

Constructing a Pristine Silence:

Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination in the Settler Colonial Landscape of *My Ántonia*

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Rationale

I grew up on a small, diverse farm in central Illinois begun by my great-great grandparents in the 1890s, parallel to the resettlement of the Cathers and the fictional Burdens in Nebraska. I love this land in all its unknowable complexities and weather extremes, and yet I have grappled with this love as a form of possession and as an inheritance of a settler colonial history that displaced the Indigenous Potawatomi, Peoria, and Miami peoples from the region. My analysis of *My Ántonia* began as a project of interrogating Cather's settler colonial project in relation to her environmental imagination, but the energy behind it is largely the result of my own questions of what it means to inherit a colonial history on an intimately personal level and

what to do with the aching weight of love for a loamy piece of land where I sometimes still find shards of my ancestor's porcelain dishes. My family has witnessed the dangerous depletion of soil and contamination of water as a result of conventional mono-crop and pesticide-heavy farming, and as a result, has redoubled our efforts to promote a sustainable, restorative model that provides for the futurity of both farmer and land. It is my intention in this thesis to speak the hard truths of our collective settler colonial history as a foundation for ongoing environmental degradation, and to frame both *My Ántonia* and my lived experience in this history. Sustainable relationships to land, which acknowledge the human body as a part of nature, are a step towards addressing and beginning to deconstruct an environmental relationship which extends the project of absolute settler colonial ownership and dominance.

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Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* vibrates with the hum of subdued voices and currents of potent metaphor grounded in the natural landscape of what is today eastern Nebraska. Cather's elevation of natural space and heroic femininity in her prairie novels saturates *My Ántonia* with the linguistic equivalent of the golden light of a late, lazy afternoon when time stretches out ahead in waves of undulating bluffs and draws, miles of unbroken potential. In an oft-quoted passage Cather describes this quality of light as "a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day" (27). Although interrupted by periods of intense suffering in the novel, Cather sustains this hopeful tone in an act of narrative transfiguration that cultivates an essence of sublime beauty and potential from a landscape scarred by the endlessly more complex histories of white settlement and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. What Cather captures in *My Ántonia* is the desire to go back—to the womb, to homelands, to "simpler times"—and the grief in the knowledge that we cannot resurrect paradise, that it never existed at all. Beneath the fraying disguise of a placid elegy for the frontier era, the seams of *My Ántonia* split and give way to the repressed anxiety of a nation grasping for identity and legitimacy within a landscape inscribed with the intertwined genocide and ecocide of settler colonialism.

As the novel's title suggests, *My Ántonia* coalesces around the figure of Ántonia Shimerda, a girl who immigrates with her family from Bohemia (what is today the Czech Republic) to Black Hawk, Nebraska where they struggle to survive, often relying on the aid of the Burdens, Jim's grandparents, who are comparatively secure and prosperous in their settlement. Cather frames *My Ántonia* in the prologue as a narrative authored by Jim Burden as he looks back on, and reconstructs, the landscape of his childhood in Nebraska and the centrality of Ántonia to his experience. Lisa Marie Lucenti argues that in *My Ántonia*, "we are not just visiting the plagued house of one man's nightmares. We are—as individuals, as cultures, as

communities, as nations—unquestionably at home in this sometimes shocking, often painful, and always peculiar embrace of remembrance” (194). Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* was traditionally read as a nostalgic musing on simpler times that celebrates America’s so-called pioneer spirit and the sweet ache of childhood friendships made, lost, and rekindled despite the sharp edges of age.

In this thesis, I argue that Cather operates within a landscape inherently mediated by settler colonial violence and forwards such language throughout the novel, pausing to reconsider and complicate settler colonial tropes where they concern Ántonia and the land-as-woman analogy. Cather positions Jim as emblematic of both preservationist and utilitarian approaches to the environment, emphasizing his admiration for nature and his use of it for emotional and material consumption. Jim’s itching need to know and fully possess the environment emerges as an unfulfilled desire to dissolve into the landscape. Cather frames Jim as an extension of a settler colonial force, a precondition which undermines the potential for oneness between his colonizing body and appropriated land.

