FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In "*Optima dies… prima fugit*" Orly Lipset writes about the privilege of nostalgia in Willa Cather's *My Àntonia*. Our course was interested in the relationship between memory and perception and the intersection between personal and collective memory, beginning with Cather's examination of the urbanization of the American frontier. Since Blythe Tellefsen's (1999) reading of the novel as self-conscious examination of the intersection of self and national mythologizing, critics have tended to read the violent disruptions of protagonist Jim Burden's otherwise pastoral elegy to the fading frontier as evidence of the return of the repressed Others to manifest destiny.

Orly was dissatisfied with the oblique attention to social class in the critical discourse and provocatively demonstrates the ways that class threatens to overwhelm every sentence of the novel. The essay extends Tellefsen's reading to mark out the ways that Jim's disavowal of the privileged class position that undergirds his scholarly thoughtfulness leads him to be unable to meaningfully articulate his relations with the farm girl Àntonia, and traces the incoherence of Jim's narrative to the lacuna between the myth of manifest destiny and the crushing reality of working class life on the frontier. Lipset argues this original and well-motivated claim through a wonderfully close, perceptive reading of Cather's best-known novel, which she balances with a balanced examination of the wider historic and economic context of the novel—a fantastically successful first essay.

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EN 120: Freshmen Seminar in Literature

FROM THE WRITER

I am interested in studying the rifts created by inequalities. Especially in wake of the upcoming election, I am riveted by the ongoing national conversation about what does and does not constitute fairness or justice. Of further interest is what aspects of people's lives inform their understanding of these abstract concepts. Willa Cather's novel, *My Ántonia*, engages with these questions. As I read, I was struck by the divergent experiences of protagonist Jim Burden—a character whose gender, race, nationality, and socioeconomic class enables him to pursue an education—and neighboring immigrant farmers. When Mr. Eisenback presented the class with a critique launched by certain scholars that Cather had "no report to make to us on the America of her time," I passionately disagreed. This essay is my attempt to articulate the value of Cather's "report."

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Orly Lipset

"Optima dies… prima fugit": Jim's Privileged Nostalgia in Opposition to Cather's Portrait of Modernity in *My Ántonia*

"There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (Cather 7) observes Jim Burden, the protagonist of Willa Cather's novel, *My Ántonia*, as he travels by train to his grandparents' settlement in Nebraska. Indeed, as Jim notes, the novel's remote Midwestern setting is not only pre-industrial; it is pre-societal. It is a setting that lends itself better to episodes featuring "giant grasshoppers, twice as big as any… ever seen" (Cather 14) than to those attempting to tackle the issues of "mass production… technological employment… cyclical depression" (Arvin, *New Republic*).

Perhaps for this reason, many of Cather's contemporaries criticize her for what they perceive to be an inordinate focus on antiquated themes and values. Clifton Fadiman, for example, accuses Cather of having "no report to make to us on the America of her time" (*Nation*). This could be said of the character Jim Burden, but certainly not of the author Willa Cather. Although Jim—an American-born, financially stable white man with a blinding obsession for his past—may himself have "no report to make to us on the America of h[is] time" (Fadiman, *Nation*), Willa Cather successfully communicates the realities from which Jim shies in the form of peripheral details and implications. In *My Ántonia*, realism competes with nostalgia as Cather demonstrates the ways in which privileged Americans of both past and present are afforded the ability to repress harsh truths in favor of nostalgic delusions.

Cather does not depict Jim's grandfather's picturesque farm as unequivocally good (as critics who accuse her of misplaced agrarian nostalgia might suspect), nor does she depict later, more modern settings, as unequivocally bad. Instead, she contrasts Jim's privileged experience with the experiences of everyone else. Although Jim fondly recounts feeling "entirely happy" (Cather 14) as he lay among the pumpkins in his grandparents' garden, so too does he describe its verdancy as "stifl[ing]" (Cather 1). Obligations to farm work severely limit the potential of its less fortunate peoples. Ántonia "cr[ies]" as she explains that she "ain't got time to learn… [if she is to] help make this land one good farm" (Cather 80). Jake is severely "handicapped by his illiteracy" (Cather 93), and Otto is "one of those… case hardened labourers who would never marry or have children of their own. [But] he was so fond of children" (Cather 55). Mr. Shimerda and a wandering homeless man are driven to suicide. Pavel dies of illness, and Peter is evicted, forced to mortgage his beloved milk cow, which symbolizes American opportunity lost.

