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Nation-Building and American National Identity in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*

Tanfer Emin TUNÇ¹

Abstract

Willa Cather's novel, *My Antonia* (1916), which centers around the struggles of female immigrants on the nineteenth-century American frontier, examines the role that disenfranchised women played in the formation of the American "nation." *My Antonia*'s heroine, Antonia Shimerda, is an immigrant from Southeastern Europe, (specifically Bohemia, or the former Czechoslovakia), who engages in the construction of American national identity through extra-political participation in the "imagined community" of the nation. Cather's intellectual project, however, does not simply describe female pioneer contributions while mirroring the political, social, and cultural context of her time. Rather, the novel encodes Cather's own mixed reaction to her culture, and presents a serious attempt at analyzing, problematizing, and imagining solutions to the intractable problems of racial heterogeneity, class and gender inequality, the fictive character of the "nation," and the meaning of national identity.

While Cather's focus on immigrant women elucidates the nature of female participation in the nation-state, it also exposes the ways in which gender, race, class and the myth of the expansive American "empire," impact female contributions to nation-formation. Not only does Cather illustrate the significance of these marginalized women to the national project, but she also exposes one of the enduring consequences of female participation in the traditionally white, and male, occupation of nation-formation: that because of essentialized notions of gender and race, the "visible" immigrant women in *My Antonia* are more likely than the "invisible" pioneer men to become casualties of the nation.

Key Words : *Nation-Building, National Identity, Women, Immigration, Frontier, Ethnicity, Sexuality, Gender Performance*

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Özet

Willa Cather'ın romanı, *My Antonia* (1916); 19. yüzyıl Amerika hudutlarındaki göçmen kadınların mücadelesi etrafında yoğunlaşıp, yasal haklarından mahrum kalan kadınların Amerikan "ulusunu" oluşturmasında oynadığı rolü inceler. *My Antonia*'nın kadın kahramanı, Antonia Shimerda; Güneydoğu Avrupalı bir göçmen olup (Bohemia'lı , yani eski Çekoslovakya'lı), Amerikan ulusal kimliğinin inşasında; siyaset dışı katılımı ile ulusun hayal edilen toplum kütesinde yer almıştır. Fakat, Cather'ın zihinsel projesi, sadece kadın öncülerin katkılarını tanımlamakla kalmaz; aynı zamanda, kendi yaşadığı çağın politik, sosyal ve kültürel bağlamını da yansıtır. Aslında, roman, Cather'ın kendi kültürüne olan karmaşık tepkisini analiz etmektedir. Yazar, farklı ırklara, sınıflara, cinsiyet eşitsizliğine, uydurma ulus karakterine ve ulusal kimliğin anlamına ilişkin çözümlenemeyen problemleri analiz etmekte ve söz konusu problemlere çözüm getirme yönünde ciddi girişimlerde bulunmaktadır.

Cather göçmen kadınlar üzerinde odaklanarak kadınların ulus devletteki katılımının doğasını izah eder. Aynı zamanda da cinsiyetin, ırkın, sınıfın ve genişlemekte olan Amerikan imparatorluğu efsanesinin, kadınların ulus oluşumuna katkılarında nasıl bir etki yarattığını inceler. Cather köşeye itilmiş bu kadınların ulusal projedeki önemini resmetmekle kalmaz; aynı zamanda kadınların, geleneksel olarak beyaz ırk ve erkeklerin işgalindeki ulus oluşumuna katılımının uzun süre devam edegelen neticelerinden birini de ortaya çıkarır; öyle ki cinsiyet ve ırk gibi temel görüşlerinden dolayı, *My Antonia*'da kahramanlaştırılan göçmen kadınlar, zayıf gösterilen öncü erkeklere oranla, daha yüksek bir ihtimalle, ulusun yitirdiği kayıpları simgeler.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Ulus oluşturma, Ulusal kimlik, Kadınlar, Göç, Etnik köken, Cinsellik, Cinsiyet farklılığı*

In 1916, on a trip back to Red Cloud, Nebraska, American novelist Willa Cather drove out to a farm on the frontier to visit a Bohemian woman, Anna Sadilek Pavelka, whom she had known in her youth. There, she found Anna serene and happy, surrounded by many children, and decided to write *My Antonia* as a tribute to her friend's determination to "build a nation on her own terms."²