Celebratory readings of *My Ántonia* have been thoroughly complicated by postcolonial, ecocritical, and feminist critics, among them Mary Paniccia Carden. Carden argues for a reading of Cather as an author who subverted the nation-building narrative, particularly the role of feminized land: “Cather’s frontier stories restage the romancing of the wilderness—that paradigmatic activity of the self-made man—by situating women in his place” (279). Cather’s repeated centering of women in her narratives of the frontier encourages a reading of Cather as an author who liberates her women characters through their relationships with the land. I complicate and expand on this scholarship by positioning it alongside postcolonial critiques of the settler colonial language of possession, as well as a consideration of how this restaging produces a queer environmental relationship between women and land. Neither Jim nor Ántonia

can escape their participation in conquest, yet *Ántonia* becomes emblematic of Cather's attempt to renew and corrupt the exhausted land-woman colonial metaphor. Carolyn Merchant discusses this gendered settler colonial approach to nature: "nature is portrayed as undeveloped 'virgin' land whose bountiful potential can be realized through human male ingenuity" (118). Cather chooses to forward the erasure of colonial violence, particularly in the character of Jim, but refuses to maintain the usual architecture of the land-as-woman analogy, instead queering the language by positioning a feminine body rather than a masculine body as the cultivator of historically feminized land. Cather's selective subversion of violent colonial language prioritizes the bodies of settler women who are often romanticized and celebrated in her prairie novels.

Cather occupies a space of tension between affirming and resisting the colonial discourses she operates within, including the language of ownership, indigeneity, and feminized land. Her glorification of settler colonialism ignores processes of environmental degradation and furthers Indigenous erasure in keeping with a revised national narrative, but her representation of *Ántonia*, as a woman who is celebrated rather than condemned for her boundary-blurring relationship with the earth, contradicts the prevailing ownership of natural spaces by a masculine settler polity. I begin by situating Jim Burden, who is framed in the prologue as the author of this account of "his" *Ántonia*, as a force of mediation who filters and obscures both the landscape and *Ántonia* through his position of privilege and possession. I then examine Jim as a character who is emblematic of the consumptive practices of the conservation movement and as an inheritor of a settler colonial approach to the environment which institutes a binary between civilized humanity and wild nature. I argue that Jim's positionality within a settler colonial framework and his acceptance of his position of dominance over the environment creates an irreconcilable dissonance between his desire to become one with the land and his failure to

realize his destruction of it. Jim's relationship to the land as material and emotional resource informs his similarly incomplete capturing of *Ántonia*. I contend that *Ántonia*'s position as a female cultivator of feminized land transforms the colonial structure of the land-as-woman trope and constitutes a break from heteronormative language structures to a queering of environmental relationships.

Although celebrated as a major figure in American environmental literature, especially in her treatment of the Great Plains, Cather's environmental realism is continuously mediated by her context within a settler colonial literary tradition. In his seminal postcolonial critique of *My Ántonia* Mike Fischer asserts, "there can be no cultural text, however apparently blind to the political preconditions assuring its provenance, that fails to record the traces of those preconditions, in spite of itself" (32). Cather's prairies, however beautifully rendered, record an absence: the reality of genocidal violence and environmental degradation. The westerly development of land, the assertion of a God-given right to possess and improve, would nearly eradicate the complex prairie ecosystem, replacing an unrecognized biodiversity with harmful mono-crop agriculture. In his introduction to a volume of scholarship on *Prairie Conservation*, Dan Flores estimates that tallgrass prairie has declined by between 82 and 99 percent since 1830, the cusp of a period of unprecedented ecosystem alteration (13). Flores articulates the particular vulnerability of the prairie ecosystem:

Because the Plains environment is made fragile by cyclical drought, the hold human societies have had here has often been disruptive and tenuous. No part of the continent invites such easy human environmental alteration, yet can collapse so quickly under that wooing as the Great Plains. (10)

During my visit to Red Cloud, Nebraska, I visited the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, a 612 acre stretch of never-been-plowed prairie that nonetheless bears the scars of colonization, including invasive plant species (“Willa Cather Memorial Prairie”). The warm-sun smell of earth and dry grass crunching underfoot, the aching blue of the sky, and the rare solitary sketches of trees stretching upwards out of the dry creek bed—these images reminded me relentlessly of Cather’s writing. It is easy, and I would argue, dangerous to get lost in these sublime landscapes. It is essential to hear the highway, glimpse the grain silos in town, stumble upon an abandoned fence post, and to hold these markers of upheaval alongside the pristine, to reflect on pristine beauty as an absence of reality.

