

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE - FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Emerging Voices: The Portrayal of Minorities in the Work of Willa Cather
(Vynořující se hlasy: portrét menšin v díle Willy Cather)

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Praha, červen 2012

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studijní obor (subjects): Anglistika-

amerikanistika – Francouzská translatologie

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to professor Matthews – both for his invaluable advice and his unrelenting patience. I would also like to thank my family and my friends for their support throughout the past few months in which my thesis took shape.

Abstract

The thesis seeks to explore the portrayal of the othered, marginalized individuals in the fictional work of Willa Cather. The primary focus of the text is the first-person narrative of *My Ántonia* (1917). Other complementary primary sources are Cather's remaining two prairie novels – *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) – and two books of the author's later artistic creation – *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). The former two books function as a preliminary mapping of Cather's concerns developed in *My Ántonia*, the latter two texts present Cather's later reflections of otherness. The thesis focuses on Cather's incessant examination of the workings of the white, male, heteronormative discourse in the context of modern American nationhood: by her "queer" writing, she aims to unearth and subvert the coercive social mechanisms, and give voice to those who were eclipsed from the project of the rising economic empire: ethnic others (African Americans, Native Americans, European immigrants), and gendered and sexual others (women, homosexuals and lesbians). The identity of modern American society reposes on the construction of the social other and the artificial category of normality. Cather, on the other hand, examines the difference – sexual, racial, ethnic and literary. She creates romantic narratives of national conquest and in their inconspicuous twists buries the subversive testimonies of her troubled characters. The thesis is interested in those loci of subversive heterogeneity. Along with the painful predicament of the subjugated groups, the thesis is equally concerned with the situation of the privileged gatekeepers of the social order. In order to ensure their social ascend or to maintain their position on the top of the social hierarchy, they have to sacrifice their personal authenticity, suppress their knowledge of disturbing historical and social realities connected with their success and deal with the feelings of guilt. As a result, they confine themselves in an isolation of their public triumph. The backbone of the thesis constitutes the predicament of Jim Burden, the narrator of *My Ántonia*. The study examines both his role of the guardian of the social order and the purposes of the story of national triumph he is trying to tell, and the wounds he inflicts upon himself by his ambitiousness which requires him to suppress various "queer" impulses and subjugate the individuals surrounding him. The thematic analysis is complemented by the analysis of the formal complexities of Cather's writing which primarily focuses on the device of first-person narrative in *My Ántonia* that further complicates the interplay of gender, ethnicity and social power, and ensures the book a unique place in the context of Cather's work. A separate chapter is dedicated to Cather's grappling with the otherness in her later fiction - *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The methodical approach of the thesis is an interdisciplinary one – it draws both on philosophical texts and texts of literary theory. Cather's "queer" writing was most succinctly expressed in Marilee Lindemann's *Willa Cather: Queering America* and, therefore, the thesis makes reference to her conception of the idea. The various articles concerning specific topics in Cather's fiction are complemented by broader philosophical perspectives (such as Foucault's theory of discourse and Butler's concept of gender performativity) which are applied on the discussed phenomena.

Key words: America, discourse, otherness, performativity, identity

Abstrakt

Záměrem této práce je prozkoumat portrét odlišných a pro svou jinakost upozadovaných jedinců v beletristickém díle Willy Catherové. Text se soustředí především na román *Moje Antonie* (*My Ántonia*, 1917) napsaný v ich-formě. Komplementárními primárními zdroji jsou autorčiny dva zbývající préríjní romány – *Ó Pionýři!* (*O Pioneers!*, 1913, překlad můj) a *Skřivánčí píseň* (*The Song of the Lark*, 1915, překlad můj) – a dvě knihy z autorčiny pozdější tvorby – *Smrt si jde pro arcibiskupa* (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 1927) a *Safíra a otrokyně* (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, 1940, překlad můj). První dvě knihy jsou využity k předběžnému mapování témat, která Catherová později rozvinula v *Mojí Antonii*, druhé dvě představují autorčiny pozdější reflexe tématu jinakosti. Práce se zaměřuje na neutuchající zájem Catherové o zkoumání toho, jak v kontextu moderního Amerického národa působí bílý, mužský, heteronormativní diskurz. Svým „queer“ psaním míní odhalit a rozvrátit mechanismy společenského nátlaku a dát hlas těm, kteří byli zatlačeni do pozadí projektu povstávajícího ekonomického impéria: etničtí „druzí“ (Afro-Američané, Indiáni, evropští imigranti) a genderoví a sexuální „druzí“ (ženy, homosexuálové a lesby) Identita moderní americké společnosti se opírá o konstrukci společenského „druhého“ a umělou kategorii normy. V kontrastu s tím Catherová zkoumá opak odlišnost – sexuální, rasovou, etnickou a literární. Vytváří romantické příběhy, v nichž národ zdolává různé překážky, a nenápadně do nich zaplétá podvratná svědectví svých trpících postav. Právo o tuto podvratnou heterogenost se zajímá předkládaná práce. Vedle bolestného údělu podrobených skupin se práce rovněž zabývá situací privilegovaných strážců společenského řádu. Aby si zajistili společenský vzestup nebo aby si zachovali pozici na vrcholu společenské hierarchie, musí obětovat svou osobní autenticitu, vytěsnit vědomí o existenci znepokojivých historických a sociálních skutečností, které jsou s jejich úspěchem spojeny, a vypořádat se s pocity viny. V důsledku toho se uzavírají do izolace svého veřejného triumfu. Osou této práce je úděl Jima Burdena, vypravěče *Mojí Antonie*. Studie zkoumá jak jeho roli strážce společenského řádu a záměry příběhu, který se snaží vyprávět, tak zranění, která si sám způsobuje svou ambiciózností, jež ho nutí potlačovat různé „queer“ impulsy a podrobovat si ty, kteří ho obklopují. Tematická analýza je doplněna analýzou formální komplexnosti autorčina způsobu psaní, která se zaměřuje především na prostředek ich-formy v *Mojí Antonii*; její využití dále komplikuje interakci genderu, etnicity a společenské moci a zajišťuje knize unikátní místo v kontextu tvorby Willy Catherové. Samostatná kapitola je věnována tomu, jak se spisovatelka s tématem jinakosti vypořádává v pozdějších dílech – *Smrt si jde pro arcibiskupa* a *Safíra a otrokyně*. Metodický přístup práce je interdisciplinární – opírá se jak o filozofické texty, tak o prameny z oblasti literární teorie. „Queer“ psaní Willy Catherové bylo nejmýstižněji popsáno v knize *Willa Cather: Queering America* Marilee Lindemannové, pročež se práce odkazuje k její koncepci. Různé články, které se dotýkají specifických témat tvorby W. Catherové, jsou doplněny širšími filozofickými perspektivami (jako je Foucaultova teorie diskurzu a koncept genderové performativity Judith Butlerové), jež jsou aplikovány na diskutované fenomény.

Klíčková slova: Amerika, diskurz, jinakost, performativita, identita

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0 Preliminaries

0.1 Note on the spelling

The text of the thesis consistently uses AmE spelling, except for the quotations, which are left in their original orthography.

0.2 Abbreviations and forms of citation

The thesis uses in-text citations for the primary sources, and the footnote citations for the secondary sources. Marilee Lindemann's book *Willa Cather: Queering America* is cited by means of Kindle locations (abbreviated as "loc.", in contrast to "p." standing for "page") since the electronic version of the work does not offer the page numbers. The cited articles are included in electronic databases, and, therefore, their uniform resource locators will be listed in the section "Secondary literature – works cited". Unfortunately, the exact place of the citation within the body of the article cannot be indicated since no page numbering is included. The citation format of the thesis is applied according to the MLA citation style. In accord with that, the cited passages of prose longer than 4 lines are indented. The following is a list of abbreviations for the referenced works of the primary literature:

<i>MA</i>	<i>My Ántonia</i>
<i>DCA</i>	<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i>
<i>SSG</i>	<i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i>

1 Introduction

1.1 Willa Cather and queer writing

As Marilee Lindemann claims, “private documents as literary and rhetorical performances painfully, aggressively display Cather’s queer stance, her occupation of a queer discursive space – a stance at odds with and a space some distance from the ‘normal’.”¹ At one point in her youth, Cather took to using a masculine persona named “Will,” and later, judging from her private documents, she fell in love with Louise Pound, an athlete and a scholar whom she met in the course of her studies at the University of Nebraska. By the act of aligning herself with masculine identity and preferring same-sex intimacy, Cather clearly defies the boundaries of male, heterosexual norms – she assumes as a woman positions normally reserved for privileged men. In her correspondence with Pound, she reveals that she feels “queer,” a sentiment provoked possibly by her recognition of the transgressive nature of her affection. The significance of the term, however, eludes any fixed meaning and it remains a locus for negotiating fluid concepts throughout Cather’s fictional work. As Lindemann puts it, in the context of Cather’s personal and literary existence, the word

retains the multivalent, slippery character it has in these letters, and the prairie – particularly in the early novels – is even more elaborately figured as the staging ground for several impossible struggles: between immigrants and native-born, the illicitly sexual and the erotophobic, the effeminate male and the too-powerful female, the homewreckers and the nation-builders.²

Cather herself attempted to refashion her social existence according to the exigencies of heteronormativity: she let go of the masculine persona. In her letter to Mariel Gere, one of her close friends, written in 1897 when she moves to Pittsburg and leaves the prairie behind, she announces that “here I have neither short hair nor dramatic propensities nor any of the old things queer to me. It’s like beginning a new life in broad daylight away from the old mistakes.”³ It is as if Cather herself yields under the pressure of heteronormativity and

¹ Lindemann, Marilee, *Willa Cather: Queering America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) loc. 246.

² Lindemann loc. 464.

³ In Lindemann loc. 447. Lindemann’s paraphrase of Cather’s letter.

attempts to mask her queerness by conforming to conventional gender performance.⁴ However, as Judith Butler says, gender is not “a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning.”⁵ Therefore, Cather’s outer refashioning and her retreat to the closet, leaving the disturbing queerness of the prairie behind, might be a strategic move which will enable her to practice her queer mode of existence underneath this façade. Her act also impugns the superficiality of a social identity. It repudiates the distinction between the authentic performing of personal existence, and the public staging of an individual identity dependent on such shallow signs as external appearance.

In her will, Cather decided to ban any direct quotation from or publication of her letters. However, her decision goes beyond a mere intention to protect her personal privacy. By this gesture, she refuses to let her words become part of the system of the coercive system of white, male heteronormativity. Only those utterances which are already rendered inauthentic by the paraphrases of scholars –and, therefore, have no affiliation with her inner self – are allowed to enter this context of violation. Butler claims that “prohibition [is] powerful in its ability to skew, to create illegibilities, a problem apparent throughout Cather studies by virtue of the continuing prohibitive power of the author’s will.”⁶ Cather herself, by her act of prohibition, creates such illegibilities likewise in her fictional narratives as she uses coded ways to express her inner concerns, and buries the voices of the subjugated, marginalized, oppressed and othered in the curves of her writing. Threatened by the ramifications of her “queerness,” she illustrates how masculine discourse distorts the speech of subjects, even as she retreats to the closet and guards the privacy of her personal affairs.

Cather, a “queer” artist and a “queer” individual, attempts to destabilize the artificial, constructed assumptions of white, male, heteronormative discourse, and to assert the fluidity, hybridity and infinite possibility for any individual. As Lindeman expressed it, “she ‘queered’ ‘America’ by examining the axes of difference – psychosexual, racial/ethnic, economic, and literary – that made the nation a space of vast energy and profound instability.”⁷ As Michael Warner, in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, observed, the “queer” can be defined “as a rejection of a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-

⁴ The term “gender performance” is used in reference to Butler’s concept of performativity which was firstly consistently introduced in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵ qtd. in Lindemann loc. 460.

⁶ qtd. in Lindemann loc. 268.

⁷ Lindemann loc. 101.

representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.”⁸ Cather is a member of the nation whose modern identity reposes on the creation of the gendered and ethnical other, on the repression of the marginalized voices and on enforcing of the artificial category of normality. Its privileged citizens are trembling in fear lest their fragile identity would not be shattered, and suffer from the wounds caused by their inauthentic mode of existence that is based on denial of their inner drives and desires in favor of the observation of the social order. She wants to expose and subvert the workings of the destructive pattern and to give space to those that were meant to be buried in history, erased and eclipsed from the picture of the rising nation – to let their voices emerge to the light and tell their stories.

