical intimacy emphasizes fluidity and constant negotiation above rigidity. Most relevant to this thesis, however, is the notion that queer community works on the basis of a radical love and intimacy for others, which not only provides support and community for queer individuals, but also challenges hegemonic notions of family, reproduction, and lines of generational descent by calling into question the ways in which these notions have historically favoured heterosexual kinship relations (295).

Within queer ecology, a politics of radical love and intimacy is also highlighted, for example, by Timothy Morton in his book *The Ecological Thought*. In it, Morton articulates the idea of the “mesh” as a specific derivation of queer radical intimacy that also takes into account and welcomes everything considered to belong to nature. Morton defines the “mesh” as “a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries [...] between species, between the living and the non-living, between organism and environment” (“Queer Ecology” 275-276). Broadly, the “mesh” should be understood as the all-encompassing system that includes and connects all entities. The notion of the “mesh” serves multiple purposes: To problematize the hegemonic understanding of nature as a resource in service of human progress, to erase the boundaries between the human and the non-human, and to signal interconnectedness between all forms of life.

Subsequently, Morton signals the need for “radical intimacy, [and] coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise” (*The Ecological Thought* 8), a thought that mirrors the queer intimacies discussed earlier but also explicitly includes non-human actors and interests. Following, radical intimacy requires not only appreciation of all others but also an acknowledgement that one presence in the “mesh” is “always already responsible for the other” (*The Ecological Thought* 50), and that, for a politics of the “mesh” to work, sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness are vital.

Chapter 2

Performance, Punishment, and Intimacy in *O Pioneers!*.

This part of the text focuses on the ways in which *O Pioneers!* addresses the notions of performativity and intimacy as originally phrased in queer theory, and, in doing so, constructs a certain relationship between Alexandra and Frank regarding their relationships to others as well as to the discourses that govern proper gender performance and proper displays of courtship and intimacy.

A first instance of performativity can be found early in the novel, when a young Alexandra is described to be wearing “a man’s long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier)” (4). This characterization of Alexandra’s clothing not only signals a performance of gender partially informed by masculinity, but also directly challenges mechanisms of pathologization, since Alexandra’s gender performance is characterized as “not ... an affliction” but rather an expression of comfort. This characterization of Alexandra is also significant because it part of her first introduction to the reader, thus constituting her as a subversive figure from the onset of the narrative.

As subversive performance is often followed by punishment, so does Alexandra face threats of exclusion tied to her gendered transgressions. This primarily concerns her position of authority (see Appendix). Given that this position is highly gendered, at times Alexandra is reminded of its supposed unconventionality and impropriety. When Alexandra first takes over the farm, her father expresses pride that Alexandra is as level-headed and strong-willed as he once was, but that “[h]e would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons” (16). This comment serves to emphasize the notion that gender performance traditionally coded as feminine is not seen as immediately compatible with leadership positions in the way that masculine performances are. In making this comment, John Bergson echoes the punishing mechanisms of sexist discourse examined earlier, which in this case punishes implicitly by further reinforcing the normative strength of traditional femininity.

A more explicit example of punishment results from a conflict between Alexandra and her brothers Lou and Oscar (see Appendix). As Lou and Oscar threaten to sue Alexandra, they argue that the farm’s supposedly inevitable downfall will be accredited to them since they are “the men of the family” (102). These threats are framed in a vocabulary of proper gender performance and

Alexandra's transgressions in that regard. Lou and Oscar criticize Carl for not being able to provide financially, telling Alexandra that Carl is "a tramp" that "wants to be taken care of" (101). The shameful behaviour Lou and Oscar identify in Carl is also gendered, in the sense that it deviates from the norm of male financial control in marriage. Carl embarrasses the Bergson family, Lou and Oscar argue, because he has nothing substantial to offer.

Moreover, Lou and Oscar confront Alexandra on her supposed naiveté for wanting to provide for Carl as well as their presumption that she is too old to marry. During the discussion, Oscar says to Lou that "[i]f she was going to marry, she ought to done [sic] it long ago, and not go making a fool of herself now" (105), implying that Alexandra is embarrassing the family not only because she wants to share her wealth with Carl but also because she plans to do it at a relatively old age. Alexandra deviates from the norm of proper feminine behaviour in two ways, and is punished for it by her brothers, who threaten to take the farm away from her through legal action. While Alexandra does not bow to their pressure (104), Carl does and decides to leave (110), causing Alexandra to be punished nonetheless.

