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The following argument began simply in our curiosity over Willa Cather's naming of flowers, particularly in her late work. Looking at these acts of naming, however, led us quickly to the beginnings of a more general historical/theoretical framework for thinking about her long relationship with natural science. Cather is of course well known as an acute botanical observer and literary user of the floral or vegetative world, as pastoral backdrop, as ornamental illustration, or as emblem. Susan Rosowski has moreover suggested a foundational "ecological dialectic" in all of her art, originating in her early university experiences with the pioneering Nebraska botanists Charles Bessey, Roscoe Pound, and Frederic E. Clements. But we believe that Cather's work more specifically reflects directly the dominant paradigms of early American plant ecology as Clements developed them after 1900. Furthermore, it manifests signs of an internal theoretical struggle in that emergent academic discipline, a struggle finally over the limits of science's explanatory and predictive powers (as opposed to its classificatory, categorizing, or "naming" functions). In effect, we find it useful to treat Cather not only as a literary flower-lover, but as herself a theorist of nature, engaged throughout her career with the conceptual complexities that formed modern plant science.

I.

We will begin with her final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), a historical treatment of slavery in the rural ante-bellum American south, where we note two related qualities: Cather's interest in taxonomy and the interplay of "scientific" and common plant names, and an

odd disregard for her own famous injunctions concerning descriptive economy in fiction. *Sapphira* is Cather's most ostentatiously "floral" (or "botanical") narrative, richly studded with references to the flowers of Virginia, and referring specifically to several dozen different species of flowers, trees, or shrubs. Her concern with the naming of plants sometimes produces scholarly-sounding parenthetical Latin identifications: *Rhododendron nudiflorum* for wild honeysuckle (34-35), *Kalmia* for mountain laurel (171). It leads also to occasional explorations of the indeterminacies and slippages of "common" names, as when Rachel Blake notices the "multitude of green jonquil spears thrusting up in the beds before the cabins. . . . 'Easter Flowers' was her name for them, but the darkies called them 'smoke pipes'" (18-19).

Such a mixture of formal and colloquial taxonomic terminologies complicates meaning in interesting ways, reflecting the ambiguities of the borderland which is the novel's literal and ethical setting—a space between the legal and the customary, between public and private, universal and local, proper and familiar.¹ The properly named *Rhododendron nudiflorum*, which Cather also calls "wild honeysuckle," is unrelated to "true" honeysuckle (genus *Lonicera*). When Sapphira brings "mock-orange" blossoms to her dying slave Jezebel, the narrator calls them "syringa" (187). Yet mock-oranges are neither phylogenetically close to oranges nor to the genus *Syringa* (lilacs), although mock-oranges (actually members of the Saxifrage family) were indeed regionally called "syringa" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gray 449). This chain of proper and local names, like Rachel Blake's meditation on jonquils, results from taxonomy's inherent limitation: the Linnaean ideal of a universally true and unequivocal language of nature must confront the reality of regions, and the clearest taxonomy always contends with a cacophony of local dialects. We may suspect that the interplay of the universal and the regional in *Sapphira* has something to do with Cather's peculiar relation to the novel's landscapes, returning in the closing decade of her life to her native Virginia, now as a literary visitor and a tourist—and we shall eventually revisit this theme in our conclusion.

Moreover, and of more obvious importance, *Sapphira*'s dense, apparently gratuitous cataloguing represents exactly the kind of prolific belaboring of detail that Cather had publicly repudiated throughout her life. Her most sustained and famous indictment of detail for detail's sake is of course her 1922 essay "The Novel D meubl ," where she condemned gratuitous cataloguing in the name of realism. In an interview shortly after *Sapphira*'s publication, she criticized specifically the piling-up of "arid botanical knowledge" as an example of "useless ornamentation" in fiction (Bohlke 135). And in fact the novel's

Latin nomenclature recalls ironically a moment from her career's beginning, her 1894 falling-out with her fellow-student, the young botanist/lawyer Roscoe Pound, whom she satirized in the University of Nebraska literary magazine as a pedant "call[ing] everything by its longest and most Latin name," a scholarly bore able to "browbeat [his listeners], argue them down, Latin them into a corner, and botany them into a shapeless mass" (Woodress 86).

