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“In a New Country”: Women and Nation in *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather’s hauntingly beautiful novel, *My Ántonia*, has been subject to an array of interpretations regarding the use of gender in her text. Often these interpretations treat what Jeane Harris calls “Willa Cather’s misogyny, . . . [which] informs the male code of behavior that is the controlling consciousness of all her fiction” (81); others take a more pointedly feminist stance, in what Reginald Dyck terms a “challenge of the consensus assumptions about Cather’s work that depend on a patriarchal world view” (265). While these readings often discuss Cather’s gender in negotiation with her contemporary culture or with her own sexuality, however, what is often pointedly absent in discussions of *My Ántonia* is a thorough address of the national moment in which the text is set. While many critics consider the use of women in *My Ántonia* in terms of its implications for gender, the active role of these women in the formation of American society--not simply in the continuance of an old one--is consistently underestimated. I would argue that, far from a straight-forwardly feminist, misogynist, or merely gender-conscious tale, *My Ántonia* reflects Cather’s awareness of women’s role in the development and construction of the American nation.

In her thought-provoking and persuasive article, “Displacing Homosexuality: The Use of Ethnicity in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*,” Katrina Irving enters the debate surrounding Cather’s

problematic and ambivalent representations of femininity. She does so by suggesting that Cather's ambivalence to American culture is actually a reflection of her resistance to her own sexuality. To Irving, "[t]he problem of ethnicity displaces that of homosexuality" in the text (92); accordingly, Cather's "displacing [of the] themes of 'deviant' sexuality onto those of gender and ethnic marginality" (92) must be read as reflecting her inability to "resolve her warring [sexual] identities" (101-2). In short, Irving sees Cather's treatment of ethnicity in *My Ántonia* as an attempt to negotiate, metaphorically if unsuccessfully, her lesbian self, rather than as an attempt to deal more broadly with hegemonic American culture and its imperatives.

This sense of the interconnection of gendered and ethnic otherness, however, is not consistent. Immediately following the above assertion, ethnicity in Irving's interpretation assumes the burden of representation for gender, as well: "But ethnicity serves as more than a displacement of the theme of homosexuality. In this novel Cather also transposes her ambivalence about her gender and sexuality" (93, her emphases). Similarly, in spite of their previous alliance, ethnicity comes to be seen as a less problematic marker of difference than gender, and Irving even reads gender as a potential curative to the ethnic otherness which characterizes the Shimerdas: "Her [Ántonia's] foreignness is mitigated by her accession to a 'normal' femininity" (101). Thus, while Irving originally suggests that it is the otherness of both her ethnicity and her gender that hinders Ántonia, it is only her gender that constitutes a legitimate threat. At the same time, while Irving, like most critics, reads Ántonia's domesticity at novel's end as problematic--what Lambert calls an "'archetypal mother' role. . . 'in service to the

patriarchy” (cited in Dyck 266), Irving’s assertion that “American culture manages to efface the threatening difference of European culture and to harness its energy” (99) is reinforced by her claim that “the threat of her [Ántonia’s] difference is effaced” by her maternal role (101). Once again, Irving reads Ántonia’s sexual difference as a greater threat to American culture than her ethnicity.

There can certainly be little question as to the importance of Cather’s use of gender in *My Ántonia*. Maureen Ryan has convincingly argued that, even in her least popular novel, *One of Ours*, “Cather explores social conventions regarding gender” (67) and represents the “acceptance of attitudes espoused by . . . culture” (70) such as those Jim Burden promulgates throughout *My Ántonia*. Burden’s alliance to the patriarchal norm is evident. Even as a child, Jim’s sense that he has inherited a boyish superiority over Ántonia is well developed: “Much as I liked Ántonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. [. . .] I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner” (38). At the same time, much has been said of Jim’s repugnance at Ántonia’s masculine work ethic, which also translates into a masculine appearance. Jim comments distastefully that Ántonia is “hired out like a man” by her brother (111); he notes that herding makes women “rough and mannish” (124); and his recurrent notations of her perspiration and “masculine physique” (Wussow 52) are well documented. Jim clearly represents the patriarchal norm¹ of American society.

¹For a detailed analysis of the masculine representation of Ántonia by Jim, see Helen Wussow, “Language, Gender, and Ethnicity in Three Fictions by Willa Cather.” *Women and Language* 18:1 (Spring 1995), p. 52, and Katrina Irving, p. 97.