Frank Shabata also faces these mechanisms of pressure and constraint regarding proper gender performance. Before his marriage to Marie, it is established that Frank was a rather extravagant figure. On Sunday gatherings he was "easily the buck of the beer-gardens ... with his silk hat and tucked shirt and his blue frock-coat, wearing gloves and carrying a little wisp of a yellow cane" (88). His mannerisms, at these times, were described as "melancholy and romantic *in the extreme*" (88, emphasis added). This highly performative side of Frank, however, appears to have disappeared after his marriage. His clothes come to resemble something more easily recognizable as traditional, rural masculinity, in the form of "overalls and a blue shirt" (85) and a "broad straw hat" (85). The yellow cane is even hidden away in a closet (120), and when Alexandra and Marie find it they joke about how "foolish" (12) and "funny" (120) he must have looked carrying it. Frank's marriage, then, can be read as a constraining force, making him feel the need to literally hide away his previous performances in order to adopt something more closely in line with the local norm.

Frank also performs this traditional masculinity regarding his marriage and the role he feels he needs to fulfil within it. He performs this role on the assumption that his wife is "timid" (121) and

does not “care about another living thing in the world but just Frank” (121). When Marie leaves for school, the pictures Frank takes of himself include “a little round photograph for her watch-case, photographs for her wall and dresser, and even long narrow ones to be used as bookmarks” (89). In taking the photographs, Frank anticipates that, while at school, Marie will have the time and desire to look at his picture in every corner of her room. Frank, then, performs his understanding of marriage despite the fact that Marie cannot fulfil the accompanying role and that both her and Frank are suffering from it.

Frank’s connection to (queer) intimacy is tied to his marriage as well, and, when compared to Alexandra’s relationship to Carl, a significant difference can be identified. While Alexandra and Carl understand each other in a constructive, positive way, Marie and Frank recognize the underlying reasons for their destructive relationship but fail to address it effectively. Marie admits she has a habit of setting people against Frank, and that “[p]erhaps he would try to be agreeable to people again, if [she] were not around” (122), while Frank expresses comparable concerns. He acknowledges that “he had been trying to break [Marie’s] spirit” (163) and that “he [had] wanted her to feel that life was as ugly and as unjust as he felt it” (164).

Both Frank and Marie know that their marriage, as informed by normative heterosexist values and role patterns, is actively damaging them both, but they never take any action to address it. As mentioned earlier, this is partially because of a discursive framework within the novel that shames people who end their marriages (91). Following the arguments of queer radical kinship and intimacy, Frank and Marie’s failure to address their dysfunctional marriage can also be attributed to the idea that, for them, there is no alternative that feels like an improvement or even a possibility. As argued earlier, one of the political goals of queer intimacy is to expand the scope of possible kinship relations outside of the heterosexual nuclear family. Within this reading, Frank and Marie’s marriage might then be seen as testament to the convincing and potentially destructive power of heteronormative discourse, since they would rather hurt and even kill each other than challenge the norms that dictate the terms of their relationship.

Alexandra and Carl, in comparison, understand each other’s needs and desires in a more constructive way. Early on in the story, Carl admits he feels insecure because he believes he cannot

help Alexandra, to which she responds: “It is by understanding me [...] that you’ve helped me. I expect that is the only way one person can ever help another. I think you are the only person that ever helped me” (32). A similar statement is made by Carl as he tells Alexandra: “I think I know how you feel about this country as well as you do yourself” (187). While their relationship already challenges certain norms in the sense that they do not get married and that Alexandra takes on the role as main provider, Alexandra and Carl also distinctly echo the politics of queer radical intimacy by emphasizing fluidity. Whereas Frank and Marie interpreted marriage as needing to be all-encompassing and in some way included in all other kinships, thus reflecting the emphasized fixity of heterosexist norms, Alexandra and Carl embrace a fluidity and changeability that is in line with queer intimacy. Carl, as mentioned above acknowledges Alexandra’s love for her farm, and when Carl leaves the Divide, Alexandra lets him leave and welcomes him when he returns. Furthermore, *O Pioneers!* does not label their love as being romantic, sexual, or perhaps just platonic, thus leaving room for it to be read as a kind of loving kinship that is not unilateral but rather many things at once.