I. Jim’s Narrative Voice and the Mediated Landscapes of *My Ántonia*

Cather’s framing device establishes Jim as the author of this text, a point of view which orients the novel as a manifestation of his faulty, rose-colored memories. The effect is to emphasize the limits of this narrative, its partiality, its bias, and its unreliability, and to destabilize the very nation-building project undertaken by Cather. Having centered Jim’s perspective and called it into question, Cather places the novel in a space of uncertainty and obscures the character of Ántonia behind an apparition constructed by Jim’s nostalgia. In Cather’s 1918 introduction to *My Ántonia*, she frames the novel as Jim’s composition, motivated by a conversation between the authorial “I” of the introduction and Jim: “I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her” (xii-xiii, 1918). The origins of the novel are telling as the idea of Ántonia is called into the narrative in the breath of conversation. Although Ántonia’s experience is often the guiding focus of the story that follows, she is caught forever in that space of Jim’s breath as he

evokes an incomplete “picture” of a woman who remains elusive. The narrator of the introduction suggests that it takes more than one perspective to come close to capturing a picture of her, but following this introduction the novel’s first narrator disappears entirely in favor of Jim’s singular and incomplete perspective. The narrator never writes an account of *Ántonia*, but publishes Jim’s manuscript, “substantially as he brought it to me” (xiv, 1918). This qualifying phrase, left out of the 1926 revision, suggests that the narrator, possibly a stand-in for Cather, has revised Jim’s manuscript in some way and is now publishing a story filtered through their own biases and experiences. Our closeness as readers to the reality of the Nebraska prairie and the person of *Ántonia* is thus distanced not only by the voice of Jim, but by Cather’s insertion of an additional editor figure who undoubtedly has their own unique positionality and motivations in presenting the story. Their assertive “I” presence inevitably fades from the narrative, a disappearance that speaks to a flattening of diverse perspectives from the face of the text. *My Ántonia*, however, is fundamentally a novel which evokes a multiplicity of voices and critical directions. Though they may fail to reach us through Jim’s narration, this diversity encourages a critical approach that acknowledges the incompleteness of Jim’s or any one perspective, and embraces the many other perspectives present in the novel.

Jim carries with him his childhood on a farm in Virginia and the privilege and expectations of having been born a boy into an established, white, land-owning family that has benefited from American citizenship for at least two generations. Jim’s Virginian frame of reference casts a film over Jim’s view of the landscape as he grasps for aspects of his known world in an unknown environment. This process of approaching the unknown through the lens of the known is described by Carolyn Merchant in the context of Christopher Columbus’s oft-cited collision with the Americas. Merchant explores Columbus’s view of the “New World” as an

opportunity to find and rebuild the lost Garden of Eden, analyzing how he projects his knowledge of the “Old World” and an idyllic space in the Christian tradition onto unfamiliar landscapes (57). Jim no doubt maps his expectations for Nebraska from the stories he is told of the West in books such as *Jesse James* in an extension of Columbus’s disastrously inaccurate mapping of a biblical Eden onto the Americas. Jim’s internalization of the mythologized West collides with a nonconforming landscape resulting in a dominant figurative language that exposes the unreality of Jim’s descriptions: it is “as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping...” (16). Due to the irresponsible hunting practices of white settlers, Jim’s predecessors, buffalo herds no longer move across the landscape, but Jim projects his imagined construction of these massive herds onto the prairie. Jim absorbs and projects a romanticized notion of the adventures of Western spaces, imagining the blood-pounding closeness of the “wild” beneath a seemingly permeable “loose hide.” Jim imagines a continuous presence that extends these herds into the land itself, but as the galloping buffalo fade into ellipses, a much more sinister reality emerges in the silences of his limited perception.

Jim’s “something like” approach continuously disrupts the realism of his descriptions and persists throughout the novel, including in his characterization of *Ántonia* (37). In several revealing moments throughout the narrative, Cather emphasizes the constructed nature of Jim’s account and draws the reader outside of Jim’s head to reflect upon the partiality of his composition and the motivations behind it. As Jim bemoans the loss of the hired girls’ company and praises their liveliness, Frances Harling responds: “I expect I know the country girls better than you do. You always put a kind of glamour over them. The trouble with you, Jim, is that you’re romantic” (116). Frances invokes a postcolonial critique of *My Ántonia*, that it

romanticizes a settler colonial narrative, erasing its inherent violence, in favor of glamour: “a magical or fictitious beauty attaching to any person or object; a delusive or alluring charm” (*OED* n.2.a.). The denotations of “glamour” as fictitious and delusional characterize Jim’s approach, not only to the hired girls, but also to the landscape itself and the processes of appropriation and burgeoning degradation that he witnesses, but interprets through the rosy lens of nostalgia.