And yet, even in the midst of such chaos, there is ample reason to interpret *My Ántonia* in light of its nostalgic undertones. Critics who understand Cather as being overly nostalgic for rural Nebraska may, for example, point to the scene in which Jim finds comfort in the phrase "*Optima dies… prima fugit*" (Cather 169) while he reminisces about life on the farm as evidence for their claim. Indeed, Jim's time spent lying among the pumpkins surely mark some of his "best days." His unparalleled happiness on the farm, however, is symptomatic of his status as a white, American-born

male who has access to education, funded by his financially stable grandparents, and who is exploitatively reliant on two illiterate field hands who work on the farm so he can attend school. The myth of the idyllic farm exists only among the select few whose privilege enables them to revel in its beauty, their lifestyles unmarred by struggles typical of the less fortunate responsible for the actual success of the farm, and the labor that entails.

Jim's position of privilege allows him to "romantic[ize]... put a kind of glamour over… the country girls" (Cather 146) partly because, "after [he] began to go to the country school, [he] saw less of the Bohemians" (Cather 82). In this, Cather evokes images of Ántonia performing grueling work "out in the fields, with those rough threshers" (Cather 100) while Jim concocts unfounded fantasies about her *charmingly agrarian* existence from the comfort of his school desk. Jim's experience is, in many ways, defined by his otherness. As Ántonia explains, "if I [or any other immigrant, or for that matter, less fortunate American-born] live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us." For those whose race, gender, or socioeconomic class (and subsequent inability to access education) bar them from lives of ease, their existences on the farm are punctuated by tragedy, poverty, death and hardship. So, for the immigrant demographic, the progression from the agrarian to the small-town Midwest signals a positive change that allows for greater opportunity.

Although Jim forever looks back to his "*optima dies*" (Cather 145) as he advances through increasingly modernized settings, the economies of the towns and cities he navigates with such restlessness provide refuge to the many immigrant "hired girls" who travel from their families' farms to work domestic jobs. Lena Lingard—previously described as "something wild… [living] among her cattle, bareheaded and barefooted, scantily dressed in tattered clothing" (Cather 106)—initiates her path to prosperity by proclaiming that she is "through with the farm. There ain't any end to work on a farm, and always so much trouble happens" (Cather 104). So, too, does Ántonia's mode of living improve when she assumes a position as house cook for the Harling family. She no longer "work like mans [sic]" (Cather 80). Instead, her days in Black Hawk are filled with baking syrupy popcorn balls and mending buttons on shooting coats. The market economy in Black Hawk allows so-called "hired girls" both to escape grueling farm labor and to better themselves significantly financially: "the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the town woman they used to serve" (Cather 128). Jim alone yearns for his family farm perhaps because he is the only one whose memories are less of toil than they are of grasshoppers and pumpkins. While Jim Burden promotes the myth of the idyllic farm through his personal experiences, Willa Cather exposes its limitations through her depictions of less fortunate characters.

When Jim moves to metropolitan Lincoln to study at university, the distance created (in both a literal and metaphorical sense) between him and rural Nebraska allows him to further romanticize the lives of those he leaves behind. In between readings of the *Commedia* and the *Aeneid*, for example, his "mind plunged away from [him], and [he] suddenly found himself thinking of the places and people of [his] own infinitesimal past. They stood out strengthened and simplified now" (Cather 168). This process of "strengthening" and "simplifying" detracts from these people's realities, specifically with respect to the hardships they face and the multi-dimensional ways in which they act. Indeed, as Jim goes on to explain, the figures of his childhood are "so much alive in [him] that [he] scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how" (Cather 168). While he observes "the edge of the prairie, where the sun had gone down and the sky was turquoise blue" (Cather 169) from the privileged position of his boarding house window in Lincoln, the Ambrosch Shimerdas of the world observe the setting sun over their heads, as they labor under its sweltering heat.