At the same time, critics have noted Burden's narrative authority in the text, citing it as an example of patriarchal presumption and assumption. Helen Wussow notes that "Jim Burden imprisons and subjects *Ántonia* Shimerda by writing about her" (54), and Gilbert and Gubar (201) and Katrina Irving (92) cite the appropriative gesture inherent in Burden's attachment of "My" to *Ántonia*'s tale.² Irving argues that, having lost "control over *Ántonia*'s behavior, his sole method of coercion is through his control of her representation" (97). How effective this narrative authority is, in the final analysis, in containing *Ántonia* or her gender, however, is an issue to which I shall return.

Yet another manner in which gender has been addressed in studies of *My Ántonia* is in regard to the androgyny rampant in the text. *Ántonia* asserts her preference for the masculine role, in spite of Jim and his grandmother's distaste: " 'I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man.' She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm" (105). Similarly, the Harlings' daughter, Sally, is described as "the tomboy with short hair uncannily clever at all boys' sports" (113). Lena claims that she never wishes to marry (122), and she disparages domestic life repeatedly (216-217). Harris notes that "a woman's goodness and attractiveness are in direct proportion to her masculinity" (87) in Cather's work; given Jim Burden's responsiveness to the "hired girls" in contrast to the town

²Richard H. Millington, in contrast, defines the moment differently, arguing that "[w]hen Jim retitles the work, appending 'My' to '*Ántonia*', he is not appropriating or commodifying her story but emphasizing his performance of the act of personal expression. . ." (689). See Millington, "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*," in *American Literature* 66:4 (Dec 1994): 689-717.

girls, this seems to hold true in *My Ántonia*.

A final manner in which gender in *My Ántonia* has been addressed has been as a commentary on Cather's own sexuality, and this has been a source of considerable debate, as I noted previously. Sharon O'Brien and others have thoroughly documented the manner in which Cather "dressed herself in boy's clothes, cropped her hair, and called herself Will" (Gelfant 78) in defiance of gendered norms during her adolescence. This desire to be (perceived as) a man has led to considerable speculation. For some, such behavior is an early indicator of her later misogyny: Cather "accepted the implicit patriarchal belief that women were isolated and domesticated precisely because they were weak and non-intellectual" (Benstock cited in Harris 83). Others argue that Cather's "silen[ce] on issues concerning women" does not undermine her feminism, because "though she did not espouse feminist ideals, she served them by creating strong and resourceful women" (Gelfant 78). Still others consider hers as a progression "from the male-identified male impersonator of her adolescence and youth into the mature woman writer who created the first strong female heroes in American literature" (Summers 103). In sum, Cather's use of gender has provided a rich terrain of research and conflicting readings of the role of gender in *My Ántonia*--none of which conclusively establishes the women's relationship to "American culture" in the text.

In spite of the importance of gender in the novel, in other words, the question remains as to whether gender deserves to hold a privileged place in relation to ethnicity in the constitution of American culture, as Irving contends. It is noteworthy that Irving's privileging of gendered

difference over ethnic otherness in the text undermines her own recognition of the interconnection of *Ántonia*'s "foreign and female difference" (99) and raises important questions about the construction of American culture in *My Ántonia*. While Irving recurrently defers to the concept she loosely defines as "American culture," it seems to me that she is speaking more specifically of some essential American-ness, to which *Ántonia*'s "European-ness" stands in contrast. When Irving speaks of "economic and cultural imperatives of *the* American culture" (101, my emphasis), she suggests that there is one, uniform, dominant culture which the frontier women must negotiate; and this concept of an overriding, hegemonic commonality sounds suspiciously like "a moral and political being" (Acton 32); like a "totality of people who seek to live together in an independent community, to defend this community, and [who] are ready to sacrifice for this community" (Bauer 71); in short, Irving presupposes the existence and entrenchment of American nationalism on the prairie. However, I will argue that no such uniform force as a hegemonic American culture yet existed in Cather's Nebraska, as we shall see.

A second and equally troubling issue arises from Irving's privileging of gender. If we are to accept, for the moment, my assertion that "American culture" is undermined in Cather's text, one must recognize that Irving's analysis implies a certain hierarchizing of the relationship of gender to the fledgling nation, as if the pursuit of a contestatory female agenda could threaten the development of American culture on the frontier: it is through her "'normal' femininity" that "the threat of difference is effaced" (101). The sense that a feminist agenda and an "American" cultural one are in some fashion incompatible--more radically incompatible than a

culturally-distinct enclave maintained within American society, according to Irving--speaks to a recurrent yet troubling interpretation of the relationship of women to nation.

