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Cather's Call for Co-existence

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the inner workings of both gender and race within Will Cather's *My Antonia*. Many scholars have noted the crossing of identities between Jim and Antonia and conclude that it is indicative of one of two conclusions: either a critique of heteronormative gender roles or a critique of the struggles of the immigrant working class. I argue that these two notions work in unison and are portrayed in Jim's fluctuating image of Antonia. Whenever Jim serves to benefit from identifying with Antonia, his figurative romanticization of her is materialized in her feminine appearance. Likewise, whenever Jim does not benefit from Antonia's identity, she is depicted as manly and he forms a negative view of her entire race. Cather does express a desire for an erasure of all identities, yet this desire is idealistic. Ultimately, Jim and Antonia lose their androgynous behavior and embrace their original identities. Cather then is calling, not for conformity to one way of life, but rather for the acceptance of diversity as evidenced in Antonia's house and her reconnection with Jim at the end of the novel.

Keywords: Cather, identity, heteronormative, immigrant, androgynous, conformity, co-existence.

The interplay of gender and cultural identities make up the plot in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. The contrasting identities of Jim Burden, a white American male, and Antonia Shimerda, a Bohemian immigrant female, allow for a "crossing of identities" to take place on levels of both gender and culture (Hoffman 33). Yet, scholars have taken this "crossing" as evidence for two very different conclusions. Some assert that Cather uses Jim Burden "to disguise her lesbian identity" to allow for her to express her love for a woman in a heterosexual lighting as well as critique normative gender roles (Kouachi 103). Contrastingly, according to scholars like Blythe Tellefsen, Cather's novel is not the working out of a lesbian fantasy but

rather a critique of the American Dream. Tellefsen writes, "What *My Antonia* evidences is the difficulty of imagining a homogeneous community- a 'nation'" (Tellefsen 231). *My Antonia* rather tells the story of a newly diverse community struggling to understand and identify with one another's cultures. I argue that these two notions, the struggles of the immigrant working class to conform in America and the critique of heteronormative gender roles, are portrayed in unison and through the crossing of identities by both Jim and Antonia. In this essay I will examine how Jim's image of Antonia fluctuates depending on her conformity to or diversion from her social positioning.

In the scenes where Jim teaches Antonia English and where he dedicates his Commencement speech to Mr. Shimerda, Jim benefits from Antonia's status of "other" resulting in a figurative romanticizing of her which becomes materialized in his description of her as feminine. Contrastingly, when Mr. Cutter comes to assault Antonia, but Jim is in her place and when Antonia wears her father's boots and works on the farm, Jim resents Antonia and his forced acknowledgement of his femininity and her masculinity results in a negative view of her entire family and race. Lastly, the connectedness with another woman and with a cultural "other" which Jim, or rather Cather, yearns for as evident in Jim's feeling of complete erasure in his Grandmother's garden, is impossible. Jim and Antonia lose their androgynous behavior by the end of the novel and instead identify intensely with their original identities. Cather argues that since we cannot transcend identity categories, we should learn to live with them, and this is shown in how Antonia's house is a conglomeration of relics from the past and in how she has lost both her physical attractiveness and her adherence to American values, yet Jim still senses a "physical harmony" within her family (Cather 224).

The two identities of Jim and Antonia are set parallel to each other early on and their gender and cultural boundaries within their relationship are revealed. Jim, who is given the book of English-Bohemian translations at the end of this scene, becomes the possessor of cultures, placing him in a privileged position. In the scene where Jim teaches Antonia English, Jim becomes the metaphorical teacher of American values while Antonia is put in the role of student and depends on Jim to give her a voice. Cather writes, "She looked at me, her eyes fairly blazing with things she could not say" (Cather 19). It is Antonia who questioned "with her glance" and by pointing and "nodding violently" at the objects around her, communicating with gestures

“quick and impulsive” as if she were a child learning to speak for the first time (Cather 19). In answering her questions, Jim begins to unveil a new world to Antonia. He admires her desire to learn English, never once asking what the word for “sky” or “blue” is in Bohemian, and so views Antonia in a positive lighting. The two snuggle together under the wind and Jim describes Antonia as both quick and eager to learn new words and he reminisces that the day was “wonderfully pleasant” (Cather 19). Antonia’s inability to speak English makes her dependent on Jim to survive, and therefore her conformity to American values is also necessary for her survival. Mr. Shimerda realizes the necessity of assimilation into American culture and so tasks Jim with the burden of teaching Antonia. “Jim Burden’s ‘burden’ is, on one level” Tellefsen writes, “the ‘burden’ of national expansion” (Tellefsen 229). The burden of national expansion means the complications and power hierarchies which arise from an increase in diverse sets of identities within a community. Mr. Shimerda is aware of his family’s social positioning, and this awareness reveals that in asking Jim to teach Antonia English he is also asking Jim to take care of his daughter. Mr. Shimerda gives the Burden family an English-Bohemian translation book, making Jim and his family the literal possessors of two cultures. Cather writes, “Before I got into the wagon, he took a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed me a page with two alphabets, one English and the other Bohemian” (Cather 20). From this moment on a stark duality is formed and Jim and Antonia are made to exist in two separate spheres of identity, yet Jim as the possessor of cultures, has the privilege to traverse these identity lines and judge Antonia’s actions.