1.2 The outline of the thesis

I will not exaggerate the autobiographical element, nor will Cather’s life function as a basis for my text, which engages solely with Cather’s literary fiction. However, the previous passage elucidated that author’s personal queer mode of existence and her artistic undertaking are closely intertwined, and clarifies the basic concerns of her work. My thesis will analyze Cather’s tendency to construct romantic narratives of national conquest, development and prosperity; their entanglement with historical realities of violence, exploitation, and injustice that trouble them, and which cause doubts in the protagonists who have sacrificed so much themselves to make such ambitions come true; and the effects of such desires and difficulties on the narrative forms of Cather’s novels.

The primary focus of the exploration of these issues will be Cather’s last prairie novel, *My Ántonia* (1918). The book occupies in the context of her work a unique place since it is written as a first-person narrative – a formal device which further complicates the complex interplay of gender, ethnicity and power and which multiplies the polyphony of voices that emerge from its twists. Apart from that, the thesis will engage with other four texts: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Therefore, the backbone of the thesis will consist of the discussion of *My Ántonia* and the analysis of the related points in the remaining books will provide more complex insight into Cather’s literary world and offer a complementary perspective on the fundamental issues of her artistic work. The choice of the texts is not arbitrary – *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, the two books of the prairie trilogy,

⁸ qtd. in Lindemann loc. 191.

constitute a framework that anticipates the complexities of *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are relevant representatives of Cather's later production which addressed the question of otherness in a more direct way. The message of the latter pair is complementary – while the first one provides evidence of miraculous ethnical fusions, the second one is a narrative of somber fracture of the interracial relationships.

The thesis will be divided in four chapters. The first chapter concentrates on the nature of the story that Jim Burden tries to tell. It will explore his purposes, as the creator of a narrative that romanticizes the history of modern American nationhood by offering a symbolic story of mid-western immigrant success, and his mythicizing of both personal and national history which requires the suppression of crimes against native Americans, African Americans, disadvantaged European immigrants and generally anyone not in the position of the white male privilege enjoyed by Jim himself. The discussion will involve the means which he employs to implement the normative order of white privilege in the context of Nebraska frontier. The second chapter deals with Cather's later fiction – *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* – and thus further develops the issues addressed in the preceding section. As Jim tells the story, he also reveals the damage done to him by the self-discipline demanded by his ambitiousness, as well as suggestions of his guilt over the success he has enjoyed at the expense of the others. These disturbing elements shall be discussed in the third chapter. His narrative suggests a counter-longing for modes of being not associated with the drive to dominate and exploit others, something that may be labeled as “a queer self-hood”. The fourth chapter will be devoted to the discussion of the narrative complexities of *My Ántonia*, drawing mainly on Judith Butler's analysis of the relationship between Cather, Jim and the anonymous “I” appearing in the preface. The thesis will use an interdisciplinary interpretative method – it will involve philosophical texts (e.g. Judith Butler, Michel Foucault) as well as texts of literary theory (Lindemann's brilliant book *Queering America* complemented by various articles).

1.3 Morrison's critique

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison criticized Cather's narrative technique for its evasiveness. She wanted Cather to address the issues of otherness directly, to let the subjugated voices rise without any formal disguises – to unwrap them from the complex

layering of her prose. Morrison was particularly discussing the issue in connection with *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. She argues that

Nancy is not only the victim of Sapphira's evil, whimsical scheming. She becomes the unconsulted, appropriated ground of Cather's inquiry into what is of paramount importance to the author: the reckless, unabated power of a white woman gathering identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others. This seems to me to provide the coordinates of an immensely important moral debate.⁹

Morrison thinks that Cather is more concerned with the identity of a white woman – a position with which she can herself identify – rather than with the painful predicament of an African American slave. However, Cather presumably feels that, despite her personal stance of “queerness,” she cannot justify herself to make introspective plunges into Nancy's mind, and thus assume the position of the other queer subject. The position of a queer individual is the one of a supreme authenticity and uniqueness, and any attempt to represent it directly – which means to focalize it through one's own subjective filters, as Jim conceptualizes existence of *Antonia* – would result in another oppressive gesture of the normative discourse. Cather cannot tell the story Morrison wants her to tell because she does not feel entitled to do so.

⁹ Morrison, Toni, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) p. 25.

2 Chapter 1: Jim the Gatekeeper

Jim Burden, the creator of the narrative, attempts to reconstitute the story of his childhood and portray its main character, *Ántonia*, through various episodes which he connects, sometimes rather loosely, into a narrative of her life. Although the book was intended by its speaker as a report of the heroic contribution of the first frontier settlers to the national rise to prosperity, Jim betrays a tendency to romanticize the true state of things in the community. The hardships and sacrifices of others are viewed by an idle outsider who has all the advantages of a wealthy Virginia farmer on his side and who ends up as a successful, educated member of the eastern part of the country. Had the story been narrated by *Ántonia* or other protagonists, authentic participants in daily exhausting labor, it would be composed of different testimonies than Jim's filtered version of reality. It may be claimed that the main character of the book is Jim himself, and that his selection of the particular stories which he mediates to the reader reveals many things about his own nature and about the purpose of the narrative he is perpetrating. This chapter aims to unearth evidence of the muted voice of *Ántonia* and other minor characters who share her position and whose alternative narrative is intermingled with Jim's predominant point of view. Consequently, it will confront the story of American modern nationhood, here symbolically embodied by the narration of mid-western immigrant success, with the stories of the suppressed sufferings or exploited groups or individuals hidden under the glamorous vision of national prosperity.

2.1 The burdensome mediator

The fundamental role of Jim's mediation of the story is made apparent already in the very preface. As Butler remarks, "when Jim Burden writes on his legal portfolio the title of his writing, "My *Ántonia*", he couples the name with the possessive, rendering explicit what is usually implied by the missing patronym. His own patronym is itself the burden of the name, the burdensome investment that the patronym carries."¹⁰ The narrative portraying and celebrating the frontier struggle is entrusted to somebody who was never a part of it. Jim only benefited from its outcome or looked with detached curiosity at the unknown, profoundly different activities, exercising the white, patriarchal authority over the othered individuals around him. He claims "my" over the existence of the others – in other words, over their most authentic property –, and feeds the reader his own vision of the reality. He is a careless rich

¹⁰ Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) p.154.

boy, who has the leisure to stay beside the stove and flip through his favorite books while the others tend to their daily chores; he is free to bask in the pastoral glorification of nature, while *Ántonia* does not have shoes to protect her from its effects on her body;¹¹ the Burdens' employee Otto is blanketing their horses at Shimerdas' doorstep while the immigrant family have virtually no clothes to wear.

The above listed set of striking contrasts highlights the supreme importance of personal property in modern society since it ensures a high status. It also reveals extreme individualism, bordering on the disturbing ignorance of the basic needs of the others which, eventually, leads to the economic success of the society. The future wealth of the nation is generated by the tremendous undertakings of the people around Jim. He is the one who ends up on the top of the ladder, managing the wealth accumulated at the prize of the suppression of the personal ambitions and painful losses of the others around him. However, he portrays the prairie struggle simply as a series of interesting incidents (the death of Mr. Shimerda he perceives mainly as a challenge to the managerial skills of his family) and habits (intriguing appearance of the difficult outdoor chores performed by others), rejoices at any unpredicted turn of events because it provides him with entertainment and meticulously avoids almost every comparison between his life and the life of his peers, mainly *Ántonia*, with whom he engages in child games. The games are his primary occupations throughout the first part of the book while for the other children they are rare occasions to escape the hardships at home.

The purpose of Jim's story is to perpetrate the encouraging concept of the positive forming of the modern nationhood: the path leading from the hard-working, small, self-subsistence frontier farmers to the nation-wide prosperity. He romanticizes the way to this economic wealth in order to veil the fact that it is paved with many victims exposed to extreme exploitation from the part of the privileged group which is now endowed with social power – he offers the reader an idyllic pastoral vision of his growing up in the mid-western community. He avoids any introspective passages and reflections concerning the uncomfortable features of the prairie life and his personal development. Despite the fact that his account may by his time span remind one of the genre of *bildungsroman* (this problematic issue will be discussed in the second chapter), it praises the authenticity of the prairie life and the success of some characters and blurs the fact that the hailed authenticity of everyday life

¹¹ In *Willa Cather: Queering America*, Lindemann sees the bodies of Cather's protagonists as semiotic fields mirroring and staging the gender, ethnic and social difference.

would be accurately described as crude drudgery from which he was extricated and placed in the midst of the soothing tales of his favorite books.

The figure of *Ántonia* – Jim’s ethnic and gender other – which stands in the center of the story embodies the whole of the United States. It is revealed by Jim’s avowal: “I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister – anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me” (*MA* 206). Jim is in love with the idea of her, an abstract concept, not with herself as a girl, as a subject. This is the reason why he polices her for all her shortcomings in respect to the social order he attempts to install and protect – he sees her as a microcosmic figuring of the whole country and his struggle over her proper conduct is motivated by his attempt to consolidate the whole American society in this miniature representation of the nation. She contains all the voices of the country, including the counter-voices which appeal to Jim’s queer self – the part of him which longs to follow the authentic drives of his personality and to subvert the social expectations regarding his future. Jim’s project to glorify the history of modern American nationhood logically requires the suppression of these subversive impulses, filtering the testimonies of the marginalized individuals, veiling the crimes committed by thus established society on its path to wealth against various othered groups – native Americans (ominous circles in the corn), African Americans (*Blind D’Arnault*), disadvantaged European immigrants (*Ántonia* and her likes) and many others who do not fit into the category of the privileged white masculinity, the “queer” elements threatening the order of the coercive social system.

2.2 Installation of order through linguistic practice

Jim’s fate is no exception from the general sense of transplantation which echoes in subdued voices of the othered characters in his narrative. Despite his privileged position, he, too, is a displaced individual. By his migration, he was uprooted from Virginia, the Southern universe with a clear social order, and placed in the midst of the chaotic frontier Nebraska. He is, however, unlike *Ántonia* and those sharing her social position, well equipped to establish himself in the new environment and not only thanks to the fundamental material resources of his family. He has at his disposal a powerful tool of linguistic creativity which enables him to coin the Southern concepts in the unknown background. He is using his mother tongue to

translate the new Nebraska experience into terms intelligible to him, seeing it through the prism of the South, and, as Lindemann remarks, seeking to impose the familiar order on a space that is initially so undifferentiated to him “that [he] had a feeling that the world was left behind” (*MA* 8). Karen Hoffman argues that “Jim constructs the Nebraskan plains as a world without divisions, a pre-oedipal world, prior to difference. Yet, the very fact that he performs this construction of negation through language – which, by its very nature, creates divisions – reveals that it is impossible for a world without categories to exist for anyone functioning within a world of language, within the oedipal.”¹² By the very act of naming things, by applying the personal discourse that necessarily stems from a particular substratum, the difference is being created, the bordering lines are drawn. Southern society, based on the rule of white male supremacy which assigns the female – the gendered other – a decorative, passive role and subjugates the ethnic other in order to solidify the ruler’s self-conception, serves as a model which Jim seeks to reproduce in the new habitat by his linguistic practice. He is “bringing the prairie from ‘the outside’ to the ‘inside of man’s jurisdiction’, functions as a sexual-linguistic gatekeeper, translator, monitor of female and immigrant language and behavior”¹³, tamer of the chaos, all this tellingly symbolized by the fact that he writes his account of *Ántonia* (who merges the categories of the gendered and the ethnical other) on a legal portfolio – a detail highlighted in the preface. His vision of the reality is thus canonized, his words chiseled in stone-like authority of law. The Southern patriarchal discourse becomes the supreme authority in the previously undifferentiated frontier.

Ántonia is the principal subject of Jim’s endeavors to keep the prairie society under this order. She is his companion from the very first days of his encounter with the disturbing lack of rules on the prairie and from his consequent attempts to inscribe the South in the new, *tabula rasa* space – she is the ideal target on which he can practice his taming skills, identifying her simultaneously as the most immediate threat in his district and as the microcosmic embodiment of the whole society. Jim polices *Antonia* both for her gender shortcomings, as

¹² Hoffmann, Karen A. “Identity Crossings and the Autobiographical Act in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*”. *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 58.4 (Winter 2002): 25-41. Rpt. in *Children’s Literature Review*. Ed. Tom Burns. Vol. 98. Detroit: Gale, 2005. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 Apr. 2012.

Hoffman is drawing on the following sentence: “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” (*MA* 7). This is presumably Jim’s first delimitation of the categories in the unknown space.

