



## An Interpretation of Cather's Prairie Trilogy From the Perspective of Diaspora Criticism

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Received 21 March 2017; accepted 12 May 2017

Published online 26 June 2017

### Abstract

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist and poet. She is widely acknowledged as one of the foremost American authors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cather's unique observations of the American West find full expression in her prairie trilogy, composed of *O Pioneers!* (1913), *the Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918). However, the three novels have got unequal attention from both international and domestic scholars. There are much more studies on *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* than *The Song of the Lark*. The literary approaches already in use are mainly feminism and ecocriticism. But the author of the thesis holds that the heart of them is about the material and spiritual realities of those immigrants in the American West in the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thereupon, it is reasonable to put them together for a comparative study. To have a better understanding of the transnational phenomena observed by Cather, we can adopt Diaspora criticism to find out what Cather wants to convey to us: the cultural logic of beyond, against the singularities of identities and of perspectives. Hopefully, approaching Cather's prairie trilogy from the perspective of Diaspora criticism will shed some new light on her novels.

**Key words:** Cather; Prairie trilogy; Diaspora criticism

Zheng, C. (2017). An Interpretation of Cather's Prairie Trilogy From the Perspective of Diaspora Criticism. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 14(6), 20-23. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/9695>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9695>

### INTRODUCTION

Although American Western fiction, one of the foundational genres in American literary canon, has made tremendous contribution to American culture, yet it has always been marginalized and the Western writers' voices have always been submerged in the discourse of history. The unfair treatment of those writers is an ugly scar that reflects the mainstream's negligence in assessing different opinions from a pluralistic perspective, thus the unfairness should be corrected. However, during the recent years, more and more people have re-shifted their attention to the West and placed it again on the agenda for a profound discussion.

As what is left behind is precisely what propels us forward, the happenings in the American West open us a window to look into the future. Cather is just the one from the American West. Her novels are conjunctions of past, present and future. The uniqueness of her novels provides the impetus for me to conduct a research on the immigrants in vivid portraits made by Cather from the perspective of Diaspora criticism, a newly emergent theoretical space in literary field.

### 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Diaspora is an ancient word with the original meaning: to sow or scatter seeds. Though it is an ancient word, it gets new currency in globalist discourses today. It refers to border-crossing phenomena of displacement communities of people who have been dislocated from their countries of origin through the movements of migration, immigration, exile, etc. Diaspora, a mode of nomadic thinking, a complex fashion interpreting the grand discourse of modernity, has permeated our modern world, and has been colored with a universal and futuristic sense. Diaspora criticism emerges in the literary field since the

journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* was inaugurated in 1991. It is concerned with the migratory subjectivity of a vast array of people crossing borders: The reason why they move, their memories of the past, their feelings of dislocation and relocation, their construction of new identities in a new historical and cultural context. As border-crossing movements are frequent happenings in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Diaspora criticism has been accorded much importance that it has become one central analyzing tool to historicize the various movements of migration and modern paths of displacement in sociology, anthropology, literature and other humanities. Many influential voices in various research fields have ongoing dialogues on it and conceptualize it as a new interdisciplinary theoretical space.

Though Cather is a writer at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she has already thought through the questions concerning people who do across borders. In her “prairie trilogy”, she broods over the problems about those immigrants in diasporic conditions and those central features highlighted by diaspora criticism. Hopefully, this tentative study on Cather’s prairie trilogy can shed some new light on Cather study.

Diaspora criticism is a new trend in literary field. Since the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* was inaugurated in 1991, debates over the theoretical, cultural and historical resonances of the term have proliferated in academic journals devoted to ethnic, national, and transnational concerns (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p.2). Tracing the trajectory of the development of diaspora criticism, we can find theorizations of diaspora have always been a site of debate involving many influential voices in various research fields, and diaspora criticism is really interdisciplinary as an emergent theoretical space. But one thing remains the same, that is, migrant subjects and migratory subjectivities are always among those important voices in the ongoing dialogues surrounding the field of diaspora criticism.

Diaspora, in the rapidly changing world we now inhabit, speaks to diverse groups of displaced individuals and communities in their border-crossing movements. As these kinds of movements are emblematic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Diaspora criticism has been accorded so much importance that it has become one central critical tool of analyzing the various movements of migrations and modern paths of displacement in sociology, anthropology, area studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, literature, and postcolonial theory, queer theory, and other humanities. The trajectory of diaspora criticism is being shaped by divergent strains of studies. The fruitful researches in those disciplines have established new terrains for the field of diaspora criticism and help to form its future paths.