If, as Franz Fanon maintains, there exist "similarities between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation," then women have a pivotal role in the construction of the nation.³ Cather's novel, *My Antonia* (1916), which centers around the struggles of female immigrants on the nineteenth-century American frontier, examines the role that disenfranchised women played in the formation of the American "nation."⁴ Like Anna Pavelka, *My Antonia*'s heroine, Antonia Shimerda, is an immigrant from Southeastern Europe (specifically Bohemia, or the former Czechoslovakia), who engages in the construction of American national identity through *extra-political* participation in the "imagined community" of the nation.⁵ Cather's intellectual project, however, does not simply describe female pioneer contributions while mirroring the political, social, and cultural context of her time. Rather, *My Antonia* encodes Cather's

own mixed reaction to her culture, and presents a serious attempt at analyzing, problematizing, and imagining solutions to the intractable problems of racial and ethnic heterogeneity, class and gender inequality, the fictive character of the “nation,” and the meaning of national identity.

While Cather’s focus on immigrant women elucidates the nature of female participation in the nation-state, it also exposes the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, class and the myth of the expansive American “empire,” impact female contributions to nation-formation.⁶ Not only does Cather illustrate the significance of these marginalized women to the national project, but she also exposes one of the enduring consequences of female participation in the traditionally white, and male, occupation of nation-formation: that because of essentialized notions of gender and race, the “visible” immigrant women in *My Antonia* are more likely than the “invisible” pioneer men to become *casualties* of the nation.

Conceptualizing the American Nation and the Myth of Homogenous National Identity

Born in 1873 to an Anglo-Saxon Protestant family from Roanoke, Virginia, Willa Cather was a product of the American Progressivism that flourished between 1890 and 1920. While Cather’s participation in the rising Protestant professional middle class ideally positioned her to survey the aspirations and achievements of the Progressive Era, she instead focused on the splintering of progressive idealism which occurred during World War I.⁷ As a socially-engaged author, Cather was most likely aware that despite its positivistic name, “a great deal of *progressive* economic, social, and political thought worked against the progressive grain.”⁸ While turn-of-the century progressives maintained that abundance would eventually give all Americans equal access to “leisure, cultivation, and refinement,” in practice, progressivism fell short of its optimistic promises because it included a number of anti-democratic initiatives.⁹ While a host of middle-class progressive intellectuals, such as Margaret Sanger, “benevolently” devoted themselves to creating programs which would manage problems like overpopulation, factory safety, child labor, inadequate education, and the decline in social and moral standards, implicit in these *progressive* attempts at improving the lives of the under-classes was a rather sinister agenda. Many progressives desired the *elimination* of the immigrant and working classes through “scientific solutions.” These solutions included eugenic programs, birth control crusades, and the education, or rather *Americanization*, of immigrants, ethnic groups, and minorities.¹⁰ The fact that Cather constructed positive representations of collectivities, such as Southeastern European immigrant pioneer women, who were under the intense scrutiny of the dominant social group (i.e.,

Protestant America), signaled her disenchantment with the progressive definition of modernity.¹¹

Cather wrote *My Antonia* during a brief period of pluralistic hopefulness that existed amongst all the progressive rhetoric of Americanization, assimilation, and acculturation. During the ten-year period between the start of the Americanization debates (1910) and the beginning of quota-oriented nativism (1920), it was possible to imagine a multicultural America in which peoples from different nations co-existed.¹² Disillusioned by works such as Royal Dixon's *Americanization* (1916), which sought to homogenize American national identity by making it synonymous with the Protestant and English-speaking peoples of Northern Europe, Cather openly criticized the "progressive" policy of Americanization: "Social workers, missionaries – call them what you will – devote their days and nights to immigrants, wanting to turn them into replicas of smug American citizens. This passion for Americanizing everything and everybody is a deadly disease with us."¹³ As an alternative, Cather advocated a flexible form of multiculturalism, which, through cultural exchange, would intermingle "old" and "new" to form a rich, hybrid, mutable American national identity. She believed, in fact, that a heterogeneous Midwestern state, such as Nebraska, which contained a more diverse population than her home state of Virginia, could nurture such a cosmopolitan culture: "It is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up."¹⁴

Cather's theory of multiculturalism was based on her own experiences in Nebraska, where Eastern Europeans, New Englanders, and Southerners co-habited the plains and shared their cultures. Cather conveys the cultural exchange she witnessed on the frontier through the characters in *My Antonia*. In one scene, the narrator, Jim Burden, shows Antonia a picture book he brought with him from Virginia. Antonia responds by animating the pictures with Bohemian stories. After hearing the stories, Jim comments on the Bohemian nature of Antonia's home, where pictures of Prague are displayed prominently on the parlor walls. He then accepts Antonia's offer of coffee and kolaches, and in return, presents Antonia with a piece of Johnny cake.¹⁵ In another scene, Jim and Antonia exchange songs from their respective homelands as they walk arm-in-arm, over the hill, into the sunset of the Nebraskan sky.