Concluding, Frank can be read as a foil character in order to add to the characterization of Alexandra. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a foil character is a character who “serve[s] to emphasize [the qualities or actions] of the protagonist by providing a ... contrast with them” (Baldick). While both of them are “wrecked by the same storm” (Cather 182) in the sense that they both suffer from the constraining forces dictating proper and accepted behaviour, they respond to it significantly differently. While Alexandra continues her transgressions in the face of constraint, Frank becomes bitter, violent, and lashes out at others. This difference in response serves to highlight Alexandra’s strength of will in her continued challenging of the norm.

Chapter 3

Performances of Nature, and the “Mesh” in *O Pioneers!*

As examined in the first chapter, the field of queer ecology strategically works with the notions of performativity and (queer) intimacy in order to critically examine the binary distinctions made not only between genders and sexualities, but also between the human and the non-human. As *O Pioneers!* tells the story of a farming community, much can be uncovered by exploring ways in which the human characters choose to act upon and cultivate their farmlands.

The farmers living on the Divide appear to inhabit a highly competitive space, in which successful farming earns money and prestige among the community. This sense of competition is further strengthened by the characterisation of the Divide as “wild” (13) and “unfriendly to man” (13), which establishes that the odds are against the farmers, and consequently, that a lucrative farm is a direct credit to the efforts made by the farmer in taming their land.

In trying to achieve success, then, a number of characters in *O Pioneers!* consider their farm in purely utilitarian terms, seeking to harvest from it in order to gain money and praise. In such situations, the farmland serves as a status symbol, with the farmer who harvests the best, the earliest, and the most being regarded as the most successful. On multiple occasions, *O Pioneers!* signals feelings of jealousy harboured among farmers in regards to their businesses. When one such farmer shows off his new mechanical wheat thresher, his friend feels an “old pang of envy” towards him (150). Another situation that renders this competitiveness involves brothers Lou and Oscar, who regard each other with “sharpness and uneasiness” (61) because “Oscar makes more money than his brother” (61).

Frank also adheres to the understanding of life on the Divide as highly competitive, primarily in the sense that he considers it in individualistic terms. He refuses to help and accept help from the other farmers, and rejects any codependence. When he complains about another farmer’s hogs escaping and eating his wheat, and Marie suggests helping fix the farmer’s fences, Frank refuses, saying: “Other peoples [sic] can do like me” (86), implying that if he has to repair his own fences, other farmers have to do it for themselves too. In doing this, Frank frames the situation as a zero-sum game, in which there is no possibility of mutually beneficial cooperation.

Whereas Frank's approach to the other farmers does signal competition, the way he acts upon his farmland is distinctly different. Instead of instrumentalizing his farm for profit, it appears as if he is using it to release his anger. Frank's method of farming includes him "[flinging] himself at the soil with savage energy" (90) and "work[ing] like a demon" (90). While not fully in line with the utilitarianism of the farming methods examined earlier, Frank's behaviour towards his farm is emblematic of the violence and anger that characterize many of his interactions. Frank's violence towards his farm, then, can be read in the same vein as his violence toward Marie and Emil, as a consequence of the constraining forces that pressure him to change his personality in order to be accepted onto the Divide.

Alexandra, in comparison, denotes a set of values toward the farm and her colleagues that are oppositional to Frank's. Where Frank operates on the premises of competition and individual effort, Alexandra instead focuses on codependence and affinity. As Frank refuses to help the other farmer, Alexandra argues that "it sometimes helps to mend other people's fences" (86). Alexandra is depicted as always helping other farmers and thus prioritizing community over profit and status. When Carl and Alexandra reminisce about their youths, Carl describes how his father would always go to Alexandra for advice on cultivating the farm, saying that they have "all depended on [her]" (32). Alexandra continues this approach throughout the novel by welcoming Ivar, a friend and other farmer, into her home, and wanting to marry Carl and share her farm with him, despite that this does not benefit her materially or financially. In this approach, the farm functions not as a status symbol or something only to be harvested for profit, but rather as catalyst for human kinship and community, a place to live and have meaningful interactions with others. Nonetheless, this approach still positions the farm in service of the human actors that choose to settle upon it.

