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Immigration and Marriage in *My Antonia*

Willa Cather's *My Antonia* showcases popular attitudes toward the influx of immigrants to the United States during the early twentieth and late nineteenth-centuries from both progressive and prejudiced standpoints. Opinions of the dominant and less recently emigrated eastern and central European white population often held negative associations about what were perceived to be less than desirable foreigners from poorer backgrounds and authors such as Cather had to weigh the commonly held notions of racial science, eugenics, and ethnocentrism against the real-life experiences of living on the frontier amongst other cultures. This paper examines the difference between tolerance of out-groups as neighbors and the risqué or unacceptable ideas about intermarriage between ethnicities, and also the social stigma and stereotypes that surrounded recent immigrants during the height of the eastern European exodus. Close reading of Cather's text informed by historical evidence shows that while many immigrants adopted American values openly and largely assimilated into the host culture, marriage outside of one's own ethnicity or race remains to be seen or accepted even in Cather's narrative fiction that holds favorable opinions of America as a cultural melting pot.

It is widely accepted that Willa Cather held pro-immigration views that would have been thought of as highly progressive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. This does not mean that Cather was oblivious to, or unaffected by the scientific and sociological beliefs held in her time period. Cather may have been pro-immigration, but there is evidence that she may not have been completely pro-immigrant, at least as far as intermarriage is concerned. Linda Helstern's article points out that "Never in *My Antonia* does [Cather] deny outright the racial hierarchy posited by the eugenics movement. Rather, she uses it to point out the logical fallacy of linking negative inherited traits exclusively with the 'lower races'" (262). It is difficult to separate the erroneous theories of early anthropology and sociology including the racial science

prevalent in Cather's time from the content of *My Antonia*. While the theories of eugenics are never directly posited, Cather's text does explicitly categorize characters based on their ethnicity. Rather than strictly negative stereotypes and assumptions, Cather's ethnic commentary often praises immigrants. Tim Prchal remarks that "Cather's refutation of immigrant inferiority and native-born superiority surfaces when Jim distinguishes the hearty, vigorous immigrant girls from the listless and, presumably, native-born girls of Black Hawk. 'They were almost a race apart' in terms of vitality, Jim says (Prchal 10-11). That being said, the critical question of this paper comes to light when considering the mixing of races through marriage and procreation, both largely still off-limits in Cather's fiction. When considering that the only child of 'mixed' ethnicity is Antonia's illegitimate daughter and that no marriages between immigrants and native born Americans occur, it is significant to note that Cather chose not to include any intermarriage between what at the time were often thought of as separate races.

More significant to Cather than hereditary racial traits was environmental influence. Cather's fiction shows that formative years and conditioning contribute more to personality and demeanor than ethnicity. Perhaps most important in shaping her characters is the "Geography and climate, then, the very land that Willa Cather showcases so effectively, makes the infant its own, according to this updated version of eugenic theory" (Helstern 261). The text shows mental and physical deformity in all races, including ethnic whites in *Crazy Mary*, as well as Marek Shimerda, but Cather chose not to pass on any negative biological traits to Antonia's children, a product of a pure Czech bloodline. Rather, the environment that the Shimerdas lived in made them the hardy and rustic people they become as "The emergence of Antonia's brood from the darkness of the fruit cave marks them as much a product of America's heartland, of the Nebraska climate and soil, as of their Bohemian-born parents. Unlike Antonia herself or her feeble-minded

brother Marek, not one of the Cuzak children carries an inherited blemish” (Helstern 261-262). While Cather’s strong bias towards nurture over nature is apparent throughout the text, the lack of any mixing of ethnicities shows at least the possibility that Cather was not willing to champion equality as far as some might initially believe. In fact, Lena Lingard serves as an example of a “pure white” that is spared the disgrace from society of race mixing by declaring never to marry at all. Helstern argues that this may have been a conscious choice to appease “Advocates of Eugenics who found existing American legislation against race mixing too permissive [and] would have applauded Lena’s decision to never marry as necessary to the health and continuation of ‘the great race’” (Helstern 270).