Cather's portrayals of cultural exchange, however, are not as bucolic, or benign, as they may seem at first glance. She simultaneously uses these illustrations of cultural exchange to complicate the construction of multicultural identity. Cather knew that to think of "American" as a homogenous nationality rooted in history is highly problematic, for if one attempted to trace American national identity back to its origins,

this search would lead to people who, according to Progressive definitions, would not be considered “American” at all. Thus, through these cultural encounters, she questions the extent to which immigrants could actually engage with an unstable, mythic, and perhaps even “imagined” national identity. In *My Antonia*, Cather ultimately concludes that while cultural exchange can occur, a differential relationship is produced within the “nation” which *marginalizes the voiceless* (i.e., women and children), and reveals the tentative, mutable, and fictive nature of national identity.¹⁶

While the hegemonic symbol of language helps produce the fictive collectivity, or homogeneity, of a nation, to Cather, the English language was merely an oppressive mechanism that forced immigrants to acculturate to American society and lose their distinct individuality. Even though Antonia’s friendship with Jim is initiated by the fact that she wants to learn English – “she could not speak enough English to ask for advice, or even to make her most pressing wants known” – their friendship evolves beyond mere verbal communication.¹⁷ In fact, by the time Antonia reaches adulthood, she completely forgets her English. Nevertheless, she is content, thus illustrating the irrelevance of English to the national project. While Benedict Anderson maintains that “from the start, the nation is conceived in language, not in blood, and that one can be ‘invited into’ the imagined community through language,” Cather knew that this invitation is never unfettered, for immigrants like Antonia would always speak English with an accent that would mark them as a foreign and ambiguous “other” within the nation-state.¹⁸ Cather resolves the problems inherent in teaching English to immigrants by reducing its significance in the novel, and its importance to nation-formation.

In *My Antonia*, Cather also uses the myth of the expansive, open and free frontier to examine the formation of national identity. However, such myths are troublesome because they elide the violent realities that national projects involve. Myth becomes an evasive discourse through which novelists, such as Cather, write the American “nation,” suppressing and evacuating the problems of history and ideology from their texts. In *My Antonia*, the exploitation of nature and the slaughter of native peoples are transformed into the comforting myths and legends of the American West. Moreover, the process of transculturation that occurred on the American plains, which began with the extermination of Native Americans (de-culturation), the introduction of European Americans (re-culturation), and the establishment of a third culture (neo-culturation), is completely ignored.

Cather contributes to the myth of the ever-expanding American empire by focusing on the transfer of European empires to America: the European immigrants in the novel are refugees from the disintegrating Hapsburg Empire, who subsequently become

absorbed into America's vision of "manifest destiny." Cather's saving grace, however, is exactly what made her such a controversial figure during her time: she populates the "empire" of the American West with characters who were considered marginal and dislocated in the project of American nation-building. Cather illustrates that the frontier is where "Americans" can overcome their marginality by developing proper human relationships within a culturally and ethnically complex situation. In Nebraska, the wandering, historically-marginal homeless immigrant is redefined in heroic terms so that the wandering immigrant arrives in America as an icon of settled, steadfast values, which lies in sharp contrast to the perpetually-shifting values of the United States. This element of permanency and enduring "European sensibility" allows Cather's pioneers to construct an America on their own terms, despite the race and gender prejudices they face on the frontier.

Race, Class, and Civilization on the American Frontier

In late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America, "race" became yet another source of impassable difference that challenged the construction of a homogenous nation.¹⁹ As Matthew Jacobson notes, racial categories, and in particular constructions of "whiteness," served as unstable social delineations were used by various groups, at various times, to differentiate and marginalize other groups, and gain authority for themselves within the American nation.²⁰ Groups that were considered to be "true" whites, such as middle and upper-class Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans, derived their whiteness, and also class-authority, from all "non-whites," to which they could be compared and deemed politically and culturally dissimilar. The physical feature of skin color by itself, however, did not determine race. Social or class arbiters, such as mannerisms, employment, and housing also determined who was "white" and "non-white." Because they often lived and worked comfortably with blacks and the working class, the new wave of immigrants who came from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Central America between 1880 and 1920 also became known as "non-white," for they were clearly not members of the middle and upper-classes, and their non-Caucasian and non-Protestant origins excluded them from the "white" group. All "non-whites," which included African-Americans, the working class, and these new immigrant groups, were seen as possessing characteristics which, to a large degree, were ambiguously inscribed across racial and social groups, conflating primitivism, savagery, foreignness and unbridgeable class difference.