Characterisations of the farmland that challenge this subservient position concern the times when human characters explicitly identify and sympathise with the land they inhabit. When Marie, for example, describes feeling "as the pond must feel" (154), she ties her emotions to the natural world around her. The connection she makes, then, signals a certain emotional proximity between Marie and the land, given that both feel in a manner recognisable enough so as to be compared to human feeling. Alexandra also directly identifies with the land and, by doing so, she gives it agency. When on the

farm, she describes feeling “in her own body the joyous germination of the soil” (125). On top of this emotional and physical proximity that is also present here, Alexandra uses the farm as a frame of reference for understanding her emotions toward other characters. Emil, for example, describes how Alexandra “had always believed in him as she had believed in the land” (148), which suggests that, for Alexandra, there is no difference between her belief in the land and her belief in her brother. She also utilizes a vocabulary of nature to make sense of her perception of herself. Her personal life is likened to “an underground river that [comes] to the surface ... and then [sinks] again to flow under her own fields” (125). In her use of the Divide as the point of reference, Alexandra deconstructs the binary opposition between human civilisation and nature, because in doing so she implies that the workings of nature are similar enough to human existence for the comparison between the two to be intelligible, relevant, and informative.

The distinction between the human/non-human is also deconstructed when considering the novel from the angle of the “mesh.” As explained, the “mesh” is primarily characterized by its inclusion of every entity that inhabits this planet, and the emphasized necessity of love, responsibility, and forgiveness between all of them. An episode in the story that can be read informatively from the angle of radical queer intimacy and the “mesh” concerns Alexandra’s decision to have Frank pardoned for his murders. During their conversation Frank is characterized as a non-human. He is described as seeming “not altogether human” (180), and “as if something came up in him that had extinguished his power of feeling and thinking” (180). This characterisation of Frank is already significant, primarily because it signals a possibility of traveling across the human/non-human divide, and thus points out how these categories are not as fixed as they are generally made out to be.

Alexandra’s response is perhaps even more telling. She feels a solidarity with Frank and treats him in a way that is fully in line with the politics of the “mesh,” emphasizing forgiveness and acknowledging that one being is “always already responsible for the other” (*Ecological Thought* 50). Alexandra forgives him for the murder of her brother, and knows that, while nothing can be done for Emil now, she can still use her power to make things easier for Frank (Cather 182), who, despite having become at least partially non-human, still constitutes a presence in the “mesh” and is thus equally deserving of care.

In terms of their approach to the farmland and the other farmers, Frank again provides a contrast to Alexandra's politics of care and affinity. He is again utilized as a foil character, functioning to highlight not only Alexandra's strength of will, but also the gravity of her decision to help Frank be pardoned for his crimes. In doing this, Alexandra shows how a politics of radical intimacy and forgiveness can make a start in redeeming those who have been hurt.

Chapter 4

“Crazy Ivar” and the Queer Ecological Synthesis

As shown in chapters two and three, *O Pioneers!* can be read from the theoretical perspectives of queer theory and queer ecology, in that they show how the novel can be used to address considerations regarding gender and sexuality as well as human relations to the natural environment. While the preceding chapters have largely approached these theoretical toolkits separately, this concluding chapter seeks to combine them more explicitly in order to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between heterosexist discourse and the exploitation of the natural world.

Chapter three already hints at such an interplay within Frank’s character arc, in the sense that constraint of his gender expression leads him to approach his work on the farm in anger. As seen in chapter two, it also results in him killing Marie and Emil, which could have been prevented, had either he or Marie seen a persuasive enough way out of their destructive marriage. The constraining forces that act upon Frank, then, not only compel him to violence in a similarly gendered sense—concerning the murder of his wife—but also lead him to direct his anger towards the farmland, and thus implicitly strengthen the supposed subservience of the natural world to the efforts of the farmer. When the murder of Marie and Emil causes him to go to jail, it is a politics of the queer ecological “mesh,” as maintained by Alexandra, that attempts to redeem him. Because Alexandra’s feelings of responsibility and affinity accommodate for the natural and animal world as well, Frank, who had become “not altogether human” (180), might be pardoned for his crimes. These two situations, the violence towards the farm and the attempt to have Frank pardoned, shows how discourses that prescribe gender and those that demarcate the natural do not operate in isolation, but rather work upon a person simultaneously.