Cather’s unmistakably mediated novel of the Nebraska plains at the turn of the twentieth century allows for a discussion on the knowability of the colonized landscape and the knowability of the closely intertwined character of *Ántonia*. Cather’s creation of distance between the reader and *Ántonia*’s unguarded thoughts and experiences mirrors Jim’s inability to access the landscape and to dissolve into it. Around every corner in Cather’s novel are barriers to knowing and relating that frustrate both reader and character. The itch of knowing that there is more (to the landscape, to *Ántonia*) and the impossibility of stepping outside one’s experience and into another’s encourages a complex, critical reading of *My Ántonia* that embraces the novel’s dark underbelly while also interrogating its sunny skies.

II. Settler Colonial Inheritance and Environmental Imagination

Embedded within a structure of violence and dispossession, Cather’s prairie novel functions as an uneasy remembrance and conscious reframing of Nebraska’s recent influx of white settlers, among them Jim’s grandparents. Alex Young and Lorenzo Veracini define settlers as “colonists who come to stay,” establishing a settler colonial system “via logics of elimination and exclusion, dispossessing Natives and then attempting to police the racial, gender, and class boundaries of the settler polity” (4). Settler colonialism in the United States thus functions via an

ideology of white supremacy, state-sanctioned violence, and the settlers' belief in the moral superiority of establishing productive, extractive endeavors within the landscape. In Cather's depiction of the settlement of the American West, agricultural endeavors represent progressive change in the landscape, and are a motivation and justification for the appropriation of Indigenous lands.

As Kyle Whyte discusses in "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice," white settlement violated interdependent relationships between humans and nonhumans, disrupting and destabilizing ecosystems by over-hunting and over-cultivating the land to exhaustion (127). Whyte explores how Indigenous societies (he cites specifically Anishinaabe peoples), are "entangled in relationships of interdependence with the environment and have habituated themselves to particular ecosystems" (127). Whyte's use of the term "habituate" here implies an active, evolving environmental relationship that requires a molding of oneself to the environment. The settler colonial project of molding the land into a capitalistic idea of productivity shifts the onus to evolve onto the land itself. Although Jim's desire to dissolve into the landscape may seem like a comparatively harmless and respectful relationship, it is wholly passive and self-centered. In pursuing dissolution, Jim fails to acknowledge his outsized influence on the local environment or its historical preconditions, a blindness that preempts Jim from recognizing and mediating his power.

Whyte discusses settler colonialism as "a type of injustice driven by settlers' desire, conscious and tacit, to erase Indigenous peoples and to erase or legitimate settlers' causation of such domination" (135). Cather's assertion of the empty landscape and Jim's unawareness of the temporal nearness of violence against Indigenous peoples demonstrates Whyte's outline of the goals of settler colonialism to erase Indigenous inhabitants, and to erode narratives that assign

blame to white settlers. Settler colonialism further asserts a nature-culture dualism that represents humanity, particularly white settlers, as dynamic actors on a separate and static natural environment. I refer to this colonial dualism as a human-nature divide in order to center the corporeal body as an entity forcibly split from its environment. Whyte sums up the particularly damaging non-relationship that results from this construction: “the US has rarely sought to create emerging and persisting relationships that are responsibilities, favoring instead the privileging of types of relationships such as rights, contracts (e.g. relating to private property), and consumer/commodity associations” (136). Whyte interprets the actions of settler colonialism as an imposition of a human-nature dichotomy that disrupts the Indigenous collective continuance model which he defines as “a society’s capacity to self-determine how to adapt to change in ways that avoid reasonably preventable harms” (131). In the rejection of persistent relationships, and the implied awareness of relationality and community with one’s environment, settlement operates within the objectifying and extremely harmful systems of privatization and consumption. The creation of land as an object, a space with hard borders that can be fenced in, entirely understood, and modified against the sustainability of the original ecosystem, positions humanity as a group above, in control of, and exempt from, the immediacy of nature.