¹³ Lindemann loc. 914.

talking and working like men, which she is proud of because it is a token of her capability to deal with the extremely complicated situation after his father's suicide, and for her linguistic awkwardness, "jabber[ing] in Bohunk" (*MA* 32) which is one of the manifestations of the ethnic difference. The gender and linguistic transgression is incompatible with the basic plantation layer of his identity which strives to maintain clear-cut divisions in the community.

As Marilee Lindemann points out, the term "queer", which Jim associates with Bohemians, implies crossing, mingling of concepts, and "signals anxiety about proliferation of difference."¹⁴ Jim's nostalgia for the comprehensible environment where the difference was carefully kept at distance is made apparent by the remark that "[he has] left even them behind" (*MA* 8), which refers to the deceased parents. This is, surprisingly, the only mention of this sorrow, coupled with grandmother's tears just before she wakes Jim the first morning of his stay, motivated, as he interprets for the reader, by his resemblance to the son she recently lost. Jim presumably attempts to strangle the stream of grief and loss at its very origin – his own loss cannot be avowed as the sacrifices of the other characters need to be kept under surface. He is, however, paradoxically the very reminder of this loss since he permanently reminds his grandparents of his deceased parents. His body is a living memory of the loss that stands at the threshold of the book full of repressed painful experience. The loss is also rooted deeply in his discourse and thus his linguistic practice stems from a deeply wounded plant.

Keith Wilhite in his essay "Unsettled worlds: aesthetic emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*" also remarks that South is the place where Jim looks "for a belief system that will help him elucidate his current experience."¹⁵ He supports his statement the scene where Jim is lying with Antonia in straw and reflects that "though we had come from such different parts of the world, in both of us there was some dusky superstition that those shining groups have their influence upon what is and what is not to be. Perhaps Russian Peter, who comes from farther away than any of us, had brought from his land, too, some such belief" (*MA* 36). Seeing the situation through the South, he believes there is some transcendental dimension to his particular system of values and it could be shared with other, profoundly different

¹⁴ Lindemann loc. 927.

¹⁵ Wilhite, Keith. "Unsettled worlds: aesthetic emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*". *Studies in the Novel* 42.3 (2010): 269+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 April 2012.

individuals on the prairie. He is, however, merely paying lip service to others' beliefs, not interested in their content but happy to declare their utility to his vision of American harmony: these arbitrary concepts could be transformed to the national fantasies to which every member of the society could relate.

Jim uses his linguistic resources as a means of social power in various instances. As Butler points out, *Ántonia*, upon her arrival, craves the knowledge of the names of things. It is Jim who introduces her to the English language – he endows her with the only way by which she can relate to the new world that surrounds her but, logically, her operational radius is thus derived from his own. He is setting the boundaries of her vision despite the apparent different dispositions and needs of the two of them. He is confining her within the framework of male heterosexual discourse.¹⁶

Jim's socially and hereditary conditioned mastery of white patriarchal discourse is enhanced by the fact that he, as an individual, is especially gifted – he is praised for his oratory skills, and he is an avid reader. His thorough education brings him the argumentative power and widens the clusters of concepts which he can use in his favor. At some points, he focalizes the reality through the lenses of his favorite fictional worlds, as when he describes his first encounter with Otto Fuchs and claims that he looked as if “he stepped out of the pages of Jesse James” (*MA* 7) – on the basis of this recognition of the familiar, he immediately establishes a relationship with him. The familiar is here the book that lays foundations and perpetuates masculine discourse, “a narrative which serves as a conduit for American constructions of masculinity as rugged individualism set apart from women”.¹⁷ From the early childhood, these texts, asserting autonomy and deepening the differences between the genders, assist at the formation of Jim's vision of the social reality.

Ántonia, in contrast, is stripped of any resources of that kind, in the new world everything familiar to her is considered suspicious, every “Bohemian” concept is regarded as “queer” – suspicious or even openly threatening – by her neighbors, as for example Mr. Shimerda's gun which is described as a “queer piece from the old country” (*MA* 29) and the mushrooms

¹⁶ The term “discourse” is used in the sense Michel Foucault applies it throughout his work. The idea that a subject grasps the reality by means of language and, therefore, is limited by the linguistic tools he has at his disposal, is based on the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁷ Hoffmann.

which are suspected to come from some “queer animal” (*MA* 52). She forms the bond with Jim on his terms, accepting his language and his world as the frame of their common reference and her vision of reality serves only as an entertaining cabinet of curiosities for his imagination. The Shimerdas are marginalized even before they arrive at the prairie, the stage of the drama of repression: the conductor on the train to Jim’s and *Ántonia*’s common destination warns the Southerners that “[they] were likely to get diseases from foreigners” (*MA* 6). The old world is conceptualized as a binary opposition to the fresh, promising new world, as a place of dangerous entities threatening the healthy American community.

2.3 The role of the patriarchal figure and material difference

The linguistic deprivation of *Ántonia* and her family is obviously complemented with a near absence of material resources and the psychological instability of the patriarchal figure of the family – the person responsible for ensuring the incorporation of all the members into the social framework. Given all those handicaps, they have very thin chances to succeed in the new world. Mr. Shimerda, who was apparently respected in the social context in the old world, is the first casualty of the troublesome transplantation of the family to the frontier reality. In contrast to Jim and his family, he is unable to recreate the value system on which the family used to lean in their homeland. His wife, who is extremely egocentric, is of no help since she remains absorbed only in her wish to make his elder son, Ambrosch, wealthy. The alienation of Mr. Shimerda is metaphorically expressed by the silence of his violin as if illustrating the crumbling of his integrity and the mute grief of displacement. As Jim’s grandmother observes, “[The Shimerdas] are wanting everything, and most of all in horse sense” (*MA* 52), as if she was despising them for the lack of managerial skills and as if she could not possibly imagine that not everyone has the privileges of the social system on their side and can manage things for themselves.

The striking imbalance between the two families is expressed extremely intensely during Christmas. Burdens are decorating their tree with food while their neighbors are starving. Mr. Shimerda kneels before the tree (since they have none of their own), displaying thus his deep religious feeling, mutely confronting the expressive performance of his Catholicism with Burdens’ stern Protestantism. Shimerda’s confessional excess is immediately checked by the presence of the patriarchal figure of Jim’s grandfather who is “Protestantizing the atmosphere” (*MA* 57), ensuring the dominance of his belief system over the intruding

Catholicism, confirming his superior social position, and highlighting the failure of his patriarchal counterpart to reproduce his belief system and protect the integrity of his family in the new settings. This act also ties with the material superiority of Burdens – according to protestant dogma,¹⁸ wealth is the symbol of the elected, of God’s favor. Therefore, the material resources are not merely a prerequisite for the worldly success on the frontier, they acquire a transcendental meaning – it indicates that Burdens are the elected and the Shimerdas are not. The fact that the belief system of the non-elected –Catholicism – is different from their system, and thus disrupts this division, is of no importance to the privileged Burdens who are able to enforce their concepts on the confusing outside reality. The tree decorated with the fruit of their economic prosperity and thrift is the emblem of this difference and the marker of their existential superiority.

2.4 Protecting class privilege as ethnic superiority

Moving from the visually undifferentiated prairie to the ordered urban settings, the question of ethnicity becomes structured along the axis of social status: class privilege is protected as ethnic superiority. The town boys are very much attracted to the country girls and Jim voices the opinion of his peers: “Physically they were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigor which, when they got over their first shyness on coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement” (*MA* 127). The rich, high class, migrant boys are attracted by the exotic other represented by the poor, working class, immigrant girls. Jim compares them with high school girls – the social likes of the town boys – who “were jolly and pretty, but stayed indoors in winter because of the cold, and in summer because of the heat” (*MA* 128). His observation reveals the self-centered nature of his vision – he does not consider the price the country girls had to pay to acquire this type of beauty.

Despite the undeniable attraction between the counter-parts, the social difference remains, however, strictly confined within the boundaries of appealing reveries and brief amusement. The “hired girls”¹⁹ cannot indulge in hopes to be married to one of the perspective town boys because “the respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth” (*MA* 130). The sameness of the social status and, consequently, of ethnicity is the highest rule. The immigrant country girls are fated to remain within the boundaries of their social class,

¹⁸ The concept appears in Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (the copy used for the purposes of this thesis was the second edition of the book, New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁹ The denomination coincides with the title of the Book II of Jim’s account.

caught in the circle of exhaustive manual labor, and this clear division protects the ethnic boundaries, precludes the proliferation of difference in this stratified community.

In *Ántonia's* particular case, her living situation improved significantly during her stay in the town, and, consequently, she was presumably able to find some mind space for her own affairs which was impossible in the midst of everyday struggle for bare living on the prairie. At least she is able to discover her passion and unusual skills in the course of dances. There are, however, several hints that she was still haunted by her disturbing past and she remained an immigrant, socially coded as a "hired girl". She was very fond of the Harling children and frequently forgot about her duties and participated in their idle games. This violation of her responsibilities may be motivated by her longing to catch in those peaceful moments a glimpse of her childhood that was abruptly ended by her father's suicide. When Lena calls on her in her employers' house, *Ántonia* refrains from showing too eager a manifestation of her emotions for fear that the Harlings might not like it because her friend has been rumored to be a shameless girl. Even though that the family treated her with kindness and she took liking to them, she was still painfully aware of her dependence on their benevolence. Therefore, she was using her intuition in order to anticipate what their employers' ideas of proper conduct might be, never letting herself act spontaneously. When she decided to break this pattern despite the ultimatum of Mr. Harling, and continued to attend the dances, the consequences of her actions were severe. She refused to be deprived of her right to enjoy this supreme pleasure, the only thing which was truly hers. As a result of this manifesto of her independence and love for life and her self, she sacrificed her good job and ended up working for a bully. She dares to defy the order imposed upon her by the society which is something that Jim never consistently manages – his secret attendances of dances seem in comparison as a child's play. Moreover, even her life with Harlings was not as idyllic as it may seem from Jim's account. He slips in a telltale remark: "Every morning, before I was up, I could hear Tony singing in garden rows" (*MA* 124). While Jim sleeps the sleep of the privileged, musing about the romantic spring imagery, *Ántonia* is up at the crack of dawn working long hours to support her family back on prairie.

When *Ántonia* leaves Harlings, she cares about nothing but having a good time. It seems as if she fully realized the irreversibility of her fate and wanted to make the most of the short opportunity she was given to live her life for herself, not for the ones around her for whom she assumes responsibility. She knows that she will remain a poor immigrant.

Simultaneously, she urges Jim to concentrate on his studies – the pleasure she was denied and the way to the prosperity and economic independence she is never to attain. It is possible that she also understands that Jim lacks her courage to attempt to disrupt the claustrophobic social order. Unlike him, she is determined to act according to her desires when they are not pursued on the expenses of the others and only her own fate is at stake. Presumably, she wants him to be successful on the way which was already outlined for him by the others because she knows there is no other choice for him, given his conformist nature. She has the intention to save him the pain of struggle for which he has not the necessary vigor, and to ensure him the maximal happiness within the social limitations.

2.5 Plantation Shadow

As was partly elucidated above in the analysis of Jim’s linguistic resources, the novel, which is seemingly immersed in the Nebraska frontier, reveals a fundamental connection with the South. The prominent scene staging the Southern system in the Mid-Western reality is the passage about the character of Blind D’Arnault. This mulatto, a product of miscegenation, “unsettle[s] the stability of racial taxonomies and offset[s] the apparent ethnic purity and isolation of the Bohemian family at the end of the novel.”²⁰ Furthermore, his presence is crucial for Jim’s self-conception since the figure “threatens the national and cultural urge to erase the violent history of slavery from memory.”²¹ Jim claims that “[D’Arnault] has the happiest face” (*MA* 118). This statement points to the nature of his filtered, romantic vision, which he employs in order to deflect the tension between their social positions and to deal with his hereditary feelings of guilt. He fears to admit to the reader that D’Arnault’s appearance is not appealing to him. On the other hand, he envies D’Arnault his spontaneity, his liveliness. He ignores the fact that his repertoire, whose nature prompts him to attribute these characteristics to the performer, stems from the same substratum as the coercive slaveholding system. The oversight may be Jim’s purposeful act of disavowal of the plantation cultural knowledge. The sensual deprivation of the blind pianist suggests alternative ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the reality. Along with Jim’s attraction to the vigorous, self-sufficient country girls (usually epitomized by *Ántonia*), D’Arnault

²⁰ Lindemann loc. 971.