Far from opposing immigration, Cather’s text celebrates the virtues of the American immigrant as hard-working and honest, and one explanation for the inconsistencies in her treatment of foreigners as both welcome and suspect, may simply be that Cather was only in favor of immigration for foreigners that married and bred exclusively within their own bloodline. This supports the critic’s arguments about the influence of eugenics as a motivation to reproduce only within one’s own race however. Helstern offers the following examples of ethnic segregation and procreation: “Mrs. Harling, Antonia’s Nordic role model, is the proud mother of five children. None of the other Anglo-Saxon women in the novel can match her example, not Jim Burden’s grandmother, nor his mother, not his childless wife, nor Wick Cutter’s. True to racial type, all of the Bohemian girls, Antonia and the three Mary’s produce large broods” (259). Even within the dialogue of the characters in the novel there is strong evidence of ethnic segregation and the prohibition of racial mixing; Antonia tells Jim Burden “You’re not going to sit around here and whittle store boxes and tell stories all your life, You are going away to school

and make something of yourself. I'm just awful proud of you. You won't go and get mixed up with the swedes, will you?" (Cather 109).

Part of Cather's bias towards and against issues of immigrants and ethnicity may stem from her position at McClure magazine. The periodical had certain political stances that Cather was obligated to uphold in the publications, and almost certainly would have influenced Cather's private opinions which in turn informed her writing. Prchal notes an article published at McClure's during Cather's employment that described the same eastern European immigrants she lived amongst in Nebraska as "races of supposedly passive, illiterate farmers standing in stark contrast to those bright and capable Scandinavians and other groups who tamed the plains. *My Antonia* certainly contradicts this view" (6). Prchal fails to see that in large part, Cather's text actually reinforces the stereotype of the immigrant as uneducated and naturally prone to rural landscapes and pastoral lifestyles. Few of the "ethnic whites" in the novel are successful in Black Hawk for long, while the Bohemians perpetually live in the country doing farm work for all but a brief period. Still, Antonia receives some native-born white acculturation in town, albeit to reinforce further the concept of the civilized Nordic instructing the barbaric immigrant. Antonia will of course inevitably return to her farm, but she is grateful for her domestic education:

Antonia understands the importance of the cultural debt she owes Mrs. Harling. Without her, Antonia asserts 'I'd never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping...I learned nice ways at the Harlings', and I've been able to bring up my children so much better...If it hadn't been for what Mrs. Harling taught me, I expect I'd have brought them up like wild rabbits'. In this regard, Antonia has rapidly assimilated to the Nordic Ideal, which is inevitably the American ideal. (Helstern 263-264)

The lack of economically successful immigrants other than Nordic races also makes a reading of Cather's text suspect for undertones of racial hierarchy. As Helstern points out, "In *My Antonia*, the superiority of the Nordic ideal...is never in doubt. The Harlings, the novel's first family, with greater prestige in Black Hawk than even the Virginia Burdens, are Norwegian. Race, culture, and money here go hand in hand" (Helstern 263). This is not to say the Czech immigrants are immune to picking up American values, in fact "Antonia explains that her mother pushed the family to emigrate to acquire 'much money, much land' for her sons we begin to see that the American Dream, not Czech predilection, accounts for her materialism" (Prechal 16).

If Cather's ethnic and Nordic characters are not predetermined to any cultural or physical traits and mostly influenced by environment, then the question of why the Burdens and Shimerdas fortunes turn out so differently is raised. Certainly, recently landed immigrants with limited knowledge of the land, or farming techniques and little social or monetary capital are at a disadvantage. But there is also evidence of ethnic stereotyping within the text that critics cannot say Cather is guiltless of perpetuating. Physical traits are the most difficult to excuse; as noted earlier, "It is Cather's depiction of young Marek Shimerda, physically deformed and mentally handicapped, that moves her text most recognizably to the heart of contemporary eugenic concerns" (Helstern 265). While Cather does not spare the Nordic races of their Crazy Mary and suicidal wandering hobo, the non-white races depicted in the novel seem to fair worse still. Cather does however separate biological deformities such as Marek's and mental issues such as Crazy Mary's that might be attributed to environment casues: "to this end, she balances her Bohemian example with Nordic and African American examples. Like Marek, Cather's feeble-minded Nordic, Crazy Mary, is given to violence. She, too, is institutionalized, but she escapes and, after making her way back home, repeatedly threatens Lena Lingard, her fancied

sexual rival, once going after Lena with a corn-knife” (Helstern 266). Cather seems to treat the white characters that exhibit negative traits more mildly: “In contrast, Cather’s African American example, pianist Blind d’Arnault, seems thoroughly benign, though his incessantly swaying body visibly marks an abnormality that Cather explicitly associates with feeble-mindedness” (Helstern 266). Here the only African American character in the novel is both physically and mentally handicapped by Cather.