Sidestepping a reckoning with her characters’ causation of environmental degradation and displacement, Cather unmistakably memorializes and celebrates the centrality of agriculture and farming families, such as the Burdens, to systems of settler colonialism. Cather’s iconic image of a plow magnified against the setting sun is often invoked as evidence of her unwavering dedication to the pioneer. As Jim and the hired girls watch the sun set after their spring picnic, “a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun...heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun” (123). The magnified image of the plow nearly obscures the face of

the sun, at first glance demonstrating the assertion of settler colonial agricultural ideals on the environment. The plow is referred to as a figure, a picture, and a heroic image, thus emphasizing its ability to signify a larger process of cultivation, as well as, its temporarily elided underlying materiality. The plow is represented not as itself, but as an illusion, heroic in size but only briefly significant enough to obscure the sun. Cather's use of the phrase, "writing on the sun," however, alludes to the larger storytelling process Cather participates in as she writes this mediated frontier into existence and attempts to cement a particular narrative over the blinding truth of the sun.

The image undoubtedly glorifies the frontier narrative, but its diminishment leads to a more complicated symbolism: "that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie" (123). Cather ends this passage by revealing the "vision" as an illusion, a symbol crafted by the chance alignment of the sun behind a forgotten plow. The plow is again consumed by the prairie, seemingly insignificant against its vastness. Having established the plow as a "vision," its diminishment may also be understood as a similarly constructed representation of reality; the plow can no longer reach across the prairie distance, but it stands at the ready in innumerable fields across the country.

Cather repeatedly asserts the emptiness of the landscape, rarely acknowledging the prior presence of Indigenous peoples or the violent history of settlement, and preferring instead to allude to the "natural" disappearance of the buffalo. Cather skirts around the underlying fact of violence, naming a creek "Squaw Creek," but reframing the violently inscribed landscape by lining this creek with Jim's "gold and silver trees in fairy tales" (18). The settlers of this Nebraska region may not have understood "squaw" as a derogatory term at the time, but its use reveals a larger colonial project in the practice of renaming landmarks using Indigenous names and languages. Cather acknowledges that Indigenous people inhabited the landscape through

names such as “Squaw Creek” and “Black Hawk,” but this naming practice enacts a violent control and evokes the absence of an immediate Indigenous population. The names act as assertions of colonial possession not only over the features of the land they claim, but as an appropriation of Indigenous figures and languages. Cather further demonstrates that her use of the land-as-woman analogy extends beyond the figure of *Ántonia* by assigning the creek to the figure of an Indigenous woman. Cather positions Jim as a complicit inheritor of a settler colonial system who perpetuates the system as a railroad lawyer, advocating for the development of the West into populated, cultivated, and industrialized space. In Jim’s desperate clinging to a land that quite literally withers at his touch, and at the touch of his compatriots, an underlying anxiety of illegitimacy and complicity seeps into a narrative that otherwise champions American settlement.

The trappings of settler colonialism, and its entrapment of the novel, emerge in the first pages of Jim’s Nebraska adventure as Cather drops Jim into an unknown where his Virginian frame of reference fails and the preconditions of Nebraskan settlement assert themselves. As Jim and the farmhand Jake disembark in Black Hawk, the darkness of night on the prairie leaves Jim’s eye disoriented and grasping for familiar forms. Jim is unable to rest in the back of the wagon on the journey to the Burdens’ homestead: “cautiously I slipped from under the buffalo hide, got up on my knees and peered over the side of the wagon” (12). Jim is apprehensive of the unknown space of the dark prairie, kept at bay by that flimsy instrument of human passage, the wagon. Within the open wagon-bed, Jim is initially ensconced in a buffalo hide which evokes the colonizers’ decimation of the buffalo on the Great Plains and the closely linked massacre, genocide, and removal of the Native American population who relied upon the buffalo as an integral part of their culture and livelihood. A buffalo hide, the gutted remains of an animal and

the prairie ecosystem it facilitated, shelters a ten-year-old Jim on his first excursion into the prairie in the mid-1880s, emphasizing that Jim enters a prairie transformed by decades of settlement, hunting, cultivation, and the forced removal of Indigenous peoples. The “wild West” depicted in the *Life of Jesse James* book Jim reads on the train is in a transition period (9). In “The Bison and the Cow: Food, Empire, Extinction,” John Levi Barnard discusses the bison’s creation as a national symbol of the United States, “a figure for the process driving its eradication” (382). The image of Jim within the buffalo hide emphasizes the dangerous success of the bison business in simultaneously attracting settlers to the bounty of the plains and decimating the bison population. The problematic logic conservationists applied to preserving select landscapes from the progress of the pioneers was predicated upon the same ideology of consumption and production that transformed the red prairies of Jim’s youth into “the world’s cornfields” (74). As Barnard explains, “the better part of the bison’s recovery has resulted not from its protection but from its production” (389). Preserving controlled herds of buffalo within national parks prevented eradication for the purpose of continued consumption, not only of buffalo itself but of the national ideology of wildness and strength it had come to represent. Jim is warmed, protected, and provided with fodder for his imagination by the colonizing processes that strategically decimated buffalo herds in order to undermine Indigenous ecologies and sources of sustenance to create the artificially empty landscape.