²¹ Wilhite.

represents another object of Jim's counter-longing, of his attraction to the "queer" – to the nonconformist, hybrid forms of existence – which is beyond limits of his fixed, determined, yet privileged social status and which would enable him to explore his authentic drives. Jim is not able to enjoy the same spontaneity since his role is to be the policeman on duty, guarding the borders for any kind of transgression. He also feels bound to pursue the path to economic, public success conform to the social expectations. This accepted vocation logically requires extreme observance of the rules. There is no room for decisions motivated solely by personal wishes.

2.6 Suppression and recognition of difference

Jim's romanticized account involves several milestones where the distance that *Ántonia* and different othered characters have covered on their arduous journey can be measured. However, Jim deliberately refuses to notice them, to openly acknowledge the painful changes. He systematically suppresses the progress of *Ántonia*'s personal development in her marginal social position. One of these crucial moments is meeting between Jim and *Ántonia* after her hapless affair with Donovan – a relationship which threatens to proliferate difference and subvert the order since the heterogeneous couple transgresses the ethnic boundaries. *Ántonia* returns home, pregnant, regarded as "poor" (*MA* 191), if not forever disgraced. Jim is angry with her because he does not want the others to perceive her as a wretched misfit. He admits that "[he] tried to shut *Ántonia* out of [his] mind because [he] was bitterly disappointed with her" (*MA* 192). His feelings stem from his unwillingness to acknowledge the profound difference between the two of them. Even though they were playmates during their childhood, the opportunities they were given were profoundly unequal due to aforementioned external factors. Jim is tormented by the feelings of guilt because he was given the chance to succeed she was denied from the very beginning. He wants *Ántonia* to be triumphant, so that her example would serve as a piece of evidence that the social system is not based solely on eclipsing and marginalizing certain individuals – there are those that can work their path upwards. On the other hand, *Ántonia* herself is well aware of the irrevocable twist in her life caused by her pregnancy out of wedlock. She indirectly implies the immense gap between "now" and "then" of hers and Jim's fate in the conversation with the Widow Steavens: "It seems such a little while ago when Jim Burden and I was playing all over this country" (*MA* 203). She does not opt for self-delusion and her acknowledgement of misfortunate change may function as a catalyst for Jim's excursus into his conscience. In order to escape this

excruciating journey, he refuses to give to the incident prominent place in his evasive account and covers it with romantic remark that “there was a new kind of strength in the gravity in her face” (*MA* 206).

Jim’s frenetic suppression of the crude reality is, however, not entirely devoid of unconscious or reluctant recognition of difference. *Ántonia* mentions the apparent material imbalance between the two families only when she reveals to Jim her father’s sickness. Presumably she already understands that her future fate is entangled with the one of her father when she “retort[s] fiercely” (*MA* 59), despite her habitual pride: “your grandfather is rich [...], why he not make help my papa?” (*MA* 59). As the above suggests, the death of Mr. Shimerda is the first open crisis for Jim’s romanticized vision. It witnesses the first occurrence of *Ántonia*’s alternative voice, and it is only at the moment of the utmost distress that the policeman Jim lets her speak. When Mr. Shimerda dies, Jim does not express compassion for *Ántonia*’s loss and does not acknowledge the tremendous impact of the event on her future. Instead, he rejoices in the disruption of tranquil reality of the community and praises the managerial skills of his family. He hastens to enforce the blissful ignorance of the painful predicament of the individuals surrounding his privileged pedestal.

A subversive remark emerges, however, during the funeral when Jim admits that he “was afraid to look at *Ántonia*” (*MA* 76). He is unable to confront her grief since it stirs in him the feelings of guilt and undermines his idyllic pastoral depiction of the prairie. When Jim meets *Ántonia* after the ceremony, she wears Mr. Shimerda’s working clothes, returning from the fields with men. By the token of the garment she mutely assumes her father’s role and rejects her childhood, sacrifices her own desires and goals. She symbolically acknowledges this rite of passage on the semiotic field of her own body. Jim comes to ask her whether she would like to attend school, and when she proudly refuses by retorting that she “helps make this land one good farm” (*MA* 80), he feels “vexed” (*MA* 80). Her statement underscores the fact that the wealth of the country is ensured by the labor of othered figures who are subjected to oppression on the part of the privileged, such as Jim. It is probably only at the moment when Jim spots the tears in her eyes that he realizes that she is not only mourning the death of her father but also the death of all her hopes. These explicit signs of grief or despair are a very rare occurrence in the account whose purpose is to celebrate the positive value of the labor in contribution to the wealth of the modern nation. The subsequent dialogue between *Ántonia* and Jim in the Burdens’ house further confirms *Ántonia*’s insight in the true state of things

and states unusually clearly the status quo of the power division. The idyllic settings, which is an embodiment of everything she is deprived of, mirrors with her confession in which she reveals for the first time her apprehensions and pronounces a prophecy which later on turns out to be painfully truthful: “If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us” (MA 90).

An attempt to consistently suppress the painful truth returns when Jim’s and *Ántonia*’s paths cross for the last time. He emphasizes that despite the fact that *Ántonia* was battered by the hard life, she still retained her inner glow and achieved respectable maturity. He is excessive in praising her fertility, marveling at the multitude of the children, but he does not reflect on the practical problem of nourishing all the members of the family. The gatekeeper is pleased with the ethnic sameness of the family which effaces *Ántonia*’s previous shortcomings – her gender transgression (assuming the male role in place of the failed patriarch), social transgression (mingling with the town boys at dances), ethnic transgression (her relationship with Donovan which produced the daughter eternally conserving the difference). Jim also ignores the fact that the ghost of *Ántonia*’s unhappy father is reflected in Anton, *Ántonia*’s husband, whose disposition is likewise incompatible with frontier life. This inattentiveness is striking, given the fact that Jim seems to construct himself as Shimerda’s heir. He is determined to wrap *Ántonia*’s story as a journey to fulfilling family life and is willing to ignore any disturbing element. He depicts her as successful on the personal level as he is in the public sphere. Firstly, there is no apparent prove for her genuine happiness; secondly, her happiness would only require the suppression of the feelings of regret on his part since his private life brought him no emotional satisfaction.

John Selzer argues that during his visit at *Ántonia*’s household, Jim starts to identify with Anton Cuzak, and this act “implies disapprobation for his earlier identification with Mr. Shimerda.”²² Selzer portrays Cuzak as “another Bohemian city man who has as much difficulty as Mr. Shimerda in adjusting to the life of a pioneer farmer – but who unlike Mr. Shimerda makes the adjustment nevertheless, worries nothing about social pretensions in his marriage, and consequently reaps the reward of a fruitful life.”²³ This depiction seems to go against the logic of the episode – Cuzak’s function in Jim’s account is to perpetuate Shimerda’s memory. His stay on the prairie does not prove that he finds happiness. He

²² Selzer, John L. “Jim Burden and the Structure of *My Ántonia*”. *Western American Literature* 24.1 (May 1989): 45-61. Rpt. in *Literature Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale, 2012. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 Apr. 2012.

²³ Selzer.

presumably loves *Ántonia*, yet, despite his affection, he rejoices at the possibility to attend town dances. Likewise, there is no evidence of Shimerda's concern about the lower social status of his wife, a former maid. The union serves rather as an instance of counter-currents in the normative flow of Jim's order. It is precisely because of the connection of Shimerda and Cuzak that Jim takes interest in *Antonia's* husband, not because he wants to re-evaluate and reject the bond with his role model.

2.7 The return of the repressed

Along with *Ántonia*, the principal subject of Jim's policing activities, there are other emerging voices which provide a subversive perspective, stir the undercurrents of the authoritative narrative flow. They are sometimes able to penetrate the dominant discourse more freely than the title protagonist since Jim is predominantly concerned with her shortcomings and keeps her in his account under constant surveillance. The others are given only a limited space, as decors for the staging of the dramatic implementation of the order in the microcosm of *Ántonia's* story. Thus they can occasionally enjoy relative freedom from Jim's assiduous patrolling.

One of the counter-voices is begotten by *Ántonia* herself, as if she was giving birth to a counter narrative, ensuring the return of the repressed, and defying Jim's control. Her first child, Martha, represents the socially feared proliferation of difference and subversive hybridity. By her mere existence, she destabilizes the ethnic sameness which Jim strived to maintain, and by the troublesome story of her conception creates an obstacle in the peaceful flow of Jim's romantic account. Jim sees the baby for the first time on a photograph, a means which is supposed to document the passing of time. This medium evokes Jim's apprehensions since it may threaten his authoritative voice, offering a different perspective on the events than his subjective, filtered picture of the past. *Ántonia* defies Jim's attempt to erase the pain lurking from the past by proudly loving her child and preserving the precious minutes of her life in the picture. Interestingly, when Jim meets *Ántonia*, he remarks that "she was brown as an Indian woman" (*MA* 197). The observation goes back to their childhood, and connects her with the empty circles left in the cornfield as a vestige of Indian rituals. This vacant "O" is a symbol of the crevice in their cultural memory: the gap was created by the absence of muted voices of those that the privileged turned into objects and tools contributing to the rise of the economic empire. It is possible that *Ántonia's* exposure of her daughter's life is an attempt to

disrupt this pattern of erasure, to make (against all social expectations) her beloved child visible.

Lena's is another powerful voice emerging from Jim's cage. Jim ends their relationship in order to be able to study at Harvard. He acknowledges that "she never tried to hinder [him] or hold [him] back" (*MA* 188), but he takes her emotional sacrifice for granted. He is even feeling a little cross at the glimpse of sorrow he finds in her eye when he tells her about the decision. Jim's radical step is prompted by his teacher Cleric, a representative of a privileged, educated, white male society – in other words, of all the categories which Lena does not fit in. Cleric senses that her independent mode of existence that does not approve of any kind of imposed hierarchy threatens the fragile social order and the development of Jim's career within this framework. Lena is, however, probably mourning rather the departure of a friend, not a prospective husband or even a temporary lover. As Lindemann remarks, she "is clearly detached from the spectacle [Jim] and other men make of her body and deftly resistant to sex and gender normativity – she claims that marriage turns men into 'cranky old fathers' and chooses to stay outside institutionalized heterosexuality, opting instead for work and companionship with Tiny Soderball in San Francisco."²⁴ Lena claims that husbands "begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want to stick you at home all the time" (*MA* 186). Thus she describes the coercive discourse of masculinity which she wishes to elude. She decides to defend her authenticity against all social pressure, including the institution of marriage. Instead, she decides to enjoy her freedom from any kind of social and familial obligations, and rejoices at the possibility to finally focus on her own self.

The marker of Bohemian queerness – a family trait of Shimerdas – is the character of Marek. Jim perceives the European otherness as threatening from the very beginning – the aforementioned scene on the train to Nebraska with conductor's warning about immigrants' contagious diseases functions as a telling preface to the later situation on the frontier. Jim feels a certain aversion towards Marek almost from their first encounter. He talks about "queer noises" (*MA* 51) he makes and it is clear that, in this particular context, the adjective denotes an unpleasant phenomenon. On the other hand, he remarks that "Marek was always trying to be agreeable, poor fellow, as if he had it on his mind that he must make up for his deficiencies" (*MA* 51). It is strangely mirroring his recollection of "the tone of docile subservience" (*MA* 118) in the voices of African Americans back in Virginia and treats the

²⁴ Lindemann loc. 977.

othered characters with a condescending contempt. Marek's queerness represents a threat to patriarchal heteronormativity on the prairie. His body is a semiotic field of mingling and disfigurement of gender definitions: it lacks the masculine apollonian compactness, his genitals are not fully developed,²⁵ and he is not able to perform the tasks requiring power and decisiveness – the traits with clearly masculine connotations. Eventually, he is eliminated – the fragile frontier social order is preserved, when he is institutionalized and he can no longer infatuate people by his queer appearance and performance, staging the resistant, however involuntary, divergence from the oppressive norms. Marek's removal from the prairie community is allegedly motivated by his violent conduct. As Patrick Shaw, in his essay "Marek Shimerda in *My Ántonia*: a Noteworthy Medical Etiology"²⁶ points out, there is, however, no clue as to his possible aggressive behavior in the text beforehand. Shaw concludes that "what this scenario suggests is that Marek is driven to rebellion and thus to incarceration not because of acts of antisocial violence but because society cannot accept the abnormality that his nonconformist appearance personifies".²⁷ Despite the fact that his disfigurement is not a matter of choice but an innate affliction, his body makes visible many fears of the community. Marek probably cannot reproduce his queerness, yet he is a disturbing antithesis of the ideal procreative force, desired at once in the land and in those who cultivate it. Jim praises this very vitality in *Ántonia*, seeing her children bursting out of the cave in a spectacle of fertility. Marek's elimination stabilizes the fragile frontier social order since he can no longer infatuate people by his queer mode of existence, introducing the resistant, however involuntary, divergence from the oppressive norms.