The interconnectedness found with Alexandra does not concern her response to the mechanisms of constraint used to enforce gender, but rather the politics of intimacy that she maintains towards both the farmland and the people that inhabit it. As examined above, Alexandra utilizes an ethics of the “mesh” in her view and support of Frank, leading her to approach him through the lens of radical interconnectedness and responsibility. Alexandra operates on the basis of a similar codependence in her approach to her farm, but also to Carl, her significant other. The mutual

understanding identified to be at the heart of their relationship is fully in line with the radical interconnectedness as well as the politics of difference that characterize the “mesh.” While they signal this connection and interdependence by wanting to share the farm and its responsibilities (100), they, too, acknowledge the ways in which they differ and attempt to accommodate for that. In chapter two, their relationship has been read from the angle of queer theory’s radical intimacy, but, as seen above, it is also reflective of the politics of the “mesh.”

One way to envision this interconnectedness theoretically is through the public park. Serving as almost stereotypical representations of the natural world within cities, public parks, along with zoos and gardens, inevitably function to underwrite the supposedly essential distinction between nature and culture. Aside from its ecological politics, public parks especially have been inscribed with a strong articulation of heteronormativity. Because of a general layout including long walkways, benches, and gazebos, public parks are made to be highly accommodating of displays of heterosexual courtship. Such parks, then, not only underwrite the distinction between nature and civilisation but also function to inscribe normative heterosexuality into the public space, and natural public space in particular. Nonetheless, public parks have also proven to be a viable space for queer presences and queer desires, despite the fact that they are still governed by heterosexual imageries. At night, Matthew Gandy describes, some parks become a welcoming place for gay cruising and public sex (732). These enactments of queer desire thus constitute performances of nature that do not result in a strict demarcation between nature and culture, but rather function to challenge both the spatialization of heterosexuality as well as the strategically enforced heteronormativity of public space.

Another embodiment of connectedness of discourse regarding gender and the boundary between nature and culture in *O Pioneers!* concerns Ivar, whose subversion of gender is directly implicated in his challenge of the exploitative approach to nature, and vice versa. Living on the Divide, Ivar treats the land not only as a house, but also as a place with a certain intrinsic worth that is not tied to what it can yield. Ivar inhabits his farm “without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (23), not wanting to build a traditional house but instead living in something resembling a cave. A large part of his farmland consists of a pond where birds come to rest during their journeys (23), and he forbids people from bringing guns to his farm so

an not to scare them. Furthermore, Ivar directly personifies the animals that visit him, referring to birds as having “voices” (25), and calling an ill horse he is treating “sister” (21). Additionally, Ivar argues that, if he were to hire a housekeeper one day, he would call them “Badger” (24), since he feels badgers keep neater houses than humans do. In doing this, Ivar emphasizes the arbitrariness of supposedly essential distinctions made between the human and the animal in particular, and the human and the non-human more generally.

His approach towards the sick animals he treats for a living signals a radical interconnectedness that is very much in line with the politics of the “mesh.” When he treats a sick horse, he “groan[s] as if he ha[s] the pain himself” (21), and even “takes the [horse] medicine himself, and then prays over the horses” (21). This method is strongly contingent upon a connection between Ivar and the horses, and a feeling of care and responsibility Ivar maintains towards them.

Ivar’s performance of gender is less explicit than Frank and Alexandra’s, but nonetheless present. Ivar is described as shaggy-looking, having long, unkempt hair and wearing “a shirt of unbleached cotton” (23). Ivar’s manner of dressing and behaving is partly informed by a desire for comfort and practicality (23), and by his religious convictions (170), but do not necessarily rely upon a traditionally recognizable understanding of masculinity. Moreover, Ivar appears not to acknowledge gender as informative or relevant, never making any general statements about femininity or masculinity, and judging people at the hand of how they treat him, rather than the respects in which they differ from him. As with a politics of the “mesh,” then, Ivar not only treats animals but also all other inhabitants of the Divide with care and affinity, regardless of the way these people differ from him in terms of, for instance, gender, status, and relationship to the land.

Moreover, Cather also more explicitly draws a link between Ivar and queerness. While in 1913 the term did not have the same sophistication it does today, queerness had already come to connote non-heterosexuality in heterosexual as well as non-heterosexual circles (Lindemann 2). Descriptions of Ivar that refer to him as “queerly shaped” (23), and “queer, certainly” (61), then, gain an additional, sexual and gendered meaning aside from simply denoting strangeness. In doing this, a vocabulary of gender and sexuality is utilized to shame Ivar for his relationship to the land, thus showing how the two discourses can intersect and mutually reinforce one another.