After years of performing "the work of a man on the farm" (Cather 202) and an illegitimate pregnancy, Ántonia—who acts as privileged Jim's impoverished, foreign counterpart—is reduced to a shadow of her former self. This degradation takes forms both spiritual—"so crushed and quiet that nobody seemed to want to humble her" (Cather 202)—and physical—"one tooth after another ulcerated… her face swollen half the time" (Cather 202). Yet Jim continues to focus less on her decline than he does on how "there was a new strength in the gravity of her face, and her color still gave her that look of deep-seated health and ardour" (Cather 205). He celebrates Ántonia's insistence that, despite all the hardships she's faced, she still "want[s] to live and die here" (Cather 205) in the fields. Jim is, by this point, a well-educated adult; he has witnessed the myriad ways in which life on the farm takes its toll on those who actively cultivate its fields, and still he remarks upon "the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall," and longingly "wishe[s he] could be a little boy again" (Cather 207).

At the novel's close, Jim explains that he has deferred visiting Ántonia for fear that he will find her "old and broken" (Cather 211), or, in other words, that her strenuous lifestyle will be reflected in her physical appearance, thus shattering his self-indulgent, romanticized, and inherently mythical vision of her and the demographic that she represents. Throughout his visit, he continues to downplay her transformation: he acknowledges that "it was a shock, of course" to be confronted with the physical taxes on her appearance, but he further acknowledges that "as [he] confronted her, the changes grew less apparent… she was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished" (Cather 214). He comments on "how little it mattered" that she has lost her teeth because her "inner glow" (Cather 216) remains dutifully intact.

Because his privilege is so blinding, he distances himself from issues relating to labor and suffering, and instead latches onto details that reinforce his notion of the idyllic farm. Although Ántonia explicitly describes the economic hardship associated with raising such a large family, explaining that "it's no wonder their poor papa can't get rich… we have our own wheat ground for flower—but then there's that much less to sell" (Cather 217), Jim fixates on the children's' "blissful expression of countenance [that] gave [him] some idea of [the food's] deliciousness" (Cather 218). He naively describes the orchard on which Ántonia and her eleven children work tirelessly to sustain themselves as containing "the deepest peace" (Cather 219). He feebly attempts to relate to the Cuzaks by quoting the "young Queen of Italy" (Cather 220), recounting the times he heard a bohemian singer live in both London and Vienna, and sending them "some photographs of [Ántonia's] native village" (Cather 211) while abroad. Eagerly, he volunteers to resume his position as farm-boy by "sleeping in the haymow, with the boys" (Cather 221), but this loses its novelty fast: "I began to feel the loneliness of the farm-boy at evening, when the chores seem everlastingly the same, and the world so far away" (Cather 223).

Although *My Ántonia* is, by many metrics, a bildungsroman, it is not one that ever comes to fruition. Jim's privilege continues to pave a smooth course throughout his entire life, and, in the context of this story, allows for an existence without obstacles. Without such obstacles, he cannot experience the individual triumphs and growth central to a successful coming-of-age story. Because Jim has been gifted the "grand chance" (Cather 224) that Ántonia and so many other characters are denied, he is effectively blind to the realities of his less fortunate childhood friends, and more broadly speaking, the realities America faced in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, he's a hypocrite: rather than return to his "*optima dies*" by buying his own stake of land, Jim retreats into the world of industry, where, as "legal counsel for one of the great western railways" (Cather 1), he assists in urbanizing the very place to which he dreams of returning. He is one of "the hounds" chasing the "rabbit" (Cather 238) of the agrarian wild west. And so, through the arc of Jim's life, Cather adeptly explores issues relating to the rise of industry, the struggles of immigrants, and the development of America. Critics who fail to recognize *My Ántonia* for the light it casts on the hot

topics of its time and the poignant statement it makes about the oft selective memory of peoples in positions of privilege fail to recognize its immense value as a historical and philosophical work.

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