As net migration to the United States reached the twenty million mark in 1920, many "progressive" Americans, including President Theodore Roosevelt, feared that the "great Protestant-American race," which allegedly possessed superior genetic

qualities, might be drowned by an “invasion” of these inassimilable, barbarous and “uncivilized,” immigrants.²¹ By invoking the eugenic specter of race suicide and the takeover of modern society by defective degenerates and “foreigners” who would outbreed the established middle and upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock, popular literature, such as Madison Grant’s *Passing of the Great Race* (1916), exploited pre-existing fears of black-white miscegenation and class-mixing by convincing Americans that the influx of these new immigrants would affect the national gene pool. To many Americans, these immigrants became “the dregs of humanity”: physically-different because of their allegedly darker skin and smaller skulls, and socially-unacceptable because of their Catholicism (which implied an allegiance to the papacy), lower-class clannish tendencies, radical Marxist politics, and potential to take jobs away from “hard-working” Anglo-Americans.²² Thus, these “non-white” immigrants were constructed by turn-of-the-century science as being socially and genetically “inassimilable,” and were formally excluded by a series of legal decisions and investigations, beginning with the House-Senate Dillingham Report in the 1920s. *Civilized* immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, who *matched* the racial and class “character” of the existing middle and upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant population were welcomed, and even encouraged, to combat the tide of *undesirable* immigrants through intermarriage and reproduction.²³

By the end of the nineteenth century, Southeastern Europeans, such as the Shimerdas, had become synonymous with this non-white, lower-class “other.” In *My Antonia*, “the fiction of racial identity and class difference is represented through ‘traditional’ markers of race, such as the characters’ skin color, facial characteristics, actions and values.”²⁴ According to Jim Burden, the immigrant girls were “physically almost a race apart...out-of-door work had made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women.”²⁵ Antonia’s “skin was *brown*, and in her cheeks she had a glow of dark color. Her hair was curly and wild-looking, and she used it to make a nest for a cricket she found.”²⁶

Jim conflates notions of race and savagery even further when he describes the adult Antonia: “When I saw her after twenty years, I encountered a stalwart, brown, flat-chested, toothless and battered woman...her curly brown hair was grizzled.”²⁷ Jim makes it clear that Eastern Europeans, because of their race-based primitivism, could relate to the land in a primal way. When Jim first sees the Shimerdas, they are coming out of a “warm dark badger hole,” in an animal-like fashion.²⁸ One of Antonia’s brothers has webbed fingers and makes sounds like a rooster crowing; another is “fox-like.” Antonia’s mother “gobbles her food” and possesses a “draught-horse neck, which is common among the peasant women in all old countries.”²⁹ Moreover, Jim, like other

white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans of his time, associates Antonia's pastoral life with "racial difference and excessive threatening fertility."³⁰ As he conveys, "All the strong things in her heart came out in her body...she was a mine of life, like the founders of the early races."³¹ Moreover, he notes that after having had eight children, Antonia's primitive ties to the land are strengthened: "Ever since she had children she doesn't like to kill anything."³² Clearly, "the forging of racial stereotypes and the confirmation of notions of savagery were vital to the [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] world view."³³

While the immigrant "hired girls" were marked as different due to their skin color and "lower-class" behavior, they were also outsiders because they were not, and could never be, true Protestant-Americans: "The daughters of Black Hawk [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] merchants had a confident belief that they were 'refined,' and that the country [i.e., immigrant] girls who 'worked out' were not, and that the two groups would never be mistaken for one another."³⁴ Through racial and class pride, the Protestant townspeople felt innately superior to the immigrants, and as a result, did not bother to distinguish between one group of immigrants and another. In their minds, all "non-whites" were interchangeable and dispensable. Consequently, they conflated immigrants into one ambiguous mass, without considering the social status of the immigrants back in their native lands. To the Protestant elite of Black Hawk, all immigrants could be collectively labeled as "dissimilar": "If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people. People saw no difference between Antonia and the three Marys. They were all Bohemians, all 'hired girls.'"³⁵ In the context of *My Antonia*, however, "Bohemian" signifies bi-directional social exclusion: not only does white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society reject, and exclude, "Bohemians," but later on in the novel, Bohemians exclude, or isolate, themselves from American society. While the young Antonia is an active participant in the nation-building process, the older Antonia consciously removes herself from American society and is content living with the cultural memory of Bohemia. As she explains to Jim, "I ain't never forgot my own country."³⁶

