ABSTRACT
A LIBERATED WEST?: FEMALE AUTHORS' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE
"REAL AND THE FANTASIZED" ON
THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

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In the broadest sense, this project investigates how representation defines the ways in which people are allowed to desire and how Western Expansion as an era was, for white women, both constraining and liberating in relation to how they were supposed to operate in certain spaces. Through the texts of public-facing authors of the West, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Willa Cather, I argue that we are able to obtain a better understanding of where white women fit within the narrative of Western Expansion. Wilder and Cather were both children of the American Western frontier, and in the early part of the 20th century, they both wrote of white women on the frontier. Their novels offer unique perspectives that are fictional but that are also influenced by actual personal experience – a concept that is in and of itself very Western. Through these perspectives of the "real and the fantasized," Wilder and Cather depict narratives of female-centered frontiers that defy the boundaries of 19th-century customs and gender norms and which express the American West as a locale of feminine possibility. Their autobiographical novels do not define Western womanhood as monolithic; rather, they use strategic representations within coming-of-age stories to depict different realms of female desire and ambition. In addition, Edith Wharton, who wrote of the Gilded Age in New York and who was alive and writing in a similar time as Wilder and Cather, uses Western terminology and metaphor

to draw a comparison between 19th-century women on the East Coast and in the West. These women writers, through their words, actively protested the constraints that culture placed on women of the era. They introduced the world to exciting and interesting female characters, and they created plotlines that were inclusive of a woman's wants and ambitions, both within the West and not.