In short, the "botanizing" of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* seems uneasily uncharacteristic, both in the uncertainties of naming that its apparent authoritativeness only partly masks, and in its departure from Cather's well-known general fictional aesthetic of austerity. To explore and illuminate the origins of this uneasiness, we will look back more than a quarter-century to her first "nature" novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913)—and beyond, to her early contact in the 1890s with professional academic botanists (like Pound) and their ways of thinking. We will find enough to postulate that *Sapphira's* "useless ornamentation," its accumulation of "arid botanical knowledge," may compensate for a condition of geographical exile, of Cather's consistent and growing sense of being out of her element—and that it may reflect her grudging giving up of a youthful vision of supportive organic community.

II.

We have characterized the representation of nature in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as "taxonomic," concerned mainly with the identification, naming, and cataloguing of discrete individual organisms and their species. Whole sections of the novel, like Rachel Blake's walk up Timber Ridge to visit Mrs. Ringer (115-16), resemble field guides or flora in the detail of their descriptive technique. In *O Pioneers!*, on the other hand, the biological world is more typically represented holistically or "ecologically." In other words, *O Pioneers!* deals much less with the names of organisms than with their functions and interactions *as members of communities*. (This is not to say that plant names are non-existent or even unimportant in *O Pioneers!* They are, however, localized in predictable settings: gardens, orchards, areas of disturbance. Plants are also frequently catalogued for their uses, as in Mrs. Bergson's canning operations [29]. Latin names do not occur, nor is there any ambivalence or vagueness in the use of common names.)

Put in the functional language of twentieth-century ecology, the novel's largest plot involves the transformation of a stable ecological community—the prairie—as its internal structures and relationships alter in response to human invasion.² In it Cather consistently represents the prairie both as an integrated system, a set of "great

operations of nature" (70), and a complex, sentient organism in its own right. Nature is a complex, developing character. "The great fact was the land itself," thinks the immigrant farm-boy Carl Linstrum in the first chapter, "which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. . . . the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength" (15). To the heroine's father, the failed farmer John Bergson, "It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods. . . . It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces" (20, 22). A half-generation later, after the land's cultivation, it keeps its volitional quality, now a benevolent giant co-operating gladly with its new inhabitants:

The brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. . . . [The country] seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other. (76-77)

Alexandra Bergson's own story—the main narrative of *O Pioneers!*—describes her willing participation in and assimilation into this fruitful organic collaboration, from her early acknowledgement that those "great operations" provide her with "personal security," "as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun" (70-71), through the discovery of her talents as farmer and midwife to the land's fecundity, to the book's closing prophetic apostrophe: "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, in the shining eyes of youth!" (309).

In structuring *O Pioneers!* in this way, around such a vision of constructive human interaction with an animated, organized nature, Cather was expressing in narrative and allegorical form what was within the next few years to become the dominant American ecological paradigm of this century's first half: Frederic Clements's conceptualization of the plant "formation" or community as a single organic entity. "As an organism," Clements insisted, "the formation arises, grows, matures, and dies," driven through its developmental history by the repeated incursions of pioneering new species and their subsequent competition (3). Clements was Cather's classmate at Nebraska in the 1890s; he also belonged to the legendary "*Seminarium Botanicum*" or "*Sem. Bot.*," Acting Chancellor Charles Bessey's research group and one of the University's intellectual and social centers. With

Bessey and his protégé Roscoe Pound (Cather's satiric target of 1894), Clements catalogued the plants of the Midwest and their environments, collaborating with Pound on the 1896 *Phytogeography of Nebraska* (Knoll 30-31, Tobey 58ff.). In the new century (as a logical extension of his research into habitats in the *Phytogeography*, but also partly in response to the practical needs of midwestern agriculture, and to a general movement in academic science toward predictive modeling) his work moved increasingly away from description and classification and toward the formulation of a dynamic, diachronic—and highly poetic—theory of how plant communities change. With his 1916 work *Plant Succession* Clements became the leading voice—for many historians, the inventor—of American plant ecology.³ We will pause briefly to describe the essentials of his community theory, the paradigm that both shaped ecological thinking through mid-century and found a reflection in *O Pioneers!* and elsewhere in Cather's work.