Cather offers a powerful narrative contrasting with violent Marek's removal in her preceding book, *The Song of the Lark*. The character of Aunt Tillie, with her "unconventional nature of gender performance"²⁸ (her "gay" attire and juvenile behavior), turns out differently: "in her case, 'queerness' proves to be a mark of nonconformist and superior approach."²⁹ Unlike Ivar in *O Pioneers!*, "who battles to subject himself to an anti-queer order [by the severe system of restrictions which he imposes upon himself], Tillie is proud and unregenerate in her queerness and saves Moonstone from narrowness and rigidity – i.e. the stagnation and the excess of

²⁵ This fact is pointed out by Patrick Shaw. ("Marek Shimerda in My Antonia: A Noteworthy Medical Etiology". *ANQ* 13.1 (2000): 29. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 May 2012.)

²⁶ Shaw.

²⁷ Shaw.

²⁸ Lindemann loc. 679.

²⁹ Lindemann loc. 679.

order.”³⁰ It is, however, possible, that Cather herself felt the improbability of such a scenario and her vision in her later work, *My Ántonia*, shows her more sober insight in the social dynamics.

³⁰ Lindemann loc. 689.

3 Chapter 2: Later Reflections of Otherness

The issues of the ethnic and gender otherness which are crucial to Jim's predicament are addressed in more direct way in Cather's later fiction. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather offered a depiction of interethnic interactions in the space of Mexican frontier. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* grapples with the painful heritage of slavery and miscegenation which lurks behind Jim's account of his encounter with mulatto D'Arnault. The following chapter represents a perspective on otherness that is complementary to the previous reflection of the theme in the context of *My Ántonia*. It attempts to widen the insight in Cather's efforts to queer America and expose the historical realities of violence perpetrated by the white, male, heteronormative society.

3.1 Miraculous fusion

The episodic, multi-layered narrative of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is set in the space of New Mexico – a landscape of geographical, cultural, social and historical fluidity. The territory was recently annexed to The United States and Americans are logically regarded by the indigenous inhabitants as the intruding oppressors. Two predominant ethnic groups – Mexicans and Indians – are characterized by their particular traditions and forms of Catholicism, interspersed with other pre-Christian religious beliefs. In this cultural flux, the social structure is highly unstable, and the American pattern of white, male, heterosexual supremacy which is at working in the non-frontier parts of the country is not yet firmly installed. Latour and Vaillant, two French priests, arrive into this exceptional environment in order to invigorate the declining order of Roman Catholicism. Their intention is to promote the Old world concepts in competition with the traditions older than the Catholicism, and to confront the threat of the future Protestant invasion from the North. In this context of constant paradigmatic shifts, the self-proclaimed gatekeepers are not the privileged individuals incorporated in the social structure, as is the case of Jim Burden. They are uprooted immigrants who have only one resource by which they can relate to the others – the love of God and the love they have for each other. These feelings are the source of patience and intuition with which they address the enigmatic community around them.

The Old world's vision of the remote cultural space is voiced in the very prologue of the novel. During the ecclesiastic meeting in Rome, New Mexico is presented as a place "to be cleansed" (*DCA* 5): the childish, ludicrous or even barbaric practices should be rectified by

the culturally superior missionaries. The terrain is described as “cracked floor of the world” (*DCA* 6), suggesting the fluidity of concepts and implying the chaotic character of the community which should be tamed. In this space of difference, the displaced characters of the priests apply the technique of translation akin to the one of Jim Burden. Father Latour, upon the arrival to his diocese, works his way through the endless scenery of hills covered with junipers. Mirroring Jim Burden’s first impression of Nebraska, the landscape strikes him by its uniform appearance: “they were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare” (*DCA* 15). He comments on this extraordinary experience in his mother tongue – “c’est magnifique” (*DCA* 15) –, and by this linguistic act compares the unknown difference to his system of concepts. The priest grasps the outside reality by means of naming its elements in the language which formed his beliefs.³¹ Suddenly, after contemplating the fascinating image, he has a vision: one of the junipers seems to be shaped in the form of Cross. In this moment, he related himself to the land, tracing there a supreme expression of Christ’s love. As a part of his initiation, he “knelt at the foot of the cruciform tree” (*DCA* 16) to pray, inscribing himself into, blending with the parched landscape, as Jesus fasting in the desert. By his merging with the land, he also comprehends all her inhabitants. He addresses them his love and bridges the interethnic difference, highlighting the common humanity of the individuals.

On the other hand, as Lindemann³² remarks, Latour sees race and ethnicity as “clear and static components of identity”, as is apparent from his statement that “the Mexicans were always Mexicans, the Indians were always Indians”³³. In the context of his relationship with Jacinto, he observes that “there was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience which no language could translate to him” (*DCA* 92). This further confirms the crucial role of the linguistic act in relating to the otherness. However, the sentence conveys an optimistic message – the difference between individuals cannot be erased, but the gap is bridged by their mutual love, as is epitomized by Jacinto’s and Latour’s affection for each other. The priest values the unfamiliar mode of existence as “a story of experience”. It is not dismissed as incomprehensible nonsense or perceived as a threat to the order. The voice of the omniscient narrator seems to adhere to Latour’s concept of race

³¹ Again, this builds on the concepts of Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

³² Lindemann loc. 1795.

³³ *DCA* qtd. in Lindemann loc. 1795.

and ethnicity as fixed categories. The new characters are frequently introduced by their ethnic background, and characterized by their tastes in respect to European and indigenous culture. One instance of such description is Mexican Don Antonio Olivarez “who read newspapers, thought they were weeks old when he got them, who liked cigars better than cigarettes, and French wine better than whiskey [...]” (*DCA* 179). In contrast to *My Ántonia*, this cultural transgression is not condemned either by the narrator or any of the priests-gatekeepers. It merely provokes the antagonism of his brothers who are portrayed as unsympathetic characters, and thus their judgment has a limited impact both on the other protagonists and on the readers.

Lindemann argues that priest’s understanding of the othered groups is limited and it is surpassed only by the authorial voice: “Latour’s initial, implicitly violent assimilationism”³⁴ (i.e. his determination to make the New Mexico inhabitants good Americans in order to facilitate their incorporation in the rising empire) “and his later, rigid pluralism”³⁵ (i. e. his concept of ethnicity as a system of parallel, static categories) are compromised by Cather’s narration, which “seeks to negotiate without denying the cultural differences and distances that his emphasis on untranslatability and each man’s confinement [the scene with Jacinto] in the cell ‘of his own thoughts’ maximizes.”³⁶ Cather insists on “the interconnectedness and interpenetrativeness” of different ethnic groups, “the fantasy of a dynamic, syncretic culture that is neither blandly ‘American’ nor narrowly ‘ethnic’, neither a melting pot nor a multicultural cafeteria line of proximate but unrelated options.”³⁷ The multitude of the cracks in the undifferentiated New World landscape are, after all, made of the identical material – the common fabric of human predicament. It is in her extraordinary description of the natural sceneries and her meticulous attention to the detail that this vision finds its stage. Symbolically, Latour’s house in Santa Fe is one of such emblems. It is composed of elements of all ethnic origins: “the native carpenters whittled out chair rungs and table legs” (*DCA* 34), Latour’s table is “a walnut ‘secretary’ of American make” (*DCA* 34), and “his silver candlesticks he had brought from France” (*DCA* 34). Together these objects make an ideal whole of the dwelling, and they are tellingly situated in the center of all Latour’s attempts to comprehend the fluid frontier world.

³⁴ Lindemann loc. 1808.

³⁵ Lindemann loc. 1808.

³⁶ Lindemann loc. 1819.

³⁷ Lindemann loc. 1809.

This locus of cultural merging is a space the priest shares with Joseph Vaillant, his eternal companion. The narration – which seems to be so overtly concerned with the negotiation of the ethnic difference and with the consolidation of religious practices – guards under its surface a story of profound love. Latour expresses the substance of his relationship with Vaillant in the passage on miracles:

Where there is great love there are always miracles [...]. One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always. (*DCA* 50-51)

The text figures their deep affection by small gestures: by the acquisition of the inseparable white mules which they ride together throughout the diocese – their child; by token of their identical fur coats. When Latour decides to pass this garment to troubled Sada, a Mexican woman, he performs an ultimate act of his compassion and love since he is willing to sacrifice an object ample with sentimental meaning in favor of the cultural other.

Therefore, it is primarily Vaillant's and Latour's mutual love that ultimately heals the splits and makes the experience of New Mexico chaotic frontier a mythical landscape of syncretic cultural space. They are occasionally overcome by the boundaries the pervasive difference creates between the individuals in the diocese and adhere to "rigid pluralism". However, the universality of God's love – along with the love for each other – and their capacity for intuition enable them to find the path beyond the ethnic division on the less conscious, irrational level. Theirs is a queer relationship, though not of a sexual sort, since they are open to progressive mixing and the otherness. Instead of violent enforcement of social hierarchy, they attempt to install the order of sympathy and bring the isolated groups within this jurisdiction, open the space for the othered individuals. It is a very rare vision in the context of Cather's work and, as was already hinted, it is later revised by the claustrophobic story of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* which will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 Somber fracture

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Cather's last book is set in the Southern Virginia where she herself, coincidentally with Jim, spent the early years of her childhood. In this story, as Lindemann puts it, "the origin of desires matters less than their movement along and across the multiple vectors of sex, gender, race, and nation."³⁸ Racial difference is used in order to generate a system of binary oppositions which would constitute a backbone of the national economics and secure the prosperity of the country. Sapphira's immobility "signifies the queerness of the relation a person has with a body she regards 'with droll contempt' as well as the corruption of a social and economic system that idealizes the immobile white woman and takes for granted the infinite expropriability of black labor."³⁹ Sapphira's body functions as a semiotic representation of American society that is paralyzed by the fear of racial transgression – an act that would collapse the fragile mechanism of self-definition and of acquisition of power. She has no body of her own to move, only those bodies of her slaves that she controls and that are the means of the construction of her selfhood. As Morrison explains, Sapphira has to invent herself inevitably as a white individual that is the negative reflection of the African American other. She "has transferred [the care about the body] into the hands of others. In this way, she escapes her illness, decay, confinement, anonymity, and physical powerlessness."⁴⁰ The economic system of exploitation of the others, of muting their nonconformist voices makes audible hers. The fulfillment of her desires and needs depends on the contrast of the blackness and the whiteness. Analogically, the whole nation rests upon the aforementioned dynamics. The country holds together only thanks to the othered, exploited group which establishes the power structure in the society. This racism functions across the economically established social classes – as Colbert points out, even the poor white boys would not accept a good job if it would involve working side by side with an African American. Unlike in *My Ántonia*, the economic difference does not coincide with the ethnic difference.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is primarily a story of a desperate mistress. As Toni Morrison explains in her *Playing in the Dark*: "it concerns a troubled, disappointed woman confined to the prison of her defeated flesh, whose social pedestal rests on the sturdy spine of racial degradation; whose privileged gender has nothing that elevates it except color, and whose

³⁸ Lindemann loc. 1898.

³⁹ Lindemann loc. 1920.

⁴⁰ Morrison p. 26.

moral posture collapses without a whimper before the greater necessity of self-esteem, even though the source of that esteem is a delusion.”⁴¹ Sapphira is unable to gain any autonomous identity which would be based solely on her authentic inner resources. As Morrison asserts, she “escapes the necessity of inhabiting her own body by dwelling on the young, healthy, and sexually appetizing Nancy.”⁴² Unlike the othered characters of African Americans who can assume only the delimited position assigned them by white society and by their mistress herself, “she has the leisure and the instruments to construct herself.”⁴³ Sapphira is, however, also in a very precarious social position. She is white, yet she is a female and, despite her power over the othered ethnic figures, she cannot act freely on her impulses. Her desire for Nancy – the character functioning as a blind spot on which all characters project their dreams and thus the desires of the coercive systems are mapped out – can be expressed only through a proxy, her cousin Martin. He, as a white male, has the possibility to access the slave. Sapphira’s impotence demonstrates that the fulfillment of personal desires is conditioned not only by ethnic origin but also by the gender roles. She is caught in a very similar trap as the subjects of her tyranny – their predicaments are determined by the same rules of white, patriarchal heteronormativity.