The discursive punishment faced by Ivar, then, is very much phrased in a vocabulary that combines notions of improper gender with inappropriate relations to the natural world. Ivar's punishment concerns people joking about him and calling him "Crazy Ivar" (20), but it is also characterized by an emphasis on the violence people fear Ivar will commit. This violence, then, is framed as both a manifestation of Ivar's inhumanness as well as an expression of a certain masculinity. People are scared of Ivar because they believe he stalks across the prairie and howls at the moon at night (20), implying that his emotional proximity to animals makes him part animal and thus dangerous. This connection between animal life and danger not only serves to mock Ivar, but also implicitly to reassert the assumption that the natural world is inevitably dangerous and chaotic, and needs to be tamed. On top of likening him to an animal, Ivar is also seen as a threat because people think Alexandra and her female employees are not safe in his company. Lou and Oscar, for example, believe that Ivar is likely "to take after ... the girls with an axe" (62) one day, and that Lou's daughter is afraid of Ivar hurting her (62).

Given that Ivar is punished principally for his unconventional approach to life on the Divide, is it significant that this punishment also assigns to him an explicit, dangerous masculinity, and shows how transgressions of one kind can also be punished in the vocabulary of another. In a similar vein to the changing functionality of public parks, Ivar's queerness in regard to gender is not isolated from his queering of human relations to the farmland and the animals, thus showing how a politics that subverts normative gender roles can also be utilized to address the discourses that authorize the continuous and destructive exploitation of the natural world, and vice versa.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have interpreted Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* from the angle of queer theory and queer ecology, by examining the novel's expressions of performativity and queer intimacy and how these two concepts function to characterize the relationships that exist between the human characters and their farmland, as well as between the characters themselves. In chapters two and three I examined the ways in which characters Alexandra and Frank perform gender, and their lives on the farm, as well as build communities with other farmers and with the farmland itself. In both these respects, I argued Frank functions as a foil character for Alexandra, providing a contrast in order to emphasize Alexandra queerness, her strength of will in continuing transgression in the face of constraint, and the importance of her politics of radical, queer ecological intimacy. The contrast between Frank and Alexandra, then, is not that they hold strictly oppositional viewpoints with regard to gender, queer community, and the human/non-human divide, but that Frank has forcefully bent to the constraining power of hegemonic discourse whereas Alexandra has not. In chapter four, I combined the theoretical perspectives of queer theory and queer ecology, in order to show how the workings of discourse regarding gender and the nature/culture divide intersect, and mutually reinforce one another. In the case of Ivar, this intersection concerns a punishment of his non-traditional approach to the land that is partially phrased in a vocabulary that rests on conventional assumptions regarding gender.

Given the fact that the scope of the presented argument is necessarily limited, it follows that there are several additional interpretive perspectives that would contribute to the points made in this thesis. For example, considerations of performance and subversion in *O Pioneers!* could also focus more explicitly on sexuality, or on race or class. Furthermore, the same theoretical framework used in this thesis could also be transposed onto the other parts of Cather's Great Plains Trilogy; *My Ántonia* and *The Song of the Lark*. Another interesting point of entry would concern the questionable statement on the back of the Penguin Classics copy of the novel, which argues that *O Pioneers!* "tells the story of what it means to be American." Subsequent research would then interrogate the extent to which Cather articulates a normative understanding of Americanness in her novel, and how this Americanness stands in relation to the novel's articulations of queerness.

Lastly, a number of considerations can be made regarding the subjects that were chosen for this thesis as well as the decisions made along the way. While the notion of performativity and queer theory's articulation of intimacy seemed to work well as a toolkit for approaching *O Pioneers!*, doubts can be voiced regarding the efficacy of a politics of the "mesh," within this thesis as well as more broadly. Given that the "mesh" maintains a radical inclusivity that is almost totalitarian, it runs the risk of disregarding specificity and difference, both of which this thesis identifies as key components of queer intimacy. Within the analysis offered here, then, another concept could have been chosen to exemplify the queerness of queer ecological intimacy more explicitly than done by the "mesh." Nonetheless, such considerations do nothing if not show that there is much more to say regarding *O Pioneers!* and Willa Cather's works more generally.