His model of plant society was optimistically, even buoyantly teleological, mirroring the enthusiasm of his generation's subduing of the Midwestern soil. (Clements's thought was eminently *pragmatic*, offering a way of optimizing agricultural land use by understanding the interactions of species across time and predicting the outcomes of community change.) In nature, Clements believed, communities moved inexorably and universally toward "climax," a condition of "stabilization," "the mutual and progressive interaction of habitat and community, by which extreme conditions yield to a climatic optimum, and life-forms with the least requirements are replaced by those which make the greatest demands" (98). This movement, the great growth cycle of the organic community, occurred through succession, the "waves of invasion" of new species and their subsequent mutually transformative assimilation to the existing formation (3). Succession was always progressive, "proceed[ing] as certainly from bare area to climax as does the individual from seed to mature plant" (147). To describe its core mechanism, Clements coined the word *ecesis*, "the act of coming to be at home" (69), the process of successful establishment and reproduction of individuals, one of whose effects was "reaction," the physical alteration of the landscape to create conditions favorable to its invaders. And all of this purposeful movement was effected by the interdependent, mutually transformative functions of individual organisms acting in concert, "just as the power of growth in the individual lies in the responses or functions of various organs" (7).

A place for everyone and everything, a vital part for the immigrant or pioneer to play in nature's unified, orderly dance toward fulfillment: Clements's ecology extends attractive consolation to the transplant, the exile in a harsh new landscape. Whether it influenced his

college classmate Cather directly is an interesting, open-ended question. According to Rosowski, some acquaintance between the two was unavoidable on the small Lincoln campus in the 1890s (38). Cather had come to the University as a pre-med with interests in "astronomy, botany, and chemistry," and did not move toward literature until the end of her freshman year (Woodress 71). During that first year she began her friendship with Louise Pound and was a frequent visitor at the Pound house, where she knew Roscoe (before their falling out), at a time when he and Clements were actively undertaking the research for the *Phytogeography*. Her good friend Mariel Gere was an active member of the informal female social auxiliary to the *Sem. Bot.* (parodied as the "*Fem. Bot. Sem.*" in the 1895 yearbook that Cather edited). In a 1921 interview Cather indicated her familiarity with Clements's work on Rocky Mountain flowers (Bohlke 47). None of this circumstantial evidence makes a wholly convincing case for direct influence, but it seems clear that Cather must have been more than peripherally aware of the emergent energies of academic botanical thinking that existed at Lincoln during her time there. In *O Pioneers!* that awareness expressed itself directly and literally in Alexandra's visit to the "young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new kind of clover hay" (64).

More generally, Cather's own thinking about "natural communities" paralleled Clements's into the twentieth century in striking ways. Her version of Clements's happy organic parable—the dominating structure of *O Pioneers!*, but in fact a presence in most of her work—gave her novels' protagonists some signature moments of vegetable affiliation: not only Alexandra's promised recycling into the earth, but also Jim Burden's famous pumpkin-consciousness in *My Ántonia* (1918) that provided Cather's own epitaph:

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins . . . Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. (14)

Interestingly, in *The Professor's House* (1925), Tom Outland's similar sensations of "possession" and "happiness unalloyed" on the Blue Mesa appear to involve a kind of photosynthesis: "Nothing tired me. Up there, a close neighbor to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way" (227). But even in the absence of this sort of oddly specific vegetative reference, Cather's work after *O Pioneers!* is filled with fading echoes of Clements's strong narrative paradigm of uprooting and "coming to be at home" in a working community. It is the explicit success story of Ántonia Shimerda and the "hired girls" of

Black Hawk. In Tom Outland's *Cliff City*, the vanished Indians equally clearly epitomize *ecesis*, albeit as a condition now available only through nostalgia: "I see them here," says Father Duchene, "making their mesa more worthy to be a home for man . . . They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it" (198-99). And both *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) exploit the allegorical possibilities of Clements's vision, as human invaders and the reaction between faith, diligence, and the land transforms the wasteland into a productive paradise regained.

III.

We need to recall now the very different observations with which we began. The "taxonomic" botanical perspective of 1940 is at once meticulously attentive to individual names and descriptive details, and yet confusing in that very wealth of detail, and contradictory of Cather's "unfurnished" aesthetic. It seems also a far cry from the "ecological" perspective of 1913, which focuses on the community rather than the individual. In effect we have seen two Willa Cathers, at the two ends of her career, engaged in two modes of botanical or scientific thinking and representation: the optimistic community ecologist of *O Pioneers!*, and the name-dropping, sometimes pedantic, sometimes bewildering taxonomist of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. These categories are significant, as we have suggested, in botany's history at the turn of the century. Classical botany (exemplified by, for instance, Asa Gray, Charles Bessey's Harvard teacher) was in essence taxonomic and classificatory, concerned with establishing the family names, lineages, and relationships of and among individual organisms and species; Clements's new ecology, on the other hand, was predictive in intention, and founded in paradigms of dynamism and complex interactions of individuals, communities, and environments. The question that we now confront is this: how can we understand the transit of Willa Cather's "natural philosophy" from an early enthusiastic Clementsian holism to *Sapphira's* more traditional—though also perhaps less coherent and less satisfying—taxonomical perspective? Should we posit in her thinking (and practice) about nature and community a kind of conservative relapse, an abandoning of progressive modernism in favor of older, more cautious conceptualizations of "nature" as phenomena in need of sorting and naming—the very ways of knowing that she had consistently dismissed as "arid" and "useless"? Such a relapse would in fact be consistent with the growing conservative trends of her political and religious thought across the century's first half.