Jim’s power to possess qualities of another’s culture and to simultaneously romanticize those qualities is evident when he dedicates his Commencement speech to Mr. Shimerda. Jim receives praise and gifts from the townspeople, specifically Mrs. Harling who makes the comment, “You didn’t get that speech out of the books” (Cather 146). Mrs. Harling’s observation is true, Jim did not get his speech “out of the books” but rather from the life of Antonia and her family. Jim’s success is built on Antonia suffering the loss of her father, a story which he takes the liberty of indirectly telling. While Jim too laments Mr. Shimerda’s death, it becomes important to note that Mr. Shimerda’s death is due to an incapability to exist in a new world that does not value his Bohemian identity. Jim’s speech is therefore made on the hardships of the immigrant class in conforming to American values, and furthermore, he benefits from it in the form of educational progress. Jim’s privileged position and academic success is made even

more painfully obvious when his speech is juxtaposed with the reactions of the hired girls. Tony says that he spoke better than any lawyer in Black Hawk, Lena says she's surprised he remembered the words, and Ana wishes that she could have "fine thoughts" like that in her mind (Cather 147). Jim has traversed into Antonia's identity of being an immigrant and used it to benefit his social positioning, while Antonia receives no such benefit. Hoffman writes, "Indeed, at many moments in the manuscript, Jim romantically constructs Antonia as an 'other'—he constructs her 'difference' as appealing and alluring. At the moments in his manuscript when he identifies himself with Antonia, he enacts a crossing into her identity positions—feminine, immigrant, and working class" (Hoffman 30). Jim enacts this crossing but in doing so does not lose his privilege, and this is again evident in how he dedicated his speech to Antonia, therefore identifying with her, but then serves to benefit from it while her and the other hired girls gain nothing. This romanticizing of the qualities of the immigrant working class is then embodied in the hired girl's feminine appearance. Cather writes, "I stood watching their white dresses glimmer smaller and smaller down the sidewalk as they went away. I have had no other success that pulled at my heartstrings like that one" (Cather 147). Jim successfully connected with Antonia in this scene and this is reflected in her and her friend's attractiveness and purity. In the above two scenes, where Antonia adheres to American values and where identifying with the struggles of her culture serve to benefit Jim, her femininity is accentuated.

Masculinity, like femininity, is also linked to specific actions and behaviors as evidenced in the scene where Jim is a victim of attempted rape. Jim's masculinity is fueled by Antonia's admiration for him, making masculinity something to be gained. Hoffman writes, "If his masculinity is not a given, if it is merely constructed by narratives told, significantly, by a woman, then it can also be torn down by narrative" (Hoffman 33). This notion is seen in how Jim is blind to the fact that he saved Antonia from being raped and instead is filled with anger towards her for putting him in a femininized position and therefore deconstructing his male ego. After being assaulted by Mr. Cutter, Jim states that, "Truly, I was a battered object" (Cather 158). Jim is forced to acknowledge, rather uncomfortably, both the reality of Antonia's life as a woman and his own feminine traits. "Instead of fighting back to Cutter," Kouachi states, "Jim escapes and he turns his rage and anger to Antonia. He is not proud of himself for saving Antonia from being raped, but he is angry and disgusted because he does not want to admit his weakness" (Kouachi 104). In feeling like an object, Jim has had his masculinity and power

forcibly taken away from him and femininity and weakness has been put in its spot. Jim therefore does manage a crossing of identities in this scene, but it is one which does not benefit him and instead is viewed as a “bad dream” which he has the ability to eventually wake up from (Cather 158). In his attempts to reconstruct his identity, Jim enacts his privilege to traverse identity lines by retreating to his social positioning and distancing himself from Antonia and the community to prevent the story from reaching the townspeople. Cather writes, “I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness” (Cather 159). Jim, having been forced out of his male identity and into an identification with Antonia’s reality as a woman, is again reflected in his image of her. He no longer sees her in a positive lighting but instead develops a deep hatred towards her. In this scene, identifying with Antonia’s gender does not benefit Jim, and so he comes to hate this very trait in Antonia, associating her and her femininity with disgustingness.