The historical perspective on the slaveholding system and on shaping of the white, patriarchal heteronormative discourse is demonstrated on the matriarchal figure of Jezebel. Interestingly, she is venerated by Sapphira herself, probably thanks to her enormous personal strength and the endurance both of body and will – traits with clearly masculine overtones, securing social power. Nevertheless, the mistress can value her individuality only as long as it remains an exception from the rule of subservience that ensures her identity. In contrast to Jezebel’s individualism, Till is a perfect example of the desired unconditioned loyalty. She is complicit with Sapphira’s scheming concerning Nancy, mutely accepting the irreversibility of her mistress’s decisions. Sapphira does not even think that Till might be hurt by her plans. The white society constructs female slaves as breeders, not as affectionate mothers.⁴⁴ When Till asks Rachel “you ain’t heard nothin’?” (*SSG* 249), it is the only evidence of her inner turmoil. Cather does not give Till a voice and thus constructs her as an unsympathetic character, a heartless parent. This narrative composition only underscores the violent suppression of subjectivity of the African Americans on the part of white society. Similarly, Nancy is not

⁴¹ Morrison pp. 25-26.

⁴² Morrison p.26.

⁴³ Morrison p. 26.

⁴⁴ Morrison remarks on that. (Morrison p. 21)

presented as an autonomous subject since there is no account of her inner feelings except for the one mediated through other people.

The book concludes with an epilogue that inserts a first-person narrative. Similarly to the preface of *My Antonia*, the identity of the speaker is not clearly stated: it may be either a fictional character or Cather herself.⁴⁵ The privileged white child is obeyed by the aging black Till since “the actual scene of meeting had been arranged for [the child’s] benefit” (SSG 282). This child perpetuates Sapphira’s denial of African American sensibility. She eavesdrops on a conversation between a mother and a daughter which was delayed over two decades and, describing Till as “little old darky” (SSG 280), performs the re-inscription of the racial stereotypes, even in the reality of the post-slavery society. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* represents a vision of violent interracial dynamics which is based on the urge to assert the individual’s identity and to ensure economic prosperity. As Lindemann puts it, after *The Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a book of “miracles,”⁴⁶ this is a book of “nightmares,”⁴⁷ as if Cather felt the need to revise her previous message, grappling with the issue of her personal Southern heritage.

⁴⁵ Morrison opts for the latter alternative.

⁴⁶ Lindemann loc. 1957.

⁴⁷ Lindemann loc. 1957.

4 Chapter 3: Jim the Wounded

The account of heroic contribution to the rise of economic empire and modern nationhood is subverted by its very narrator: as Jim tells the story, he also reveals – by way of matter-of-fact remarks and ominous details – the damage inflicted on his psyche by the extreme self-discipline demanded by his ambitiousness. Jim’s firm determination to succeed is partly ignited by his sense of obligation to maintain the position of white privileged male and meet the social expectations concerning his public triumph. The narrative likewise incorporates suggestions of his guilt over the success he has enjoyed at the expense of the others: his privilege rests upon the subjugation and sacrifice of the marginalized individuals. As James Miller remarks in “*My Ántonia* and the American dream”, “in some dark sense, Jim’s experience is the American experience, his melancholy sense of loss also his country’s, his longing for something missed in the past a national longing.”⁴⁸ Jim’s case figures the nation’s traumatic raise to prosperity which comes at the price of violent eclipsing of the social other and resigning personal fulfillment for the discipline ensuring the social ascension.

Jim’s account suggests a counter-longing for modes of being that are not associated with the drive to dominate and exploit others – a concept that might be called “a queer selfhood”. Lena is the one who seems to enter Jim’s mind as an impulse defying the social normativity in a particularly suggestive way. James Miller states that “Jim was strongly attracted to the vitality of the hired girls, consciously and unconsciously, as revealed in a recurring dream he had.”⁴⁹ He refers to Jim’s fantasy about Lena coming to him as he was lying in a field, and telling him: “Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like” (*MA* 144). The society, “they”, is no longer watching so he can let go of his self-restraint. The nation’s dream about wealth and social respectability is coupled with another dream, the one about the fulfillment of sexual desires and pursuing personal happiness. The juxtaposition suggests the damaging effects the pursuit of economic prosperity has on the innermost, unconscious wishes of the protagonist. Jim ends up trapped within an arranged marriage, devoid of romance that was the very essence of his fantasies. He traded economic and social success for his personal authenticity. As Miller puts it, “the book in a way represents his confession, a confession of unaware betrayal of the dream. In looking back from his vantage point in time, Jim can come

⁴⁸ Miller, James E., Jr. “*My Ántonia* and the American Dream”. *Prairie Schooner* 48.2 (Summer 1974): 112-123. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Dedria Bryfonski. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1978. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 Apr. 2012.

⁴⁹ Miller.

to the full realization of what the hired girls [...] represented and what they have come to symbolize: simply all that is best, all that survives of worth, of the faded dream.”⁵⁰

This chapter aims to unearth the evidence of Jim’s psychological wounds and to comprehend the drama of denial on his way up on the social ladder. The question of his queer self will be discussed in connection with the homoerotic nature of Jim’s bond with Gaston Cleric – the character assuming the role of a demiurge in Jim’s life. As Hoffman remarks, there are many questions concerning a male subject’s relation to the masculine discourse: “How do subjects in a masculine position profit from the discourse of masculine autonomy *and* how, in other ways, is this discourse detrimental to them? Why might subjects in a masculine position be inclined to step out of this position? On the other hand, why might they feel threatened by taking such a step?”⁵¹ These points will be relevant throughout the analysis of Jim’s predicament.

4.1 Suppressed knowledge and self-denial

As I suggested in the preceding chapter, Jim attempts to deflect the tension between his privileged position and economic prosperity, and the sacrifices and losses of the othered characters in his vicinity: he refrains from explicitly commenting on *Ántonia*’s development, he is careful not to include any comparison between himself and the less fortunate members of the community. The evidence of the difference is, however, still encoded in the text. Jim is conscious of its presence since he is the writer, the omnipotent creator of the narrative. Despite his awareness of the true state of things, he firmly refuses to act on his knowledge and generates a story of denial.⁵² Nevertheless, he represents the painful reality, even though only in an extremely cryptic way. The overwhelming, omnipresent sense of loss is mirrored in images which Jim occasionally slips in – *Ántonia*’s digression about a tramp’s suicide is one instance of such subversive occurrences. Due to this constant suppression, the tension within the narrative rises. Jim’s determination to keep all the pieces of the celebratory account together and to remove the disturbing elements into its inconspicuous twists borders always on his personal collapse. The attempt to maintain the romantic vision merely amplifies his sense of guilt – the feeling he was trying to overcome by the very composition of the story.

⁵⁰ Miller.

⁵¹ Hoffmann.

⁵² The theme of the suppressed knowledge, the subject’s refusal to act on the knowledge and its implications for the modern national ideologies are discussed in the works Slavoj Žižek (e.g. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso, 1989).

Apart from the painful suppression, Jim's narration is full of regret that he denied himself so much pleasure. As was previously hinted in connection with Burdens' Protestantism, this strict self-control is associated with Max Weber's concept of capitalism⁵³. Weber interprets capitalism as an outlet of protestant self-denial and self-restraint, the very basis of Jim's economic success. Jim refuses his longing for the queer counter-currents embodied by "the hired girls" – an element present in his relation with Lena with whom he probably could have joined his path if he had not chosen to obey Cleric and had not thus decided to pursue the academic career ensuring his latter incorporation into the economically and socially powerful layer of the modern nationhood. He sacrifices his personal happiness and pleasure in order to retain his privileged position, and invests his emotional energy in the public capitalistic project.

Jim's desire is to sustain losses and still triumph. To this end, he attempts to promote the notion that sacrifices of the others can be redeemed (e.g. *Ántonia's* glorified fertility echoing blessedness and transcendence of Eden and compensating for her previous misfortunes), and failures turned into success (e.g. his praise of *Ántonia's* acquired inner glow outshining her battered complexion). By this effort, he also hopes to indirectly vindicate his journey to the economic prosperity, and keep knowledge under the surface of his agonizing testimony. He sees his fate as complementary with *Ántonia's* story: on the example of her misfortunes which are turned into the celebration of her endurance and, eventually, of her happiness, he strives in vain to create a story of fulfillment of his desires. Jim's social ascension – which he intends to justify by his account – concludes in New York. He should rejoice that he finally managed to attain his goal and acquired a fundamental social power. However, his capacity of cultural translation fails him, and he has no longer any shield against the unknown reality. The Southern social order that he managed to transplant to the prairie is no longer transmittable into this chameleonic space: gender roles are fluid and people can occasionally re-invent themselves on condition that they are able to imitate the discourse of the antagonist. Jim seems to be caught in the middle of the disturbing multitude of contradicting voices, between his feminine role in marriage and his masculine position in the public life. He is mourning the loss of the clear division of gender roles on Nebraska frontier and the comfort of social security it provided. The stage of his intended triumph proves to be a locus of displacement and isolation.

⁵³ The concepts are introduced in Weber's text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as was already indicated in the previous discussion.

The strategies Jim uses in order to vindicate the losses and sacrifices pose the question of his characteristics as a narrator. In his essay “Jim Burden and the Structure of *My Ántonia*”, Selzer argues that “Jim understands his past, that in effect he is a reliable and knowledgeable narrator recalling with a sense of perspective, sympathy, and awareness his earlier failings.”⁵⁴ He analyzes his relationship with Peter and Pavel whom he interprets as misogynistic figures opting to live in isolation from women.⁵⁵ Selzer highlights the implications of such a stance for Jim’s formation – the men conceptualize sexuality as a threat and adolescent Jim seems to adhere to this opinion. In contrast, the narrative voice of the adult Jim recognizes Peter and Pavel as outcasts and “he adds to his narrative a rather detailed account of the consequences of the brothers’ action—sterility, isolation, wandering, and guilt: the same consequences that Jim has suffered himself on account of his own renunciation of Ántonia and the other ‘hired girls’.”⁵⁶ It is, however, arguable whether Jim should be labeled on the basis of these shifting viewpoints – which imply a mature reflection of the previous experience – as “reliable” narrator. The discrepancy rather offers a further evidence of the creator’s painful struggle to maintain the romantic illusion of the frontier community. The passages do not stage Jim’s maturing over the course of time. They are a layered depiction of Jim’s adult psyche, full of longing for the joyful pastoral reveries that could drown out the knowledge of the true state of things. As Hoffman claims, “through Jim Burden’s fictive act of writing, Cather draws attention to the autobiographical act as an ongoing performance of identity at the time of composition.”⁵⁷ The temporal dimension of his narrative serves only as an axis for his spatial movement through the spheres of his troubled mind.

4.2 Queerness and same-sex intimacy

Jim’s extreme observation of the order of masculine heteronormativity, which is at the origin of many of his psychological wounds, is subversively coupled with a few enigmatic images implying same-sex intimacy. He never manages to renounce all the impulses of his “the queer self”, and thus remove every obstacle on his way to public success. The first scene with homoerotic overtones can be found early in the book: when visiting the house of Pavel and Peter, Jim describes their dwelling as “comfortable” (*MA* 25) – therefore spacious. Yet, he claims that there was a double bed, despite the apparent possibility to fit in more furniture.

⁵⁴ Selzer.

⁵⁵ An alternative reading of these characters will be discussed in the following section.

⁵⁶ Selzer.

⁵⁷ Hoffmann.

Jim remarks that all windows were wide open, as if symbolically indicating that the two men were not closeted, openly presenting an alternative mode of existence. The close attachment of the men may be stimulated by their shared guilt from the past incident. However, Peter's immense grief over his friend's death may be a clue in the direction of deeper and more affectionate bond.⁵⁸ The couple can be interpreted as "queer" refugees from the harsh predatory competitiveness of heteronormativity, the "wolfishness", represented by their past.