Simply put, Cather increasingly found nature less orderly and purposeful than the Clementsian model had assumed, and she was not alone in this disillusionment. By 1918 we can find her in *My Ántonia* somewhat qualifying her enthusiasm for the prairie community and its organic growth cycles (represented primarily by Ántonia's and other immigrant girls' fecundity) by framing it with scholarly, skeptical—and sterile—Jim Burden's ambiguous detachment. Like Jim an exile, displaced from the pioneering community, Cather saw the world through protagonists like Claude Wheeler, Niel Herbert, and Godfrey St. Peter, whose eyes grew steadily more ironic, more inclined to locate the organic community in an irretrievable past rather than a possible future, in a nostalgically recollected high culture. As we have seen, she turned in the late 1920s and early 30s (in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*) to Christian communities of saints visible, moving across transfigured, atemporal landscapes. In effect, the Clementsian prairie of *O Pioneers!* became available to Cather mainly as a territory of myth, poetry, or religious faith—not of empirical science and this world.

A similar shift in the reputation and uses of Frederic Clements's theory occurred, or was at least in the making, among its academic and scientific practitioners after 1914. Although his models for community, invasion, and succession remained generally dominant in ecology until after his death in 1945, all of their central assumptions were in fact contested. Clements's most vigorous attacker was the taxonomist Henry A. Gleason, who in a series of articles of the late 1910s, 20s, and 30s, doubted the predictive power of Clementsian theories; proposed that the individual, not the group, was the decisive entity in plant succession; argued that vegetative change had no necessary direction or teleology; and suggested that Clements's coherent, interdependent "plant association" (his theory's foundational natural structure) might in fact simply be the construction of its observer's desire, striving to find purpose in a landscape of accident and coincidence. As Michael Barbour has described this classic quarrel in early ecology, "where Clements saw predictability, uniformity, cooperation, stability, and certainty, Gleason saw only individualism, competition, a blur of continuous change, and probability" (238). In effect, Gleason challenged Clements's holistic thought as in essence poetic synthesis, unsupported in the real world of empirical observation, and, although the debate was never fully engaged during Clements's lifetime, modern ecologists have discarded his teleology in favor of more complexly descriptive (and less rigorously predictive) assumptions

about the nature of succession and climax. As his old friend Roscoe Pound wrote after his death, "Clements had an eminently philosophical mind;" but "Science has outgrown her philosophers" (113).

Something like a Gleasonian perspective is at work throughout Cather's career in counterpoint to what we have called her Clementsian "optimism." Against Alexandra Bergson's faith in the "great operations of nature, and . . . the law that lay behind them" (*O Pioneers!* 70-71), for instance, this less self-assured perspective sets Godfrey St. Peter's gloomy insistence on nature's inherent messiness, its inferiority to culture: "In Nature," he complains, "there is no selection" (61). St. Peter's position—an extreme of Gleasonian particularism—seems essentially conservative in its pessimism over the future, and in its entropic vision of organic experience. It powerfully underlies the darkening novels of the mid-20s, works structured around themes of irretrievable lost pasts and diminished, anti-climactic futures, in which nature provides only (in Godfrey St. Peter's words) the "cruel biological necessities" of individual reproduction and death (13) or (in Tom Outland's) "sad substitutions" for lost organic connections (165).