While Jim does not like to be reminded of his femininity, he also does not want to be reminded of Antonia’s masculinity. Hoffman again asserts that Jim resents Antonia for being “too proud of her strength” because it serves to deconstruct his male ego (Cather 81). She writes, “Even though Jim attempts at certain moments in the manuscript to cross identity borders himself, he becomes uneasy when Antonia moves out of her socially-assigned position” (Hoffman 33). In the scene when Antonia works on the farm like a boy, she takes on a “masculine role and abandons her delicate feminine qualities” (Kouachi 105). Cather describes Antonia as, “She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her calves, over the boot-tops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s” (Cather 79). Jim attempts to reconstruct Antonia’s identity when he tries to convince her to attend school, since he believes that heavy field work will “spoil a girl” and that she’ll “lose all her nice ways and get rough ones” as his Grandmother states (Cather 80). Yet, Antonia’s embrasure of her masculine traits is only further emphasized in her response. She says, “I ain’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (Cather 80). Antonia not only refrains from mentioning herself as a woman but instead portrays herself as a man. Antonia later states that she does wish she could go to school so that she could learn like her father did, but now she is needed on the farm.

Despite this confession, Jim begins to see everything as disagreeable with Antonia. She “ate noisily now, like a man” and every time she yawned, she “kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached” (Cather 81). Antonia acting out of her gender boundaries is then reflected in Jim and his family’s opinion of her race. After Jim and Jake fight Ambrosch for allegedly breaking their Grandfather’s saw, Jim responds to Jake’s comment that one can never trust foreigners when he says, “‘I’ll never be friends with them again Jake,’ I declared hotly. ‘I believe they are all like Krajiek and Ambrosch underneath’” (Cather 84). The interplay of gender and culture is again prevalent here but instead of culture affecting how Jim sees Antonia’s femininity; it is her lack of feminine traits which leads to a negative image of her culture.

Cather does make it known that Jim possesses a desire to transcend all duality, and this notion is symbolized in nature. Cather writes, “At any rate that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep” (Cather 14). In this quote, nature is expressed as a community and a common ground where different people come together, much like the different plants all existing in harmony in his Grandmother’s garden. Yet, this viewpoint is also idealistic, and the complete erasure of identities is ultimately impossible. Hoffman writes, “In her novel, Cather presents a world in which identity borders need not be rigid, a world in which characters, especially privileged ones, can move in limited ways across identity borders, but she does not portray a world with no categories at all” (Hoffman 37). Jim, as a privileged character, has crossed identity borders often, especially when he visits Antonia’s hometown in Bohemia. But, for the characters that are not privileged, this is not the case, and the elimination of identity boundaries, even for Jim, is unobtainable. When Jim goes to visit Antonia at the end of the novel, the two have lost most of their androgynous behavior and have learned to embrace their given identities more fully. As the two proceed to reconnect, Antonia’s house becomes like a garden, since it is filled with relics. Her house is one giant conglomeration of things from the past and from her homeland. Antonia has forgotten most of her English and so her family speaks Bohemian in the house, yet instead of her retreat from the English language resulting in a negative image of her, her native tongue has become a “rice old language” (Cather 224). Likewise, hollyhocks surround her home and Jim remembers that Bohemians like to plant hollyhocks. Antonia also has a content marriage with a Bohemian man and has her father’s instruments, which the children play. Along with Antonia’s strong embrace of her Bohemian roots, she also has lost her feminine traits, something which Jim

notices but does not care for anymore. Jim observes that, “As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger” (Cather 214). Antonia’s image has become solidified through her embrace of her identity, an identity which Jim cannot ignore. For most of Jim’s time in Antonia’s home, they reminisce on old photographs. The novel placing much “primacy on the past,” as Tellefsen writes, “reflects again Cather’s unwillingness or inability to choose a single story or vision of America” (Tellefsen 241). The mixture of various objects and language within Antonia’s home is then also a call for America to learn how to live with different identity categories and to stop in their efforts for conformity. In this scene, Antonia’s image has been constructed by herself, and neither her culture nor her gender influence Jim’s perception of her, he sees “simply Antonia’s eyes” (Cather 214).

Jim’s and Antonia’s contrasting identities allow for various “crossings” to occur between the two. Jim from the very start of the novel represents the possessor of cultures, as evidenced in his literal possession of the English-Bohemian translation book. Because of this he can traverse identity lines and exert his privilege in both exploiting a romanticized “other” for his benefit as well as retreating to his comfortable social status when he no longer gains from his identification with the “other.” Instances where Antonia adheres to American values and Jim serves to benefit from identifying with her culture, Antonia is depicted as feminine and pure. Contrastingly, when Jim’s male ego is deconstructed through his forced recognition of both his femininity and Antonia’s masculinity, his image of Antonia and her culture are depicted in a negative lighting. In the scenes then, when Antonia learns English and Jim’s Commencement ceremony coupled with Mr. Cutter’s attempted rape of Antonia and Antonia acting as a boy on her family farm, expose how both a critique of gender roles and a critique of the forced conformity of the immigrant class, effect one another and are portrayed in unison. While Cather does express a desire for an erasure of these dualities, a world without categories is impossible to obtain. Through Antonia’s house, which is a mixture of categories all co-existing, Cather shows that one must find solace in their identity and learn how to live with people who are different from them. Ultimately, Jim moves away from letting Antonia’s expression of her gender and her culture influence his image of her and instead learns how to co-exist.

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