In her landmark study, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, Kumari Jayawardena cites this exclusion, or cordoning-off, of women from the nation as due to the misconception that women's issues somehow inhabit a separate sphere. Women's issues are often seen as some-thing that "alienates or diverts women, from their culture, religion and family responsibilities" as well as from national issues and agendas (2). An example of this privileging of one agenda over another can be seen in George Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*, in which the author argues that women customarily would subordinate feminist endeavors to the more pressing and acceptable nationalist ones: "The transition from the advocacy of women's rights to a crusade against all forms of vice helped reconcile the feminist movement with. . . nationalism" (111). Similarly, in his anti-colonialist tract, *A Dying Colonialism*, Franz Fanon addresses feminism as necessarily a subset of a larger nationalist endeavor, as Adolfo Gilly explains: "Women . . . can only liberate themselves by liberating all other oppressed strata and sectors of the society, and by acting together with them" (5). Thus there is, unfortunately, considerable precedent for the belief that women's agendas stand distinct from those of the nation and/or culture and must ever remain subordinate to them.

However, such a radical separation of women from the goings-on of the nation is as artificial as it is historically inaccurate. As Leonore Davidoff notes, women's studies has exposed

the false yet “implicit assumption that ‘real’ history need not be concerned with the supposed trivia of their [women’s] existence, often regarded as unchanging and therefore outside the remit of historical investigation” (50). Jayawardena similarly notes that “struggles for women’s emancipation were an essential and integral part of national resistance movements” (8), rather than a separate or subordinated sphere. This recognition of women’s place in history and within the historical moment when the pioneer was to be incorporated into “American-ness”—an essence to be defined by those who lived it, in the isolation of the frontier—seems to me to be a crucial factor to consider in any reading of *My Ántonia*. While the Burdens may represent the traditional, Eastern American perspective, the frontier is as wide-open culturally as it is geographically in Cather’s text; and the acculturation that occurs within it is effected not by the men, but by the women whom Burden encounters.

Gilbert and Gubar note that “Cather memorialized a time in history when women were economically productive and socially central” (173). While Dyck contests Gilbert and Gubar’s reading, arguing that they “overestimate Cather’s presentation of a genderless frontier that becomes corrupted,” insisting instead that “settlers brought a good deal of [presumably gendered] baggage” (273), the fact remains that the West was largely out of reach of the societal norms which American pioneers left behind and that negotiation was a necessity in frontier communities. This is perhaps best exemplified by Mrs. Burden’s exasperated exclamation when burial ground for Mr. Shimerda is refused by the Norwegians: “ ‘If these foreigners are so clannish, Mr. Bushy, we’ll have to have an American graveyard that will be more

liberal-minded” (86). This exclamation is telling. Betraying Mrs. Burden’s discomfort at the negotiation inherent in this search for burial ground, this moment highlights the lack of a dominant culture here; the necessity to establish an “American” graveyard in America, in other words, discounts any ready assumption of American cultural hegemony, registering the frontier as a nationless, contested terrain.

While the frontier may not have been precisely “genderless,” in other words, I would argue that it stands apart from the hegemonic norms of American society, including American conceptions of patriarchy, which simply have not been uniformly institutionalized yet. This is reflected in the conflicting versions of domesticity in the text: Mrs. Burden and Jim protest that “she [Mrs. Shimerda] managed poorly under new conditions” in her domestic role, as interpreted from an eastern American perspective, yet they are grudgingly “willing to believe that Mrs. Shimerda was a good housewife in her own country” (29). Davidoff notes that, historically, “there were many, sometimes conflicting, versions of domesticity” (51); Mrs. Burden’s rejection of Mrs. Shimerda’s proffered Bohemian mushrooms reflects not a successful “denigration of the values of the marginal group” as Irving suggests (96), but rather Mrs. Burden’s failed attempt to contain the threatening, “other” domesticity of the Shimerdas.

The recognition of this fledgling part of the nation--the sense that this is no longer “America”--is also reflected in the slippage in the characters’ use of the word “country.” Jim Burden notes that Nebraska “was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (11-12, my emphasis). This image of a “country to be made”

undermines the conception of a simple extension of the American nation. His grandmother similarly blurs the line between a rural or fresh area of land (“country”) and a new nation (“a country”), when she asserts, “ ‘In *a new country* a body feels friendly to the animals” (19, my emphasis). Finally, in referring to Virginia, Jim speaks of his “ ‘old country” (65), a construction which can only be read as either state separatist (the “country” of Virginia versus the “country” of Nebraska) or national (“America” versus this nationless frontier). Jim’s gesture of unpacking treasures from a distant place and time echoes the Shimerdas’ carefully stored treasure of dried mushrooms from Bohemia; both are artifacts of their previous cultural existence, transported to the “new country” of Nebraska. Their careful storage in dark trunks and wrappings suggest their symbolic value as frozen moments of the past, as symbols that “guaranteed the immutable existence of the nation and its people” (Mosse 53).