Cather was well-aware of Protestant prejudices against these racialized immigrants, and was particularly disturbed about the way Virginians who moved to Nebraska viewed the immigrant population. Her acute observations of these prejudices are evident in her portrayal of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant characters, such as Jim, through whom she exposes the narrowness of American views. As a Southern family uprooted from their native Virginia and transported to Nebraska, the Burdens bring with them their racist beliefs and assumptions. Jim notes that like a plantation slave, Antonia

was “most comfortable only when...tucked down on the baked earth, in the full blaze of the sun.” Mrs. Burden replies that, like slaves, “the Shimerdas are hard to keep. Where’s a body to begin with these people? They are wanting in everything.” She also notes how good, civilized (i.e., “white”) Christians, such as herself, were now burdened with the responsibility of being “their ‘unfortunate’ brothers’ keepers.”³⁷ In Virginia, the “unfortunate” would of course be African-Americans (i.e., former slaves); however, in Nebraska, they would be non-white Anglo-Saxon Protestant immigrants. Thus in this context, Jim’s grandmother is once again the “plantation mistress,” essentializing and racializing the marginal as she would have done in Virginia.

When Antonia abandons traditional female “virtues” out of necessity, and begins to work on the farm like a man, Mrs. Burden notes that her “civilized attributes have withered away.”³⁸ Her genteel manners and social veneer, which had rendered her more civilized, and therefore “whiter,” than the other immigrant women, ceased to exist. Consequently, Mrs. Burden believes she “saves” Antonia by placing her in a *nice* (i.e., Anglo-Saxon Protestant) home where she could learn some manners. Implicit in Mrs. Burden’s actions is the desire to “whiten” and assimilate Antonia into the middle-class American nation, removing any traces of her “unacceptable” Eastern European heritage. However, Mrs. Burden’s attempts at assimilating Antonia do not work: she returns to farming on the Shimerda homestead, marries a Czech, and becomes enveloped in the immigrant culture of Black Hawk. Through Mrs. Burden’s failure, Cather illustrates that policies of assimilation are inherently flawed, for they rest on two very important assumptions: that immigrants desire assimilation, and that assimilation is possible. In this context, “civilizing” Antonia becomes a futile form of racial and cultural imperialism that fails to conquer and colonize her body and national identity.

Gender, Sexuality and “Performing the Nation”

As Ann Laura Stoler conveys, “these nationalistic and racial discourses did more than give force to a politics of exclusion. They produced gender distinctions, which were closely linked to discourses of sexuality and power.”³⁹ Jim, who comes to represent the male white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony in *My Antonia*, serves as a foil for Antonia’s independence and her rejection of essentialized female qualities.⁴⁰ Even as a boy, Jim presumes that his sex entitles him to social superiority over the female immigrants in Black Hawk, particularly Antonia: “Much as I liked Antonia, I hated the superior tone that she sometimes took with me... I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner.”⁴¹ Moreover, by labeling her as *my Antonia*, Jim Burden attempts to restrain and objectify Antonia. However, Antonia never actually belongs to Jim, as his romantic intentions never come to fruition. Jim cannot influence

Antonia's "masculine" behavior, and his only source of empowerment becomes his pitiful efforts to control her identity.

According to Homi Bhabha, women contest experiences of the nation, and challenge male authority from the margins, through gendered-performances of the "nation."⁴² Like Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, which argues that *gender and heterosexuality* always involve imitation and repetition because gender and sexual identity are never derived from a stable, biological origin, Bhabha's theory of performance contends that the *nation* is derived from female "masquerade," "mimicry," and "invention." By joining men during times of struggle and mimicking masculinity, the immigrant women in *My Antonia* perform the traditionally-male occupation of nation-building. However, as Cather illustrates, this mimicry implies more than just the subversion of traditional gender roles. Rather, it undermines the power of the white male hegemony by portraying the "masculine" immigrant pioneer woman as an active participant in nation-building, and the "effeminate" white Anglo-Saxon Protestant pioneer man as a passive observer. While Jim writes poetry, the "rough and mannish" Antonia, or "Tony" as she is labeled by Jim, is "hired out like a man," transforming the new "nation" through her own physical effort.⁴³ As Antonia asserts: "School is all right for little boys like Jim. I help make this land one good farm...I don't care that your grandmother says farming 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." As Jim notes – perhaps with a sense of envy – Antonia is "too proud of her own strength."⁴⁴