Later on, Jim himself experiences a queer moment during his confrontation with *Ántonia's* employer, Wick Cutter. Prior to their ominous encounter, he is particularly repelled by Cutter's yellow whiskers and remarks that "it was said he brushed them every night, as a woman does her hair" (*MA* 135). This gender transgression may have been the source of Jim's nausea, the physical abnormality being complemented by Cutter's behavior which is described as "particular combination of old-maidishness and licentiousness" (*MA* 135). When Jim is assaulted by Cutter, who is under the impression that his prey is *Ántonia*, he finds his zones of intimacy profoundly violated. Subsequently, he is ashamed of the event and refuses to see a doctor. He is extremely angry with *Ántonia* for putting him into the vulnerable position of femininity. The ambivalence between his sexual desires and the repulsive character of the subject assisting at their revelation makes the scene a perverse disfigurement of Jim's intimate feelings. Hoffman⁵⁹ claims that Jim, by this unintentional gender transgression, experiences *Ántonia's* position of a socially less powerful individual and feels on his very body⁶⁰ the dangers of a feminine role. The event functions as an epiphany that lays bare the foundation of the social power structure. Jim is terrified by the extreme vulnerability he experiences in *Ántonia's* position, and he rejects the identity crossings since it turned out to be such a traumatic encounter. Despite his attraction to different modes of existence, Jim recognizes them as a threat to his privileged position. The episode with Lena which directly follows this revelation serves as a confirmation of his masculinity and heterosexuality that were both so threatened by Cutter's assault. He suppresses his queerness, yet it remains dormant in his psyche.

However, Jim is also refraining from any erotic engagement with the girls that come his way, or suppresses any evidence of such events from his account. Interestingly, his detachment is supported by *Ántonia*, one of his possible partners. She seems to understand that Jim's

⁵⁸ This is an alternative to Selzer's reading of Peter and Pavel.

⁵⁹ Selzer.

⁶⁰ Again, this evokes Lindemann's concept of a body as a semiotic field for staging the difference.

reluctance to commit to any woman is generated by his fear that a heterosexual relationship would interfere with his career. It was a cause of Ántonia's fall, and she resolves to save Jim from its risks. She is even enforcing his self-restraint by warning him not to kiss Lena and by urging Lena to stay away from him. As was previously discussed, Ántonia knows that the public success is the only option for Jim's conformist nature. On the other hand, the same-sex intimacy protects sharp gender divisions, defines clearly the separate gender roles, and does not lead to reproduction which could jeopardize Jim's career. Homosexuality would be a safe choice since it generates pleasure without any hindrance of the individual's raise to economic prosperity and does not burden the partners with responsibility for the offspring.

As Michael Bibler explains in his *Cotton's Queer Relations*,⁶¹ same-sex intimacy brings together individuals that are in the same social position – men that have the power in their hands and thus they feel alienated from powerless women who do not understand male predicament and responsibilities. Isolated men long for a companionship of somebody in the same social situation: “this relationship affords the men an opportunity for intimacy that is wholly mutual because it is not fractured by any of the power differentials that mar both heterosexual and interracial relationships.”⁶² In Jim's particular case, he finds such an equal partner in the character of Gaston Cleric. Furthermore, Jim's affiliation with queerness furnishes him with the form of dissidence or opposition to the socially compulsory heterosexuality— he is supposed to accumulate wealth and secure the procreation of his lineage, to assume the role of powerful patriarch managing those surrounding him. Instead, he longs to remain his own master and to concentrate on his own self-enrichment. Eventually, he is coerced by his economic position to confine himself in a tactical marriage and reproduce the pattern of heteronormativity.

The culmination of Jim's initiation into the homoerotic mode of existence is his intimate friendship with his tutor, Gaston Cleric. The teacher's name itself is an ominous echo of the restrictive power of religious institutions and functions as a reminder of Jim's policing duties. In Lincoln, Jim describes the streets as “oppressively domestic” (*MA* 167), which contrasts with his praise of the homeliness of Black Hawk. This sudden shift in his preferences may be explained by the abrupt realization of his socially conflicting feelings for the teacher. Later in

⁶¹ Bibler, Michael, *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009). His study is confined to the plantation, yet the prairie can be – through Jim's Southern origin – conceptualized as a descendant of the plantation regime and thus the theory can be applied on the Nebraska frontier.

⁶² Bibler p. 18.

the narrative, when he reunites with *Ántonia* after the birth of *Martha*, he slips in an enigmatic remark: “I found myself telling her everything: why I had decided to study law and to go into the law office of one of my mother’s relatives in New York City; about *Gaston Cleric*’s death from pneumonia last winter, and the difference it had made in my life” (*MA* 205). He intentionally leaves a blind spot concerning his relationship with *Cleric*. He does not offer any explanation for “the difference” in his life – an expression that suggests something more fundamental than a grief over a deceased friend. The “difference”, apart from the loss of a lover, can be interpreted as the effect of *Cleric*’s insistence to follow him to Harvard and pursue his academic ambitions. By this act, the narrative merges the academic and homoerotic elements and suggests their interdependence. *Cleric* represents the pure study of literature. After the death of his teacher, *Jim* decides against that queer kind of life, a life apart from practical, capitalist self-making, abandons the art and starts making money in New York.

Lindemann proposes a suggestive, yet slightly abrupt connection between the counter-currents in *Jim*’s life. When *Cleric* dies and *Jim* loses the object of his same-sex “Bohemian” (standing for queer) desire, he declares the ethnic “Bohemian” desire to *Ántonia* by claiming that “[she] really [is] a part of [him]” (*MA* 206). Consequently, he “beats a hasty retreat from the prairie – space of difference that he craves and fears.”⁶³ His confession may be, however, simply an expression of his nostalgia for the idyllic prairie childhood with its clear social order that so profoundly influenced his future. Lindemann contrasts *Jim* to *Alexandra* from *O Pioneers!* who is determined to make the prairie a space of sameness and safety. There is no danger in her union with *Carl* since they do not violate ethnic boundaries, unlike the tragic couple proliferating the difference – Norwegian *Emil* and Czech *Marie*. In the concluding section of the account, *Jim* betrays his desire to be a part of the *Cuzak* family – he insists on sleeping in the hay with the other elder sons, as if imagining being one of them. Following Lindemann’s idea, in order to reconcile his attraction to the “Bohemian” queer with the rule of ethnic sameness, he constructs himself as one of the Czech children and hopes to become a part of their homogenous mass. Nevertheless, he is aware of the illusionary nature of his endeavors – he has already made his choice and the pastoral prairie is inevitable encapsulated in the past. Hoffman assumes that in his nostalgic account, there is strongly inserted “*Jim*’s desire to define himself as integrally related to others even to the point of crossing over into the position of ‘the other’ [i.e. his admiration for the ‘hired girls’ and his homoerotic desire].

⁶³ Lindemann loc. 990.

It is Jim's writing of his manuscript that offers him a chance to define his identity as more explicitly intertwined with the identities of others."⁶⁴ He is, however, a displaced, isolated, deeply troubled figure whose ambitions bring him no personal fulfillment.

⁶⁴ Hoffmann.

5 Chapter 4: The Complexities of Narrative Voice

While the two preceding chapters focused mainly on thematic issues, this chapter will be concerned with the complex conception of the narrative voice and its gender identity derived from the story Jim/Cather is trying to tell. First, I shall analyze the preface, since it reveals many fundamental concerns of the book, and then we will build on these theoretical foundations to illuminate particular passages and elements in the following narrative. The complex relationship between Jim (the creator of the story), the anonymous figure in the preface and Cather herself will be of the utmost importance for the discussion, and for the implications of the whole text itself. Likewise, the question of ethnic otherness will be addressed since the particular technique of its figuration sheds light on Jim's grappling with historical realities of violence and exploitation. The analysis of the narrative shaping of the text will provide yet another perspective on the account which is so concerned with staging and veiling the difference and otherness, and will elucidate the dynamics of authorship in Jim's drama of denial.

5.1 The Preface

The anonymous speaker of the preface, the "I", transfers the narrative to male, white economically successful Jim Burden – a privileged member of society endowed with various resources. As Judith Butler remarks in *Bodies That Matter*,⁶⁵ summarizing what was already stated in the preceding sections, Jim's character is a representative of the law, the force of prohibition and institution outlining the territories within which subjects are allowed to perform their lives. The anonymous "I" dissimulates as the prairie vanishes behind the train and the panorama of New York – the locus of Jim's public triumph – approaches. Butler explains that Jim's figuration of *Ántonia* in the preface⁶⁶ appears to be an occasion for the "I"'s desire, "an enabling displacement that ostensibly transfers desire from him to the anonymous reader who is figured by the anonymous narrator."⁶⁷ The desire of the "I" is "directly eclipsed through the installation of Jim as the resource and origin of the desirous reverie that will constitute the text."⁶⁸ The "I", however, records Jim's speech (including his presentation of the text to the "I"), frames the body of narration and "thus confers an

⁶⁵ Butler, *Bodies*.

⁶⁶ Butler is particularly referring to the following statement: "He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her" (*MA* 2).

⁶⁷ Butler, *Bodies* p. 147.

⁶⁸ Butler, *Bodies* p. 147.

unmarked authority on that speech.”⁶⁹ Therefore, the “I” becomes an “illegible condition of his narration.”⁷⁰ Jim’s account becomes “a citation which thus acquires its origin and its ground retrospectively in the one who cites, the nameless one who, in the citing, or, rather, *as* the citing, is displaced in the act.”⁷¹ This passing of the narration from the “I” to the male authority may be merely “a kind of fraud, one which facilitates the claim to the text that she only appears to give away.”⁷² Since she has now at her disposal all the power of the socially privileged narrator, she is free to encode the message she feels the urge to impart, and this strategy “enables and conceals the workings of [her] desire.”⁷³

Another perspective on the preface is presented in “Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*” by Keith Wilhite.⁷⁴ He points out that the relation between Jim’s text, “My Antonia” and Cather’s text is uncertain.⁷⁵ Jim claims that he just wrote down what came on his mind. What follows is, however, a highly ordered narrative. This discrepancy implies either the unreliable nature of his narrative strategy or the interplay between the anonymous voice in the preface that cites Jim’s statement, Jim’s actual authorial intention and Cather’s supervision of the text. In the first version of the preface that was published in 1918, the anonymous speaker told Jim “that how he knew her and felt her was exactly what I most wanted to know about Antonia. He had had opportunities that I, as a little girl who watched her come and go, had not” (*MA* 244). Thus the anonymous narrator disrupts the credibility of Jim’s account of the reality by emphasizing, even demanding the workings of his subjective filters. The passage also sheds light on the identity of the “I” since it contains “the obvious overtones of gender and privilege”⁷⁶ implying that the anonymous speaker may as well be one of Jim’s marginalized peers, a girl from Antonia’s neighborhood.

In the rewritten preface published in 1926, Cather omitted the passage, as if she decided to “place gender under erasure,”⁷⁷ and thus further unsettle the category – provided that the recipients do not automatically assume that the “I” is identical with the author indicated by the paratextual information, i.e. Cather herself. As Wilhite remarks, in this latter version, the

⁶⁹ Butler, *Bodies* p.147.

⁷⁰ Butler, *Bodies* p. 147.

⁷¹ Butler, *Bodies* p. 147.

⁷² Butler, *Bodies* p. 148.

⁷³ Butler, *Bodies* p. 148.

⁷⁴ Wilhite.

⁷⁵ Similar observation makes Lindemann in *Willa Cather: Queering America* but does not make further remarks on the point.

⁷⁶ Wilhite.

⁷⁷ Wilhite.

“I” does not provide a framework anchoring Jim’s narration in the outside objective reality – the anonymous narrator is not an arbiter to whom the reader can relate. It rather adds another fictional narrative voice that unsettles the reading of gender, privilege and authorship in the following text. This ambiguity, the impossibility to determine Cather’s position within the play of voices echoing in the opening passage, underscores the muted nature of the othered voices. Cather chooses to remain veiled, buried in Jim’s pastoral storytelling. Consequently, she is able to slip in the subversive testimonies of the marginalized characters that find the loopholes in Jim’s authoritative filter of reality. Importantly, the title Jim chooses is derived from Cather’s own title and thus she “retains the title to the authorship that is Jim’s burden to carry.”⁷⁸ By her external position in the text, the woman (either Cather or an unknown Nebraska girl) assumes a fundamental power over the reader’s perception of Jim’s account. The reversion occurs – the displaced and subjugated gains control.