As the wide-scale dispersal and migration movements are prevalent in our age of globalization, diaspora has been endowed with a universal and futuristic sense. It is

a human phenomenon-lived and experienced, and it also connects with the postmodern theoretical abstraction of displacement and movement as a part of nomadic thinking. To facilitate future researches in diaspora criticism, we should bear two important points in mind: First, as diaspora criticism is linked with many research fields, thus it is characterized by one core feature of interdisciplinarity. If we are to take the lessons of interdisciplinarity seriously, it is also incumbent on us to examine how work in ethnic studies, communication studies, area studies and cultural studies, as well as sociology and anthropology, provides us with the tools to understand the lived experiences of diasporic subjects (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p.7). Second, the phenomena of diasporas are situated in historical and cultural contexts, thus we cannot divorce diaspora criticism from historical and cultural specificity. We cannot just view it as abstract notion of dislocation; instead, we need to accord much importance to those historical and cultural forces that have triggered the emergence of diasporas. Investigation into diasporas is a forward-looking project in this age of globalization.

We have entered a period of globalization with an increased pace. The late twentieth century has witnessed the myriad waves of transnational migration as a part of the inevitable flows of global capitalism, world financial markets, and international division of labour, production and profit as well as the speedy dissemination of information on a world-wide scale. There are more and more people who deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move, and there are some people who do traverse borders to see their lives unfolding in diasporic settings.

Cather has already set her mind on depicting of those people who cross borders in her times. She has keen observations of the issues concerning the immigrants, such as displacement (feeling out of place), dislocation (relating to alienation), fragmentation (the jarring multiple identities) and their memories about their homes and roots. Therefore it is reasonable to examine the border crossing phenomena in Cather’s works in the framework of diaspora criticism, because she says something true about the cultural logic of beyond, which is the heart of diaspora criticism.

Examining from the perspective of diaspora criticism, we can find Cather’s works not only give us insight into the people in diasporic conditions at Cather’s times, but also assert something true about the people in the same situation in our time period. Cather wants to tell us that diaspora signifies something general about human beings, that is, it is a basic human condition which requires our deep thoughts. It is a bridge between individuals and society, between the local and the global. Just as Ifekwunlwe (2003, p.196) laments in her auto-ethnographer that I am a nationless nomad who wanders from destination to destination in search of a singular

site to name as home, the feeling of rootlessness and disconnection, of loss and estrangement as a result of diaspora might be universally true. However, diaspora also means bravery and creativity in a new cultural context.

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## 2. ANALYSIS

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The main feature of modernity is its favor in new beginnings and a reinterpretation of historical origins. It is a particular kind of time consciousness that defines the present in relation to the past. Modernity's historical stages are no longer simply an affair of chronology. The historical past is not a spectral memory but coexists materially alongside the present as well as the future (Mishra, 2006, p.138). Diasporans demonstrate their relation to the past, present and future in the modern society with their own experiences.

The concept of diaspora signals processes of multi-locality across geographic, cultural and psychic boundaries (Brah, 1996, pp.193-209). During the period from 1870 to 1914, the American West witnesses the coming of a myriad wave of immigrants in the process of industrialization. This human-lived phenomenon is diaspora. The immigrants are diasporans, the people who cross borders and situate themselves in the transnational networks. Thousands of people from many parts of the world, especially from Europe, come to America, their common destination. As Cohen (1997, p.82) states that many of the European groups that arrived in the USA between 1870 and 1914 comprised manual laborers destined to work in the mass industries of the period. The diasporic races cling to their memories about the past while longing for a bright future in the New World. American soil gains a prominent position in the immigrants' eyes, as we can find the exaltation in *The Song of the Lark* by Cather:

This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range (Cather, 2004, p.143).

The settlers possess the land by making it into country-planting fields, building roads, watering trees. By the same process, they become a part of the country they create (Rabin, 2004, p. 33).

Though America soil is deemed as symbol of potential and richness, yet the diasporas could not always succeed on this land. The tree image in Cather's *My Ántonia* may stand for the insignificance of those diasporans in contrast with the new land.

Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons. It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious (Cather, 1994, p.17).

The diasporans are like trees, struggling hard to make their way and trying to stand firmly on the new land.

Diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity-cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national-and these subjects are defined by traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora (Braziel & Mannur, 2003, p.5). The diasporans, with their ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds, facilitate the formation of American multiculturalism. First, they are from a diversity of background with their respective cultural heritages. Most of them are European diasporans, and others are from Mexico, Spain, Africa, etc. Early Spanish explorers are mentioned in *My Ántonia* as the ones who perhaps begin the non-native culture of Nebraska; Blind d'Arnault is a black pianist with a happy face, and he plays his melody so well that bring joys to the diasporic community; the Mexican with the nickname Spanish Johnny in *The Song of the Lark* brings the mandolin with him and struggles with his music for a living in the new country. Both European and non-European characters are essentialized in the trilogy, and their cultural backgrounds enrich the prairie spirit which is an important part of the American Western multiculturalism. Second, the mixture of languages of those immigrants constructs the American Western multiculturalism. Cather (1949, p.56) states that the mixing of languages is important to define the culture of prairie. The language people speak to each other is the native tongue. No writer can invent it. It is made... in communities where language has been undisturbed long enough to take on colour and character from the nature and experiences of the people. The "sayings" of a community... imply its history; suggest its attitude toward the world, and its way of accepting life.