Lena, another Southeastern European immigrant, also uses her masculinity to perform, and challenge, the white, male occupation of nation-building. In fact she becomes a happy "tomboy with short hair, uncannily clever at all boys' sports, and much better at them than the boys themselves."⁴⁵ Lena's wish for economic control over her life, despite its social unacceptability, comes to fruition: she eventually achieves success through commerce, and gains the independent life she seeks by rejecting all her male suitors. Cather further validates these masculinized claims to authority by elevating the visibility of immigrant women within the national project, and marginalizing white male contributions to nation-building. In *My Antonia*, the active participation of immigrant women overshadows the futile efforts of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men: "Mrs. Harling ran the business and looked after everything. Her assistant, Mr. Gardner, stood at the desk and welcomed incoming travelers. He was a popular fellow, but not a manager."⁴⁶

The "spectacle" of immigrant women representing the masculine within the context of nation-building is problematic not only because it is unfeminine, but also because it

implies the non-dominant, non-authoritative, and even impotent, masculinity of white men.⁴⁷ By inverting notions of masculinity, femininity, and race, Cather blurs the social-constructions of race and gender, and in effect emasculates white men, altering their claims to authority, and providing “women of color” with a power-infused space which they can use to create a nation on their own terms. However, what is interesting to note is that Cather only “masculinizes” female characters whom she portrays as pioneers, or nation-builders, for she believed that male qualities were necessary for women who sought to challenge the white male hegemony. Those characters who become objectified by the male hierarchy, such as Tiny and Anna, remain distinctly female.

While, as Homi Bhabha notes, national performance or mimicry of any type, whether it be visual or linguistic, is never perfect because there is no self-contained, entirely racially and culturally homogenous “nation” which can be seamlessly produced, Cather’s goal is to illustrate that a nation can be created, nurtured, and affected by marginalized women.⁴⁸ Jim realizes that immigrant women, such as Antonia, will eventually constitute the core of American national identity: “The girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are today managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the women they used to serve.”⁴⁹ In fact, for the adult Jim, Antonia even comes to represent “the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood.”⁵⁰ Thus by showcasing characters who successfully negotiate white Anglo-Saxon Protestant definitions of womanhood, Cather illustrates that female immigrants can be valuable participants in the national project.

As Cather illuminates, the sexualized bodies of female immigrant nation-builders, such as Antonia Shimerda, eventually come to represent the “national body.” “Excluded from direct action as national citizens, [immigrant] women are subsumed symbolically into the boundaries of the national body politic, and work within the margins to forge a national identity. As the biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities, these women become the symbolic bearers of the nation, active transmitters and producers of national culture, signifiers of national difference, and active participants in national struggles.”⁵¹ Antonia’s fertility thus embodies her participation in the nation-building process, and her undying contribution to the country’s future:

Antonia lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. I had not been mistaken...She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness

of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body [which] had been so tireless in serving generous emotions... It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.⁵²

By virtue of their essentialized capacity to reproduce and nurture, women, both as individuals and as a collectivity, are burdened with ethnic, cultural, racial and national representation. As “carriers of national identity,” it is the immigrant women in *My Antonia*, and not the men, who engage in the identity negotiation that occurs on the Nebraska frontier. They maintain and reshape national identity through memory, voice, storytelling, and the preservation of symbols of diasporic consciousness, such as the Bohemian mushrooms that Antonia and Mrs. Shimerda so cautiously protect. The ritualistic treatment of this “treasure” highlights the notion that they are sacred representations of the “old world,” small “totalizations of national culture...which construct the field of meanings associated with national life.”⁵³

Because of essentialized race and gender roles, the “visible” immigrant women in *My Antonia*, more than the “invisible” immigrant men, become *casualties* of the nation. Accusations that immigrant women, such as Mrs. Shimerda, “manage [their households] poorly under new conditions” stemmed from the notion that these women, as representatives of national and racial identity, transmitted the unsanitary and unhygienic conditions that were associated with second wave immigrants.⁵⁴ According to popular nineteenth-century discourse, “the ability to conform to antiseptic standards of cleanliness differentiated rich from poor, educated from unschooled, and American from foreign-born.”⁵⁵ Thus, the race, class, and “foreignness” of immigrant women automatically rendered them “bad housekeepers.” They, unlike middle and upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant women, could not be considered the “hygienic wardens” of the home, let alone part of the emerging American nation.⁵⁶ The subtle and ephemeral nature of diseases, such as tuberculosis, made illness difficult to diagnose, which exacerbated the nativist fear of immigrants. Symptoms were arbitrarily grouped together on the basis of cultural assumptions rather than clinical diagnoses, and female immigrants became the contaminators of disease through their unsanitary households. As bacteriology heightened awareness of the microbe-ridden body, both physicians and lay people became increasingly fearful that disease could spread through casual forms of touch.⁵⁷ Consequently Mrs. Burden’s rejection of Mrs. Shimerda’s Bohemian mushrooms could reflect an attempt to control the ambiguous disease, menacing race, and national “otherness” of the Shimerdas.