Karen Hoffman argues in “Identity Crossings and the Autobiographical Act in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*” that Cather’s use of a male narrator “may be read not so much as a desire to be a man as a resistance to restrictive categories of gender that would lock her into a feminine position. By signing the name “Willa” to her novel, thus marking her feminine position, yet writing in a masculine voice, Cather neither renounces her feminine position nor treats masculine positions as inaccessible to her.”⁷⁹ This unsettling hybridity destabilizes the rigid assignments of gender roles and blurs the clear-cut division which Jim, as a prairie gatekeeper, struggles to install and maintain. Hoffman’s vision of empowering identity crossing is in line with Butler’s theory concerning the interplay of the “I” in the preface and the inauguration of the masculine narrator. She also agrees with her that the revised preface further unsettles the category of gender: “I see the narrator of the 1926 edition as Cather’s construction of a figure who eludes gender – to an extent that Cather herself was not able to do, despite her unorthodox approach to masculine and feminine categories in many aspects of her life. Thus, from the outset of her novel, Cather prompts readers to imagine the gender of a subject as not definitively fixed.”⁸⁰ Therefore, she describes the anonymous “I” as a subject of fluidity, opening the space for the modes of existence eluding fixed categories of binary oppositions. It is a locus of stimulating fusion of the functions and elements which are habitually strictly delimited by the social order. Unlike Butler, Hoffman does not perceive the

⁷⁸ Butler, *Bodies* p. 149.

⁷⁹ Hoffmann.

⁸⁰ Hoffman.

“I” as a struggling figure of a woman but rather as a hybrid principle that prefigures the conception of gender in the whole of the book and that functions as a constant reminder of the potential gender transgression and its positive value.

5.2 Ominous letters

Another interaction between the authorial subjects as established by the preface – the anonymous “I” and Jim – occurs early in the book when *Ántonia* and Jim encounter the rattlesnake during one of their adventurous expeditions in the countryside. This time the roles are reversed: the “I” is Jim and “he” is the animal. Jim loathes the serpent’s appearance, commenting on his size and comparing it to his own leg which introduces phallic associations into the scene of their ominous confrontation. The loops of the snake’s body resemble the letter “W” that may symbolically refer to the veiled persona of “Willa”. The striking capitalization which pierces the horizontality of the textual symbols surrounding the letter may possibly allude to the vertical, universal significance of the term, removing the sign by this upward movement from the particular reality of Jim’s story and endowing it with a universal sense of “Woman”. These two viewpoints can be reconciled if the passage is interpreted as a figuration of “Willa” as metonymical embodiment of the predicament of women in general. Jim, the struggling master of the text, attempts to decapitate the *queerly* huge protean female figure, incarnated in the antediluvian male creature. The inobservance of gender boundaries is underscored by the deictic use of masculine pronouns referring to the snake’s body. However, the animal threatening the fragile social order manages to elude Jim’s destructive force and, despite his lethal wounds, continues to write with his trembling body the subversive curves on the prairie ground. This reversed confrontation offers a glimpse into the subterranean struggles of the marginalized voices in the narrative troubled by their violent exploitation. Cather’s text inscribes symbolic letters which suggest another realm or dimension of signification beyond Jim’s conscious discourse of masculine heteronormativity.

The inscription of the “W” into the text is coupled with other occurrences of letters throughout the narrative. The enigmatic circles which seem to be the only vestige of the Native American existence are described as follows: “whenever one looked at this slope against the setting sun, the circle showed like a pattern in the grass; and this morning, when the first light spray of snow lay over it, it came out with wonderful distinctness, like strokes of Chinese white on canvas” (*MA* 42). The aperture in the homogenous prairie grass in the shape

of an “O” represents a blind spot in the text – the inaccessible, yet still painfully present past. The comparison with Chinese art transforms the originally meaningful ritual of the ethnic other into an aesthetic object. The empty center of the letter symbolizes the missing stories that are lived by *Ántonia* and her likes. These narratives are eventually preserved only as curious landmarks – such as Mr. Shimerda’s grave – or completely forgotten in the triumphant account of the national economic maturing. Such amnesia is a matter of self-preservation for the privileged individuals such as Jim Burden, otherwise they might be sucked into the still open well of history which is full of sacrifices and pain.

The letter imagery is also a key element in the scene staging the difference of Burdens and Shimerdas. When kneeling, Mr. Shimerda’s body forms a letter “S” which might stand for a “snake”. This connection with the episode that stages the drama of Jim’s endeavor of keeping the inhabitants of the prairie within his jurisdiction underscores the tragedy of the othered immigrant who decides to end his life in order to be saved from constant confrontation with social power struggle. Shimerda dies but along with the animal’s incessant posthumous coiling haunts the text: his spirit is commemorated by Jim who feels to be his heir. It is Shimerda who is at the origin of the title of the book by his affectionate addressing of his daughter, and thus he – the ethnic other – retains along with Cather – the gendered other – his rights to the authorship of the narrative longing to affirm the white, masculine heteronormativity.

5.3 Competing for attention

The nature of Jim’s storytelling can be interestingly related to the protagonist’s Southern origins. As Wilhite points out, Jim’s narrative strategy can be metaphorically expressed by D’Arnault’s piano technique since they are both displaced Southerners, regardless of their racial difference – “piano playing is clearly coded as Southern, both in its origin and in its improvisational, unpracticed delivery, and it seems fair to say that Jim’s narrative – unpracticed and unarranged as he claims it to be, and replete as it is with allusions to his old world – takes part in this sense of Southernness.”⁸¹ He adds that “[D’Arnault’s] piano playing, like Mr. Shimerda’s violin, unsettles the binary tension between Jim’s written text and *Antonia*’s oral storytelling, defusing any “competition” between voices in the novel through a

⁸¹ Wilhite.

more complicated synthesis of aesthetic forms.”⁸² Antonia’s voice, which is for the most part censored by Jim’s romantic filter, occasionally breaks through or blends with Jim’s authoritative narrative, much as the tones of the minor motives of D’Arnault’s improvisations slip into the stream of main melody that is not able to subdue the monumental outburst of the music. Simultaneously, Jim’s rigid, ponderous, orderly literacy becomes more vivid by contrast in its proximity with D’Arnault’s natural expression. The attention that the reader devotes to Antonia’s intriguing rendering of stories – whose immediacy and authenticity⁸³ is conditioned by Jim’s introduction of her oral performance into his text – is matched by Jim’s connection with the Southern oral tradition. Paradoxically, the two voices standing on the opposite sides of the power scale are brought closer together by a Southern element – the very emblem of the coercive social practices. D’Arnault relates their modes of expression, and they are not seeking a direct confrontation but rather attempt to attract the attention of the reader by benefiting from the technique of the social other.

As Walter Ong states in *Orality and Literacy*, “oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired learns to talk.”⁸⁴ Therefore, Antonia’s mastering of a foreign language renews her natural relation with outside reality, marks her appropriation of the new world discourse and enables her to affirm her inclusion in the society. On the other hand, it makes her more vulnerable since “talk implements conscious life but it wells up into *unconscious* depths, though of course with the conscious as well as unconscious co-operation of society.”⁸⁵ Antonia is deprived of the luxury to organize her thoughts before she gives her account of the reality. Not only are her words and deeds filtered through Jim’s consciously organized, literary narrative but, even if it was not for the control of Jim’s authoritative voice, her expression would be limited only to the immediacy of the oral mode of existence. She is not able to conceal and encode the painful experience lingering in the spheres of her unconscious as Jim does in his legal portfolio

⁸² Wilhite.

⁸³ Ong argues that language is primarily oral: “oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality.” Ong, Walter, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982) p. 8.

⁸⁴ Ong p. 82.

⁸⁵ Ong p. 82. emphasis added.

6 Conclusion

Willa Cather's assiduous negotiating of the queer stance of an individual in the context of modern American nationhood was thoroughly staged in the persona of Jim Burden, both the creator and the center of the account of *My Ántonia*. He is simultaneously a figure that installs, perpetuates and profits from the oppressive white, male, heteronormative discourse, and a subject that suffers under its effects and inflicts upon himself deep wounds as a consequence of his continuous attempt to observe the order reposing upon the repression and denial.

The first chapter explores Jim's role of a gatekeeper on a frontier prairie that is structured as a microcosmic figuration of the nation. The wealthy family background which provided him with the material resources – a key to the privileged class position protected as another coding of ethnic superiority – was identified as only a partial cause of his rise to the prosperity in the context of the modern American society. His extraordinary linguistic skills and his ability to translate his belief system into the unknown, not yet structured frontier cosmos is the key to his empowerment. The Southern background which is the root of his belief system is, however, not only the source of his power but also the origin of his feelings of hereditary guilt and personal regret. The wealthy Southerner who is predestined by his family position to be privileged, and who retains his prominent position even after removal from his original habitat is obliged to pay a high price for his social prosperity: he has to deal with the fact that he is in power at the detriment of the social others and he has to tame his authentic drives and personal ambitions in order to remain the figure in control and to publicly ascend. For brief moments, however, his firm self-restraint collapses, and in his strong, domineering voice resonates the polyphony of the repressed, queer counter-voices.

The second chapter presents two complementary visions of the interactions among the subjects of different gender, racial and ethnic identification, and further develops the issues addressed in the preceding sections. While the protagonists of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are the apostles of the order of love and, through their affection and intuition, find the bridge over the gap of otherness, the world of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is full of violence targeted at the marginalized characters that support the pedestal of the socially privileged. The figure of Sapphira stands in the middle of this power division since she is both a slaveholding master benefiting from the image of the ethnic other, and a female subjugated

under the order of patriarchal order. Jim's policing activities and his struggle to maintain the privileged position is mirrored in priests' endeavors to install the order of Catholicism, and Sapphira's determination to gain control over her desires and the destinies of those orbiting her. Yet, unlike Jim, Latour and Vaillant find through their miraculously corrected vision the path to peaceful cultural fusion. Sapphira's and Jim's predicament prove to be in some respects similar since they both lose their authenticity by suppressing the spontaneous impulses that interfere with the retaining of their social privilege.

The third chapter discusses the damage that Jim causes to himself by the process of constant self-restraint and the determination to observe the social rules which results in his alienation from the others in order to solidify his dominancy and suppress the subversive, othered voices. The queer drives that reside in himself, and that are at odds with the path he is trying so dutifully follow tear him in the direction opposite to the one he is expected to maintain by the people around him (even by othered *Ántonia*) and by the society in general, and he is repeatedly suppressing his authenticity in order to fulfill the ambitions in the public sphere at the detriment of his own self. His longing for the homoerotic intimacy merges the queer impulses in his interior and the damaging effects of the external social pressure. The loneliness of the privileged position is generated by the fact that in order to inhabit this niche, he is required to subjugate nearly everybody in his vicinity – those that could rebel against his oppressor and those that could threaten his social progress by forming close bonds with him. That is the reason why sex is regarded as a threat: it represents a distraction from the social career and it can lead to affection which could extract privileged individuals from the discourse of white heteronormative supremacy, offer them an alternative perspective on life. It can proliferate difference and lead to procreation which obtrudes the verticality of social ascend and creates a horizontality of intersexual bonds, of a fixed space of family background. Affection brings responsibility for the others – they are no longer an available raw material that helps the privileged ones to construct their identities but they become equal partners.

The fourth part grapples with the narrative complexities which are inseparably entangled with the thematic issues discussed in the preceding parts – the specificity of Cather's narrative technique addresses the question of gender, ethnicity, power struggle and the coercive practices of normative discourse. The preface unsettles and hybridizes the relationship between the author, the anonymous "I" and the narrator of the following book, *Jim Burden*,

who is himself simultaneously a burdensome component of the account, and thus the narrative destabilizes the assumptions of gender and ethnic categories of the reader. The formal plan of Cather's fiction is a one of indirect representation – an unusual figuring of the unconscious undercurrents of Jim's mind by means of the enigmatic letters is presumably an element to which Morrison would object. As the preceding analysis attempts to demonstrate, Cather managed to expose the social dynamics in these multilayered, encoded accounts probably more efficiently – provided that the reader was attentive and perceptive enough to decode it – than if she opted for a direct representation, since this technique depicts and unearths all the nuances of the mechanisms at working in the society and stages the lacunae in the oppressive discourse through which the subjugated, marginalized voices commence to arise. Cather deliberately eludes any fixed narrative method, and thus renders her fiction “queer” – she systematically refuses to be classified in or subsumed under any category, agenda or institution which proliferates the order and discursive control and prevents the individuals from expressing themselves on their own terms, without the coercion of the society which has predetermined the place for them by virtue of their ethnicity or gender. In Lindeman's words, “[it] is a process of making and unmaking, settling and unsettling that operates at times on the surfaces and at times on the deep structures of her fiction. It is a blend of or an uneasy movement between ecstatic optimism [*Death Comes for the Archbishop*] and a sometimes a deadly anxiety [*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*], an often volatile mixture of utopian possibilities and dystopian dreads.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Lindemann loc. 102.

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