The volatile preconditions of settlement refuse to lie silent, asserting their presence in the unpolished and highly personal corners of Cather’s text. The fictional town of Black Hawk, Nebraska and the surrounding rural area are mapped upon Cather’s experiences growing up in and around Red Cloud, Nebraska. As Mike Fischer explores, both town names derive from prominent Native American chiefs in the area, recording traces of presence and elimination.

Fischer connects Cather's choice of the name Black Hawk to the popularity of the immensely mediated autobiography of Chief Black Hawk, "one of the first texts in the nineteenth-century cult of nostalgia" (35). Fischer positions Cather as an author who ingests and replicates inaccurate, romanticized depictions of Indigenous populations and is facilitated in doing so by the recent forced removal of the "Indian threat."

Joining an established white settlement in Nebraska in the early 1880s, Jim is sheltered from the most immediate and violent encounters that characterize settler colonialism, including conflicts with Indigenous populations and an unknown environment. The timeline of potential encounters with the tribes inhabiting the Red Cloud/Black Hawk area is much nearer than Cather's imagery of emptiness suggests. As settlers, among them Jim's grandparents, pushed into what is today Nebraska in the 1870s and 1880s, the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains faced mounting restrictions, including government prohibitions on bison hunts. David Wishart relates that by 1880, the Pawnee, Ponca, and Otoe-Missouria peoples of this region had been forcibly removed to reservations in Oklahoma (188). According to Wishart's depictions of the path taken to the southern reservations by the Pawnee people, they passed almost directly through the newly established Red Cloud (the prototype for Black Hawk) in 1875 (200). Contrary to Cather's literary landscape, it is likely that the Burdens, as well as Cather's own family members, were aware of, or even watched, this forced migration enacted by the U.S. government to their benefit. Cather *chooses* not to bear witness, a choice that haunts the novel and undermines its frequent scenes of expansive peace—"the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight"—as artificial productions instrumental to the revision of the national origin story (26).

Nebraska's white settler population grew to almost half a million people by the 1880s, considered the "boom" years of Nebraskan settlement (Wishart 187). Jim's arrival in Nebraska in the early 1880s coincides with this second wave of colonization. Jim is neither burdened by the risk of bodily harm from Indigenous peoples defending their homelands, nor by the risks and labor involved in building a home, breaking the prairie, planting the first crops, and accumulating the supplies and capital that provide security. The environment is therefore less immediately threatening to Jim's life, and the violence of previous generations facilitates the peace of Jim's "first glorious autumn" in Nebraska (21). The Burdens live in a frame house, a progression from the sod dugout where the Shimerdas first make their home, and frequently travel into the town of Black Hawk and neighboring settlements. Chad Montrie refers to frame houses as symbolic of the reestablished division between humanity and nature: "the land was under at least a measurable degree of human manipulation, and some semblance of the cultural order men and women had known back east was reestablished there in the West" (252). The Shimerdas, however, experience many of the struggles of the initial settlers, living in a dugout, "thatched with the same wine-colored grass that grew everywhere," and nearly starving during their first winter on the prairie (18). The contrast between the homey routines of the Burden household and the Shimerdas' tenuous existence demonstrates the varying degrees of security with which Jim and *Ántonia* approach the environment, and the ways in which closeness with the landscape is mediated by one's economic security and membership within a dominant community.

Although Cather redacts the specificity of Jim's role in westward development in the revised 1926 version of the text, his involvement in railroads and implied involvement in various extractive industries is consistent with Cather's detailed 1918 prologue. The narrator describes

his “naturally romantic and ardent disposition. This disposition...has been one of the strongest elements of his success. He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches” (7-8, 1926). Cather suggests that Jim’s appreciation for and closeness with the land supports his expansion efforts, demonstrating the existence of common ground between seemingly disparate sentiments—the ability to love the land and simultaneously facilitate its destruction. In the expanded 1918 prologue, Cather explicitly represents Jim as a highly influential developer of the West: “He is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil...the money which means action is usually forthcoming” (xi, 1918). Jim’s continued movement west to Wyoming and Montana suggests that he follows the settlement action, attracted further west in pursuit of the “wild” spaces that no longer exist in Nebraska. His support for the next generation of enterprising businessmen and his diversification throughout the most prominently harmful sectors—mines, timber, and oil—illustrates his prominence and widespread power, suggesting his direct culpability via his personal and financial entanglement with the business of resource extraction.