As diaspora criticism focuses on the migratory subjectivity of mankind, thus it has close connections with the social and historical factors that have triggered the border-crossing movements. The deep reason lies behind the diasporas is the basic human urge to move. The impulse of movement pushes people out of their own country and encourages them to live in another one. Diaspora means the end of one chapter of life and beginning of another one. Urgo (1995, p.5) explains that the central theme, the overarching myth, the single experience, that defines American culture at its core is migration: unrelenting, incessant, and physics mobility across spatial, historical and imaginative planes of existence. Mobility has achieved an almost sacred status among the immigrants as they share the same desire to move, the impulse towards futurity. Cather's prairie trilogy explains "the American experience of change, mobility and loss of contact with the past" (Rabin, 2004, p.42).

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## CONCLUSION

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Through the research, we can find out that Cather prairie trilogy, composed of *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the*

*Lark* (1915) and *My Ántonia* (1918), can be considered as part of diaspora literature, because they serve as a window for us to view the immigrants' life during the Great Migration to the American West at her times. To have a deeper understanding of the state of living of those immigrants, it is better to apply diaspora criticism to her works, because she says something profound about the cultural logic of beyond, against the singularities of identities and of perspectives, through the experiences of those immigrants. By adopting diaspora criticism to Cather's prairie trilogy, we can have a general picture of how those immigrants, with their pioneering spirit, set adrift from their original home and find a place in the New World. Diaspora is a human-lived phenomenon, and the immigrants can be called diasporans, the people who cross borders and relocate themselves in the transnational networks. There are several types of diaspora mentioned by Cather: labor diaspora, trade diaspora, imperial diaspora and victim diaspora. The diasporans come to the new land, voluntarily or involuntarily. But one thing remains the same: They are cut off their roots with their countries of origin and set their feet on American soil to make their way out. The difficulties they are about to face up with really take up their endurance, as they have to confront with the wilderness of the new land, manage between hope and despair and judge between the past and future. The difficulties bring those people sufferings, but they also mean new opportunities for those ones full of courage to make something out of the new reality.

The diasporic people and races hold different reactions to the new land: Some of them cling to their memories of the original home through different means; some of them have a troubled relationship with the host society and are likely to feel dislocation and alienation concerning their displacement; some of them even feel the fear and emptiness in the home in exile, and there are some people who are so homesick that they go to the extreme by committing suicide. However, there are still some people who are capable of readjusting to the new environment and rebuild a home on the strange land.

As diaspora means hybridity of identities in the transnational networks, the immigrants have to reconstruct their new identities by managing their past, present and future. They must adapt themselves to the New World. The means of adaptation are as follows: self-actualization by keeping one's belief in tradition while pursuing one's ideal, forging new links with others in a new cultural context and having the awareness of multiculturalism by interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In addition, Cather's prairie trilogy provides us a new perspective into the three key issues "home, memory and identity", concerning those immigrants' movement to the American West on the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their memories of the homeland link them with their tradition

in the Old World and affect their new way of life in the New World. They have to cherish their house of memory of the cultural heritage of their ancestry, while embracing the New World. As they are cut off the roots from their original home, the place for tradition, they have to rebuild a new one, a place for security and a sense of self in the new country. In the process of rebuilding a new home, they have to strike a balance between consolidating their original identities and forging a new one under the new circumstances by depending on themselves and seeking alliances from others.

In the academic sense, the thesis is a new and brave try by having a comparative study of Cather "prairie trilogy" from the perspective of diaspora criticism. The thesis suggests that Cather "prairie trilogy" constitute an important part in diaspora literature and points out the deep concerns about the immigrants showed by Cather in these novels. Cather's concerns with the salient issues such as transference and relocation, rootlessness and rootedness, separation and solidarity as well as ethnic identity as a matter of negotiation are debated topics all over the world today.

In the practical sense, the diasporic conditions those immigrants experienced in Cather's times also speak something true about people in our current times, therefore it is important to conduct a research about the state of living of the immigrants in Cather's works. The thesis demonstrates that Cather is never backward. She produces literary texts that transcend time period, geography and cultural climate. She foretells something true about our times: Diaspora is a basic human condition which requires our deep thoughts. Cather is a pioneer with enterprising spirit, imagination and creativity, and makes her novels conjunctions of past, present and future.

As diaspora is colored with futuristic sense, thus investigation into diaspora literature is of much significance and researches on diaspora and literature are forward-looking projects in the age of globalization.

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