It is from this perspective, in which Cather represents the frontier as a new nation, that analysis of the role of these frontier women must be approached. Blanche Gelfant notes that Cather “creat[ed] images of strong and resourceful women upon whom the *fate of a new country depended*” (78, my emphasis). This responsibility, along with the “economic productivity” Gilbert and Gubar cite (173), reinforces the sense that women hold a different place in this frontier community than they would in America proper.

One manner in which this unusual place can be seen is in the women’s privileged relationship to the land in the text. While Jim Burden attends school, it is *Ántonia* who shapes and works the new land that the pioneers inhabit, going “from farm to farm” to fill the need for

agricultural hands (111). While Otto and Jake fill this need early in the text, it is predominantly *Ántonia's* cultivation of the land that is followed throughout the remainder of the text. Similarly, the concrete contributions of the "hired girls" stand in pointed contrast to the invisible and/or passive employment of male characters such as Mr. Harling.

In the same way, Jim recognizes that it is the "hired girls" like *Ántonia* who will form the backbone of the society when the next generation comes: "the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day [sic] managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the women they used to serve" (150-1). These assertions--of the women's direct involvement of the development of the region, both agriculturally and socially--highlight an important point: "it is insufficient to think of nationalism affecting gender in a one-way relationship" (Walby 237). In other words, the society envisaged in *My Ántonia* is one forged, grown, and nurtured by women. In contrast to the standard interpretation of a nation, in which nationalism is characterized by "its stereotype of manliness" (Mosse 114), the male presence in shaping this "new country" in *My Ántonia* is practically invisible.

The role of the women in *My Ántonia* as the showcased laborers and workers in the new community does not, certainly, alleviate the questions of patriarchal influence offered in the discussions of gender above. Certainly, the fact that *Ántonia* is deprived of the education she longs for and yet cannot have, because it is she who is responsible for her family's success--"School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm" (94)--cannot be seen as entirely good, if we agree that "the value of education is among the greatest of all

human values” (Woolf 45); and in spite of her protests to the contrary, the bitter recognition of exclusion brings *Ántonia* to tears. However, recognizing the women’s relationship to the development of national culture does suggest some alternative readings to the conclusions often reached, even as *Ántonia*’s sacrifice of her own education does not exclude the contribution she makes to American culture, as we shall see.

Recognition of nation-construction effects our reading of the play of gender in the text. One such instance is in the case of narrative authority, which has frequently been cited as Jim’s patriarchal subsuming of *Ántonia*, as we have seen. While Jim appends the “my” to his transcription of *Ántonia*’s history, however, it is worth reiterating that *Ántonia* is never, in fact, Jim’s; rather, his possessive “My” reflects a failed attempt at possession, as his amorous advances were firmly rebuffed and as the adult *Ántonia* never seeks his assistance or support. At the same time, that the tale is proffered via an anonymous female narrator further undermines Jim’s narrative authority, for his masculine presumption to speak for *Ántonia* undergoes a feminine revision itself: “the following narrative is Jim’s manuscript, *substantially* as he brought it to me” (6, my emphasis). Since we cannot know what changes the mysterious female editor effected nor which emendations or clarifications are hers, Jim’s possessive claim to *Ántonia* is undermined and a feminine voice is again given the dominant place.

At the same time, the readings of the women’s masculinity and androgyny must be similarly reconsidered. While Irving reads Lena as one who “conforms more readily than *Ántonia*” and assimilates in a manner “too complete” in that “she, like Jim, is lethargic” (100), I

would argue that Lena's refusal to marry and her achievement of the independent, successful life she sought belie any ready categorization of reinforced hegemony, undermining standard patriarchal demands; and her success can be contrasted with Jim's loveless marriage and the vague reference to the "disappointments" that have failed to quell his "naturally romantic and ardent disposition" (4). Similarly, as Gilbert and Gubar highlight, the happiness of the "masculine" hired girls stands in stark contrast with the emotional restriction to which town wives are subjected: "Energetic and jolly, Mrs. Harling must stop all the activities of her household so as to devote herself entirely to her husband" (197). While it may be true that "their disturbing androgynous qualities, and their unwillingness to accept traditional female roles" position the hired girls as "outsiders" (Wussow 52) and that these facts can be read as critical of the feminine, it seems more likely that Cather critiques the attributes of femininity that American culture promulgates. It is these characteristics which her androgynous characters undermine; it is these marginal women who form the basis of the new society; it is they who circumvent the Burdens' stereotypical and patriarchal expectations; and it is largely they who will prosper from the new society they forge.