The link between nation-building, symbolic landscapes, and environmental degradation proves fundamental to understanding Jim’s complicated environmental consciousness and his ability to express intense devotion to the environment while simultaneously destroying it. Joseph Urgo contextualizes Cather’s environmental writing within the rise of the National Parks Movement in the early twentieth century, describing the motivation to preserve artificially empty, appropriated Indigenous lands as a nation-building project: “Natural resources might thus be understood as the national imagination” (50). In the context of settler colonial language, the land is material not only in its economic value, but in the way it inspires a national origin story.

Cather's celebration of America's natural beauty and simultaneous erasure of Indigenous peoples and the atrocities committed against them positions *My Ántonia* as a novel interested in the creation of a revised national narrative, a revision that nevertheless reveals its insecurities, particularly in the character of Jim.

Jim's simultaneous exploitation of and longing for the sublime landscape of the American West embodies the seemingly contradictory movements of early conservation efforts which largely split into utilitarian and preservation focused factions. As Urgo discusses, the conservation movement became a debate between a utilitarian approach, reserving land for future use, and a preservationist approach, saving the most striking natural spaces for their aesthetic and recreational value (44). These approaches align, however, in their appropriation of land in service of the violence of settler colonialism. In discussing the role of the bison in the conservation movement and symbolic natural spaces Barnard notes, "the conservation movement in the United States has never been at odds with consumption per se" (378). Consumption, whether in the form of hunting bison for their hides or in the more abstract appropriation of animals and landscapes into the national imaginary, remains at the root of both preservationist and utilitarian approaches. When he is first exposed to the prairie, Jim observes: "there was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (12). His view of land as "nothing," suggests that he values it as material and economic resource, a utilitarian viewpoint that denies its intrinsic value separate from its status as property. Yet this statement is at odds with Jim's appreciation of the land as "glorious" and "magnificent," especially his desire to dissolve into the land as "something complete and great," sentiments which align with a preservationist model (17). Throughout the novel, Jim suggests a melding of self and land, proposing a situation where he is erased into the land and attempting to negate his

position of control. This stance establishes Jim, and the settler polity he symbolizes, as simultaneously subsumed by the enormous beauty of natural spaces and in control of their use, whether they are cultivated or consumed in the creation of a national narrative. In his embodiment of both preservationist and utilitarian approaches to his environment, Jim demonstrates their overlapping qualities of consumption and violence. Where his desire to relinquish power and his facilitation of environmental degradation would seem to create an irreconcilable internal dissonance, I argue that Jim's language of dissolution is, in reality, a language of violent erasure that enacts power in the deliberate avoidance of accountability.

III. "To be dissolved into something complete and great:" Death and the Denial of the Self

Throughout *My Ántonia*, Cather positions elegiac, rapturous descriptions of the Nebraska prairie within a literary and historical context of settler colonial violence. With the character of Jim, Cather centers the desire to become "native" to a place which stubbornly recedes into strangeness. Jim's desire for oneness is an impossible bid for indigeneity within a landscape that resolutely reflects his colonial origins. Young and Veracini propose that the ultimate ambition of the settler, and the aspiration of Jim Burden, is "to have the land and to have it as an Indigenous person would; that is, to indigenize" (11). The goal then is to possess the land fully by dissolving the boundaries between self and land. *My Ántonia* demonstrates this paradoxical desire to possess and be possessed in Jim's appreciation for cultivating the land "in long, sweeping lines of fertility" while also passively longing to be "something that lay under the sun and felt it" (149, 17). Ultimately, for Jim, dissolving the human-nature binary constructed by the settler colonial system that circumscribes his life proves futile. The fantasy of achieving dissolution is also a fantasy of collapsing difference and bypassing the mediating discourses that contextualize Jim's

approach to the environment. He desires a complete closeness and accessibility to an entity which has, from his positionality, become irrevocably othered and degraded by the narrative of the American frontier. Jim's disavowal of reality performs the fantasy of living in a land without history in response to the unbearable weight of silenced narratives.