Of the many stereotypes of immigrants in the early twentieth-century, Cather can be forgiven for reinforcing some prejudices while bringing others into question with the positive light shone on many immigrant characters in the text. Cather’s own experience with Czech immigrants in Nebraska very likely influenced her opinions and “*My Antonia* can be seen as Cather’s response to and reshaping of the popular image of Czech immigrants” (Prchal 3). While the Shimerdas and Cuzaks are often portrayed in a sympathetic light, the Czech characters in the novel are at best seen to achieve a lifestyle that is agreeable to them alone, and judged harshly by outsiders: “When I met Tiny Soderball in Salt Lake, she told me that Antonia had not ‘done very well’; that her husband was not a man of much force, and she had had a hard life” (Cather 155). Despite some obvious ethnocentric bias from Nordic characters like Lina, Tiny and Jim, the circumstances of the Cuzaks are at least validated as agreeable to Antonia and her family. Upon learning of Antonia marriage to Anton and their comparatively meager life on the farm, Lina reassures Jim, “There is nothing the matter with Cuzak. You’d like him. He isn’t a hustler, but a rough man would never have suited Tony. Tony has nice children- ten or eleven of them by this time, I guess. I shouldn’t care for a family of that size myself, but somehow it’s just right for Tony” (Cather 156). Diane Quantic argues that Cather’s fiction allows that the immigrants do not have the economic and social capital as most Nordic families, but that their lifestyle may actually

be the one they most prefer. Antonia's marriage and home do not have the prominence as the Harling's property in Black Hawk, yet:

When her children gather around her, it is evident that Antonia has created a place that functions according to the family's norms, and not according to the dictates of society or popular fashion. Antonia is surrounded by children who speak Bohemian, their 'private' family language. Every part of the house attests to her careful attention to the details of her domestic landscape. (Quantic 119)

This is not to say that a disproportionate amount of misfortune does not happen to the Czech immigrants compared to other ethnicities. while Jim Burden and Lena become wealthy and stable, Antonia is abandoned by her fiancé, life on the farm remains a struggle, and she bears the shame of an illegitimate child: "I replied that grandmother had written me how Antonia went away to marry Larry Donovan at some place where he was working; that he had deserted her, and that there was now a baby. This was all I knew. 'He never married her,' Frances said. 'I haven't seen her since she came back. She lives at home, on the farm, and almost never comes to town'" (Cather 141).

The domestic spaces of the novel seem to contribute as much to environment influence as the harsh Nebraska weather and climate. Antonia's time with the Harlings is as a servant, but she benefits from the social and domestic education: "They use this knowledge to improve their social positions. Antonia's world expands as she learns farming from her neighbors and then housekeeping by careful observation and imitation in Black Hawk. These skills enable her and her husband, Anton Cuzak, to realize a fulfilling life on their farm" (Quantic 109). But the prosperity does not last, as Antonia will go from social dominance among the Harlings, to socially questionable residence at the Cutters, and finally return to the country, while Jim will

leave Nebraska eventually to live in a big city, and become wealthy. Indeed Cather's environments do seem to determine as much about their destiny, exemplified when "The lives of Jim and Antonia diverge even further when Jim goes to school and Antonia continues to work on the farm" (Quantic 109). The domestic relationships and homes of the characters seem to have as much influence on their lives as any other factor, just as Antonia knows she will always be an outsider because she is at best a humble guest, and at worst an interloper among the Harlings and Burdens; Quantic summarizes the poignant effect home and marriage has on the individual in Cather's text:

Antonia realizes that her own home has—and will—shape her life. When Jim asks, 'why aren't you always nice like this, Tony?' she replies, 'If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us'. Antonia is fully aware that the domestic landscape she will create and inhabit will be very different from Jim's... Antonia's domestic landscape will encompass the far horizon of the plains. (109)

The environmental divide is even more obvious in that the country is full of poor immigrant farmers while Black Hawk is comparatively cosmopolitan, yet only the relatively affluent Nordic characters like Jim, Tiny, and Lena will make it beyond the town and country to become truly independent of their former environment.