What then are we to make of *Ántonia's* apparent reabsorption into the patriarchal structures of American society by text's end? Not, I would suggest, what Jim Burden would have us take away. While the interpretation that *Ántonia* is "fulfilling her appointed role as archetypal earthmother" (Dyck 264) may be pervasive, I would again return to the question of women's place within the nation and to the question of ethnicity abandoned by Irving. In her classic text,

Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf creates a sardonic and stinging response to the question of the nation and a women's place within it, positing woman as "outsider" to the nation because of her historical exclusion from it:

By freedom from unreal loyalties is meant that you must rid yourself of pride of nationality in the first place [. . .] When he says, "I am fighting to protect our country" and thus seeks to rouse her patriotic emotion, she will ask herself, "What does 'our country' mean to me an outsider?" [. . .] "For," the outsider will say, "in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world. (146; 195,7)

This sense of gendered exclusion is relevant here, in that I have argued that there are no dominant regulatory norms in effect in the text--at least, not that can be consistently enforced. In this no-land of Nebraska, where the normative rules of the American nation do not quite apply, where women control and shape the fledgling community, and where dominant patriarchal norms fall through, *Ántonia* stands as emblematic of the public/private line where, Woolf tells us, "the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected" (258). *Ántonia* has no "unreal loyalties"; her only ties are to the heritage she cherishes and the land she cultivates. The sense of nation she maintains hails back to "her country", not to the America in which she has lived for most of her life. This is reflected in the national identification of her American-born children: "Show him the spiced plums, mother. Americans don't have those" (248). While Irving reads this infusion of "European-ness" (101) as an ambivalent moment in the text, I would argue that it

reflects the continuation of *Ántonia*'s empowering otherness: other to the gendered norms of the Burdens' Virginian mentality, and other to the linguistic and cultural norms of American society, *Ántonia* and her family offer an alternative and yet no less legitimate construction of membership in the American nation.

This is best exemplified by the consistency of Cather's representation of *Ántonia*, which critics consistently devalue. When Jim encounters *Ántonia* for the first time in twenty years, it is the fecundity of her land and the fertility of her marriage that stands out--not as a symbol of her Gaia-like ability to multiply, but rather of the continuation of her role as creator and developer of the "new country." "It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, *like the founders of early races*" (259, my emphasis). Cynthia Enloe notes that "nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (cited in Walby 241). Here, in contradistinction to that masculinized norm, we have images of *Ántonia* as the source of growth and productivity--an image utterly in keeping with the fertile, productive role she and the other women in *My Ántonia* have played throughout the text. Just as the construction of the American nation in Nebraska has been largely women's work, *Ántonia*'s enclave microcosmically recreates that process of creation. Additionally, *Ántonia*'s success and her recreation of her own linguistic community on Nebraskan soil--" 'And then, I've forgotten my English so'" (Cather cited in Irving 101)--stands again in contrast to Jim's barren life. To argue that the fact of *Ántonia*'s fertility somehow negates the ambivalence of her representation throughout the text is to essentialize femininity in a manner that the text

consistently defies. Far from an essentialized portrait of *Ántonia* as surrendering to patriarchy and passivity, then, what we see in *Ántonia*'s final destination is a continuation of the process she maintained throughout the text--the creation of an America on her own terms, independent of the gendered norms that Jim Burden sought so desperately to enforce or of the hegemonic influence of a dominant, uniform American culture.

Virginia Woolf notes that "those also serve who remain outside" (216). In *My Ántonia*, we are presented with a portrait of life both inside and outside--life inside the American frontier, but outside the constraints of a hegemonic American culture; life inside cultural and ethnic communities, but outside the patriarchal, Protestant norm that Jim Burden and his grandmother envision. Although the question of gender is certainly central to the text, to read *My Ántonia* solely in terms of its commentary on gender is, I have argued, a mistake, even as to privilege gender over ethnicity in the text is to misconstrue the interconnectedness of both. Through the vehicle of gender roles and their (non)performance, Cather highlights the unconstructedness of the American frontier and the central role of women in forging a community, and by extension in negotiating a fledgling national consciousness. Through the subversion of Jim Burden's narrative authority and a disrespect for gender delineations, Cather emphasizes the constructedness of patriarchal norms, highlighting their irrelevance to successful cultural consciousness. Finally, through *Ántonia*'s final assumption of a nurturing role, she assumes not a passive feminine identification or a sudden retreat into traditional female roles. Rather, *Ántonia* becomes emblematic of the women who forged the frontier community in their own image, infusing it

with their own ethnicities and resisting the hegemonizing impulse of the tangle of norms we now know as the American nation.

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