By mid-life, perhaps, some rational, individualistic part of Cather's intelligence apparently could simply no longer accept Alexandra Bergson's vision, a Shelleyan consolation of impersonal immortality in nature's great organic recycler. The biological changes implicit in affiliation with the Clementsian community pose threats even in the early prairie novels, both to the individual (Alexandra must die personally, after all, in order to be reborn as "yellow wheat and rustling corn") and—perhaps just as importantly—to the invaded community itself: wheat and corn, like the alfalfa that Alexandra contributes to the plains' high country's ecology, are non-natives, and building the humanly productive "climax community" means irreversibly destroying the prairie. Certainly Cather never again ended a novel with the unequivocal and transcendent communal optimism of *O Pioneers!*

We will close these speculations with a caution. As we read and reread Cather on nature, it became increasingly evident to us that the structuring which we earlier called her thought's "transit" from the ecological to the taxonomical, from the Clementsian to the Gleasonian, is at best an oversimplification and at worst an imposed unity or hopeful fiction—similar in fact to the teleological error for which Henry Gleason and eventually others criticized Frederic Clements. As we have also suggested, these perspectives co-exist dialectically or symbiotically in most of her writing. *Sapphira's* bitterly distanced narrator struggles to tell an almost

occluded story of familial love and creative community, while Tom Outland's narrative of affiliation is framed by St. Peter's alienation.

Like the two great modern ecologists who have given us the terms for her internal debate, Willa Cather acquired her views of nature, individuals, and communities in relation to her own environments. Clements was a Nebraska native, a product of the territory's relatively stable grassland communities, where a young scientist could with his own eyes see the great orderly pattern of succession at work. Gleason, on the other hand, grew up on the frequently disturbed, unpredictable borderlands of plains and forests in Illinois. The botanist Robert McIntosh has suggested that these early experiences shaped—in his phrase, “imprinted”—their opposed theoretical positions in profound ways (256). Willa Cather, even more radically a migrant pioneer, had a complex childhood of uprooting and re-affiliation, in which her “first nature” of rural northwestern Virginia was replaced by the intense experience of Clements's prairie. She entered adulthood in the mid-1890s, at the precise historical and cultural moment when Frederick Jackson Turner was simultaneously valorizing and memorializing the agrarian frontier, celebrating Americans' pioneering relation to the land while consigning it to a legendary past. By the beginning of her career as a novelist she had become an upper-middle-class New Yorker, an urban journalist watching with interest the United States's great national debates over a new kind of pioneering, southern and eastern European immigration—anxious debates in whose lexicon the term “invasion” had a very different meaning from Clements's, an ominous suggestion of impending chaos rather than of orderly progress and “coming to be at home.”⁴ Cather's world was multifarious, a place where *ecesis* could be loss as well as gain, threat as well as consolation. As her fictions repeatedly demonstrate, every successful pioneer dislodges a precursor “native,” and every homecoming marks a site of exile. Making her way between the painful oppositions of pioneer and refugee, Cather wrote and often lived as a displaced literary tourist, a wandering writer of place. In her work she made temporary homes in vividly imagined, painstakingly described landscapes that seemed nonetheless never fully articulated, never quite completed, never wholly her own.

NOTES

1. We think for instance of the complicated symbolic interdependencies of the Mill House's formal, orderly front ("of a style very well known to all Virginians, since it was built on very much the same pattern as Mount Vernon"), and its blossoming domestic (and African-American) back yard, "another world; a helter-skelter scattering, like a small village" (20). This kind of opposition is pervasive in *Sapphira*, and appears in the conclusion as the child-narrator's mistrust of the civilized Nancy's acquisition of standard (rather than regional) English: "her speech was different from ours on Back Creek. Her words seemed to me too precise . . . it didn't seem a friendly way to talk" (284).

2. "Community" is a complicated term in modern ecology. We borrow our definition from Robert E. Ricklefs, using the word to denote a group of populations occurring together and interacting with one another and their physical environment, bound by "a complex array of interactions, directly or indirectly tying all members . . . together into an intricate web" (657).

3. The other principal turn-of-the-century American researcher into the relations of plants to one another and to their environments across time was H. C. Cowles at the University of Chicago. Ronald Tobey traces European philosophical and scientific influences that influenced both Clements and Cowles, whose competing successional paradigm developed along less teleological lines (89-109).

4. Cather was an active participant in this national conversation, and not only in her direct treatment of immigration in many of the prairie works ("The Bohemian Girl," *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, "Neighbour Rosicky," and others). Her early editing career at *McClure's*—a magazine intensely concerned with social issues of the moment—brought her into direct contact with the politics and "ecological" vocabulary of nativist responses to immigration. *McClure's* published Hendrick's *The Great Jewish Invasion* in 1907, and Jack London's futurist Yellow Peril fantasy "The Unparalleled Invasion" in 1910. In 1912 Cather published her own story of New York immigration in *Collier's*, "Behind the Singer Tower," in which Jews and Italians threaten to overwhelm the edifices of high Western culture.

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