Marriage is of course the force that tethers the individual to whichever place the character finally comes to. Lena will remain single, yet wealthy and independent while Jim's wife will keep him away from the country, and of course Anton and Antonia are inexorably linked to the land and their children that populate it. It is interesting to consider what effect marriage (or the lack of) had on Cather herself. The loss of Isabelle McClung through her marriage to a man and Cather's reaction to the loss of a deep friendship and possible intimate partner could certainly

factor into her fiction's concepts of both friendship and marriage. David Stouck believes Cather's personal life to be vital to understanding *My Antonia* because "[Cather] wrote in a descriptive-reflective manner that permitted her to ponder aloud on the universal dilemmas of the human condition. Cather, who did not marry and who lost her closest friend, thought deeply on matters of friendship and marriage. She returned almost obsessively to them in her fiction" (230). While Stouck makes valid points about the authors personal life, he overemphasizes the "theme of friendship [a]s equally as important as marriage in this book-it is registered in the title," (230) while ignoring that fact that Jim wanted to be more than Antonia's friend, as well as textual evidence that his marriage and Antonia's are both arrangements of convenience rather than romance.

Stouck does correctly recognize that nature of successful relationships within the text, showing that the "Marriages that succeed invariably consist of men and women of contrasting, complementary natures who share a project or purpose for living as well as sexual partnership" (Stouck 228). This partly explains the reason Jim and Antonia never married. On the surface, many would argue that Jim and Antonia do not marry merely for differences in ethnicity, environment, and social stigma, but this is an important point where Cather's fiction makes a conscious choice not to separate individuals by ethnicity alone. In short, Jim and Antonia are too much alike, and just as each successful marriage in the novel is a case of "opposites attract", the main protagonists do not share what Stouck calls "the creative union of opposite forces, something like Blake's idea of marriage as a dialogue between passion and reason... The pairing of opposites is also characteristic of successful relationships between members of the same sex in Cather's fiction" (Stouck 226). In addition, the opening narration of the novel reinforces this notion that only different and complementary personalities will make a lasting relationship. Jim

and his wife whose “husband’s quiet tastes irritate her, I think, and she finds it worthwhile to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability. She has her own fortune and lives her own life. For some reason, she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden” (Cather 2), and in fact - Genevieve Whitney’s marriage to Jim “was the subject of sharp comment at the time. It was said she had been brutally jilted by her cousin, Rutland Whitney, and that she married this unknown man from the West out of Bravado” (Cather 1-2).

Perhaps most illustrate of the nature of successful relationships in the novel is Anton’s marriage to Antonia, described as being “of a domestic rather than erotic character...it is a story of married love and hospitality” (Stouck 229). Thus, despite Jim’s attraction to Antonia, he marries a cosmopolitan urbanite within his own ethnicity, and Antonia finds a Czech man to form “a creative partnership of two people who are physically and temperamentally opposite. Antonia’s country girl robustness is in striking contrast to her city-bred husband” (Stouck 229). A final credit to Cather must be given for placing the “Burden” on Jim as the less fortunate marriage, despite his wealth and social stature and for refraining from depicting the Cuzacks as both poor and unhappily married. It is in fact Antonia’s Bohemian ethnic values that brings about her contentment with the marriage arrangement. Cather shows that at least in regards to making a happy marriage that “Czech immigrants are shown to encourage not just a closer connection to their cultural heritage by speaking Czech but also to ensure greater family cohesion. This is particularly important to *My Antonia* because of the contrast between Antonia's large, happy family and Jim's childless and presumably cheerless marriage” (Prchal 19).

When considering the novel as a whole, it appears that both the wealthy and established Nordic races and the recently arrived immigrants of Cather’s *My Antonia* must yield to the forces of ethnocentrism and can only find happiness in marriage by selecting a complimenting spouse.

Rather than allow social status and wealth to determine their fate, all of Cather's characters must face the social norms and taboos related to race and ethnicity, as well as find someone to complete their personality in order to have a healthy marriage. Cather's text places the value and equality of the immigrant high above the popular notions of her time, but lingering stereotypes and expectations still affect her fiction. Both Jim and Antonia marry and settle within communities of their own distinct ethnicities; yet Cather's work may continue to be praised as socially progressive, at least by the standards of 1918, as marrying within the in-group was a conscious choice by Cather for reasons of domestic compatibility and strength in cultural heritage; and not because of xenophobic prohibitions.

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