Appendix

1. Plot Summary of *O Pioneers!*.

The plot of *O Pioneers!* revolves mainly around Alexandra Bergson, a woman in the Western United States who, at the beginning of the 20th century, takes over the family farm from her sick father at a relatively young age. As the head of both the farm and the family, Alexandra manages to turn the farm into a highly successful venture despite the fact that it is a difficult season on the Divide and many farmers are going bankrupt and leave for the city. Alexandra's determination not only allows their business to survive but also expand and thrive greatly over time.

Alexandra's inner circle consists of her three brothers Lou, Oscar, and Emil, her close friends Carl and Marie, and Ivar, the old farmer Alexandra takes into her house after he loses his. Lou and Oscar are often unhappy with Alexandra leading the business, and express this by challenging her on certain decisions, like her proposed marriage to Carl (See Appendix 2)

Alexandra's friend Marie is married to a man named Frank, but it soon becomes clear that neither of them are happy being married. They fight numerous times, sometimes violently, and Marie often says they would both be happier if they had not gotten together. Nevertheless, neither Marie nor Frank want to divorce the other, primarily because they know people will judge them for it. Marie, especially, argues that she would be shamed if she were to enter into another relationship after marriage. Over the course of the story, Marie falls in love and begins an affair with Alexandra's brother Emil.

When Frank, Marie's husband, finds Marie and Emil together in their orchard, he kills them both and flees. After a while, however, Frank reconsiders and turns himself in. When Alexandra finds out about the death of her brother she becomes determined to get Frank pardoned for his crimes, because, as she believes, he is the only one who can still be helped. After she visits Frank in prison and tells him about her plans to have him pardoned, she returns back home. Having heard the news of Emil's death, Carl returns to the Divide to support Alexandra. In their last conversation in the novel, it is implied that Carl and Alexandra will be getting married.

2. Conflict between Alexandra and Lou and Oscar (100-111)

During a family conversation between Alexandra and her brothers Lou and Oscar, the brothers express concern over Carl's infatuation with Alexandra, stating that people are beginning to gossip about their relationship, and the possibility of them marrying. When Alexandra does not deny their claim, Lou and Oscar become angry and try to stop her from going through with the hypothetical marriage. They feel that, because Carl is relatively poor, Alexandra will embarrass the family by marrying him. Furthermore, Lou and Oscar also fear Carl becoming co-owner of the farm will threaten the inheritance of their children. For these reasons, they threaten to sue Alexandra in order to take control of the farm, but also because they believe that she will bankrupt the farm and they will be held responsible for it. Alexandra dares them to go to their lawyer, stating that that they will no longer have influence over her in another way.

After the discussion, Lou and Oscar confront Carl. The shaming turns out to be more effective on him, since he decides to leave the Divide, only to come back when he feels he has something to offer to Alexandra. Carl leaves, despite that fact that Alexandra explicitly tells him she wants him to stay and does not need or want his money.

3. On Ivar

At the beginning of the story, a young Alexandra, Carl, Lou, Oscar, and Emil travel to Ivar's farm in order to buy a hammock from him. On the way there, they joke about Ivar's way of living, call him "Crazy Ivar," and scare Emil with stories about Ivar howling at the moon and running across the prairie at night. When they arrive, they first have to assure Ivar they did not bring a gun, because he does not allow them on his farm so as not to disturb the birds. Ivar does not inhabit a traditional house, but rather something resembling a cave, with only one window making it recognizable as a house. After Ivar gives Alexandra advice on how to keep her hogs healthy, they leave.

When Ivar loses his land through mismanagement, Alexandra welcomes him into her house, where he takes care of the animals. Because he still chooses not to live in a traditional house, he is allowed to sleep in the barn with the horses. Lou and Oscar are not happy with Ivar living with

Alexandra, and threaten to have him sent to the asylum because they believe he can easily become violent. Alexandra, however, assures him that nothing of the sort will happen, and that she trusts him.

When Emil and Marie are killed by Frank, Ivar is the first person to find out. When he finds Emil's horse, hurt and overworked, he immediately knows something is wrong, and when he reaches the Shabata's orchard, he finds the two bodies. After he tells Alexandra about the killings, he helps her work through her shock and grief.

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