As “threatening” marginal figures, the immigrant women in *Black Hawk*, and in particular the hired girls, become infused with taboo. Their bodies become sites for the articulation of Anglo-American sexuality, exoticized desire, and anti-miscegenation rhetoric, for they possess the ability to “pollute” white America. Interracial romance, which dealt with desire and exoticism, was, to a certain extent, acceptable on the American frontier. However interracial marriage, or miscegenation, which dealt with procreation and the purity of bloodlines, was a completely different issue.⁵⁸ As Joanne Hershfield states, “Sex is one thing, but the preservation of the purity of the Anglo-Saxon American family (both the nuclear family and the national family) is another.”⁵⁹ Consequently, in *My Antonia*, the immigrant farm girls are only acceptable as hired girls, or “good-time girls,” but never as wives. The boys of Eastern American stock, including Jim Burden, only marry “their own kind,” for, like Theodore Roosevelt, they believe that miscegenation would weaken the national race.⁶⁰ It is this feeling of racial superiority, or “respectability,” that prevents intermarriage between immigrants from Eastern Europe and Protestant-Americans: “The county girls are considered a menace to the social order. They shine out too boldly against a conventional background. But the anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The *respect for respectability* is far stronger than any [sexual] desire in Black Hawk youth.”⁶¹

Americans believed that as *reproductive vessels*, immigrant “women of color” could pervert society by creating undesirable stock. For Americans, miscegenation, illegitimacy and racial impurity had no place in the construction of a pure and legitimate nation. Thus, in *My Antonia*, the ailments or degeneration of the national body are inscribed on “alien” *female* bodies, and a barrier, or a *cordon sanitaire*, is established through anti-miscegenation strategies, to prevent further contamination.⁶² Antonia, who is aware of this social boundary, is careful to protect Jim from the disgrace of racial transgression, and expects him to do better: “You are going away to school and make something of yourself...I am awful proud of you. You won’t go and get mixed up with [those hired girls], will you?”⁶³ Jim, who later develops a romantic attachment to Antonia, ponders what might have been if such socially-constructed barriers did not exist: “I would have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother, or my sister – anything that a woman could be to a man.”⁶⁴ However, Antonia’s ambiguous gender, racial, and national status automatically excludes her from any such relationship. Thus, even Cather’s “liberal” vision of cultural exchange has its limits: it clearly does not include sexual interaction. By portraying the intermingling of non-Protestant immigrants and Protestant-Americans without the miscegenation of blood-

lines, Cather challenges, yet ironically remains true, to Theodore Roosevelt's eugenic vision of America.

Wick Cutter's attempted rape of Antonia is, therefore, significant for a multitude of reasons. Wick, a member of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite of Black Hawk, tries to rape a "polluted" and "dark" masculine woman without considering personal contamination, or the social ramifications of his actions. In this situation, his desire to humiliate and shame Antonia outweighs the risk of personal defilement. After all, Antonia is a virgin, and rape would construct her, and not Wick, as an object of taboo, further distinguishing her in terms of sexuality, gender, and race. Rape would fulfill Wick's imperialistic desire for the exotic "other," without the complications of marriage or miscegenation, while simultaneously exerting violent power and discipline over Antonia's *difference*. Defiling Antonia would be like raping, or conquering, her masculinity, race, class, and the entire Bohemian nation. The rape of an immigrant woman would also render immigrant men effeminate, for it would challenge the familial ownership of women and the ability of male relatives to claim compensation for their *possession*.

While these disenfranchised and marginalized women were clearly involved in the construction of national identity, and an alternative mythology of the West, they faced the reality that "women are both of and not of the nation."⁶⁵ Cather knew that despite her intellectual ideals, reality would always intervene to create a differential relationship between women and the nation. As Antonia poignantly remarks, "Things will be easy for you [Jim]. But they will be hard for us."⁶⁶ Social inequality continues to impact female immigrant nation-builders, rendering them casualties of, and not simply contributors to, the country that has promised them "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Thus, as "peoples marked as 'others' in the 'imagined community' of the nation, [immigrant women] are contingent and incomplete at best, denigrated and despised at worst, and always the product of contestation and resistance."⁶⁷

NOTES

- ² Brent Bohlke, *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches and Letters* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 9 – 10.
- ³ Anne McClintock, ed. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Post-Colonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 95.
- ⁴ Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1916).
- ⁵ In this paper, I define identity as "a subject's location within social structure...identities transverse the space between the social world and the subjective experience, constituting a central organizing principle connecting self and world. Collective identities of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, and nation,

forge connections among individuals and provide links between past and present, becoming the basis for cultural representation and political action...Identities become contested sources and products of construction, authority, and legitimation.” This definition is borrowed from Lisa Duggan’s “The Trials of Alice Mitchell,” *Signs*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 793.

- 6 In this paper I define gender as the social construction of masculinity and femininity, not the sexual differences between men and women.
- 7 During her lifetime, Cather was a journalist for the infamous muckraking magazine *McClure's*, a professor at the University of Nebraska, and a novelist – all professions that were considered part of the “progressive” movement. Bohlke, 12.
- 8 Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 360.
- 9 Ibid., 531.
- 10 Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877- 1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), Chapters 5 and 6.
- 11 Modernity, in this context, is defined as “an unfolding set of relationships – cognitive, social, and intellectual as well as economic and technological – which, however valued or construed, are seen as producing the modern self and its expectations of perfection of progress.” This definition is borrowed from Kathleen Wilson, “Citizenship, Empire and Modernity in the English Provinces,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1995, 70. Brett Bohlke notes that while some critics and members of the intelligentsia rejected *My Antonia*, overall, the novel was very-well received. This suggests that others, like Cather, might have been disillusioned by the attitude that Progressivism took towards marginalized peoples. For more on this topic, please see Bohlke, pp. 5 – 6.
- 12 Bohlke, 22.
- 13 Ibid., 71 – 2.
- 14 Ibid., 94.
- 15 Johnny cake is a variety of American corn bread.
- 16 Bohlke, 68.
- 17 Cather., 20
- 18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Press, 1991), 19.
- 19 In the nineteenth-century, “race” signified more than skin color and other markers of “physical difference.” Implicit in “race” was ethnicity, class, culture and religion. In this paper, “race” will be used in this broader sense.
- 20 Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.
- 21 The term “net migration” is used to exclude the five to ten million immigrants who returned to their country of origin or made another migration elsewhere. Walter Nugent, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870 – 1914*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 150.
- 22 Ibid., 89.
- 23 Ibid., 106.
- 24 Joanne Herschfield, *The Invention of Dolores del Rio* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000), xii.
- 25 Cather 55.
- 26 Ibid., 23.

- 27 Ibid., 188.
- 28 Ibid., 75.
- 29 Ibid., 79.
- 30 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 22.
- 31 Cather, 190.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 37.
- 34 Cather, 44.
- 35 Ibid., 78.
- 36 Ibid., 211.
- 37 Ibid., 52. It is interesting to note that Cather named the white, male narrator Jim Burden. Perhaps his last name was intended to suggest the racist discourse of the "white man's burden."
- 38 Ibid., 50.
- 39 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 7 – 8.
- 40 From this point on, "white," in the context of race, will also imply middle and upper-class Anglo-Saxon Protestant American.
- 41 Cather, 38.
- 42 Homi Bhabha, *The Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 299.
- 43 Cather, 111.
- 44 Ibid., 105.
- 45 Ibid., 113.
- 46 Ibid., 182.
- 47 Stoler, 8 – 9.
- 48 Bhabha, 301.
- 49 Cather, 150 – 151.
- 50 Ibid., 2.
- 51 McClintock, 90.
- 52 Cather, 258 – 259.
- 53 Bhabha, 3.
- 54 Cather, 29.
- 55 Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.
- 56 Ibid., 62.
- 57 At the time, physicians lacked accurate diagnostic tools, such as the x-ray machine, which would conclusively diagnose diseases like tuberculosis. The result was the construction of a prejudiced diagnostic mechanism that targeted working-class Americans, immigrants and racially-marginalized groups. Please see Tomes, 107.

- 58 Hershfield, 24
59 Ibid., 30.
60 Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 214 – 215.
61 Cather, 188.
62 McClintock, 75.
63 Cather, 122.
64 Ibid., 189.
65 Caren Kaplan, et. al. *Between Woman and Nation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 12.
66 Cather, 150.
67 Wilson, 84.

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