Jim's dissolution implicates his corporeal body, centering his physicality as it collapses into the landscape, and necessitating an analysis of how his body appears or disappears into the text surrounding episodes where he expresses a desire to recede. Cather consistently dematerializes Jim's body, establishing him as a nondescript figure, and allowing her to foreground his internal desire to fade into the earth via a physical non-presence. Our first glimpse of Jim occurs in the final pages of *My Ántonia* and is inserted into the narrative by Ántonia rather than Jim. Contradicting the novel's prevailing trend of asserting Jim's male gaze over Ántonia, in this instance Ántonia initiates and focuses the gaze onto Jim's body. Cather's language briefly shifts the ownership of the narrative to Ántonia who, to her children, has her own characters and possesses her own girlhood. Ántonia's children gather around a prized box of photographs, "characters of their mother's girlhood," giggling at "a tintype of two men, uncomfortably seated, with an awkward-looking boy in baggy clothes standing between them; Jake and Otto and I!" (169). Jim is finally made visible as "an awkward-looking boy," but even in the frozen solidity of the tintype picture, his uneasiness at being captured in the gaze of the camera is clear. His awkward posture framed by the bulk of the older men imparts a comparative flimsiness, and the outlines of his body are further obscured by too-big clothes, swallowing and disguising his corporeality. A second photograph appears in the box: "a tall youth in striped trousers and a straw hat, trying to look easy and jaunty" (170). Once again, Jim's clothes take precedence over the body they encapsulate, which tries but seems not to achieve, a casual appearance. Jim's

efforts to seem “jaunty” are evidently pained, suggesting again that when Cather directs the attention of the narrative onto Jim’s body, he shrinks away from the gaze he so often imparts on others. Jim’s invisibility, and his preference for this invisibility, inform his desire to dissolve and become unseen in the landscape, an impression that is further enforced by the episode of Wick Cutter’s attempted rape which relentlessly involves Jim’s physicality and his agitated existence in an abused and sexually implicated body.

When the design of Jim’s narrative, which so often revolves around *Ántonia*, places his body in the vulnerable position she inhabits, his careful displacement of attention shatters to expose the fabrication of his narrative invisibility and the instability of his own body image. *Ántonia*, seeking freedom to go to the dances, leaves her employment as a hired girl for the Harling family, and accepts a position with Wick Cutter, a moneylender who is notorious for his financial and sexual dishonesty with the young women he employs and often rapes and impregnates. When *Ántonia* suspects that Cutter is “up to some of his tricks again,” Mrs. Burden devises a plan for Jim to sleep at the Cutters’ in place of *Ántonia* (123). As Jim sleeps, Cutter enters and assuming the sleeping body to be *Ántonia*, caresses Jim who awakes to “the detestable bearded countenance” and begins to struggle away (124). Cutter realizes his mistake and Jim is badly beaten in the fight that ensues. Mrs. Burden wants to send for the doctor, but Jim protests: “I could stand anything, I told her, so long as nobody saw me or knew what had happened to me” (125). Jim’s concern to remain hidden from the view of the town suggests a sense of shame for having temporarily been the object of Cutter’s nonconsensual sexual advances. Jim guards his battered body as a hyper-visible reminder of Cutter’s abuse, resisting the gaze of both friend and reader and the exposing of his body in a text where he resolutely shies away from solidity. Jim expresses a sense of betrayal by *Ántonia*: “I felt that I never wanted to see [*Ántonia*] again. I

hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness” (125). Jim’s offended surprise and rage directed at *Ántonia* is an emotional response that speaks to his fear of the story getting out and tormenting his reputation in a loss of the narrative control that he has maintained throughout the novel. In Lisa Marie Lucenti’s reading of *My Ántonia* as a Gothic novel, this unsettling episode of near rape is evidence of the disruptive role memory plays as the unsteady structure of Jim’s composition. Lucenti emphasizes that “memory is *always* disfigured and disfiguring—a relentless prying at the sutures of cosmetic designs” (201). The cosmetic design of Jim’s narrative displaces Jim’s physicality from the surface of the text in favor of a deeply introspective exploration of self, landscape, and *Ántonia*. Cather allows Jim to recede, centering the pressure of the novel’s gaze onto *Ántonia* and inserting narrative preconditions of invisibility for Jim’s repeatedly expressed desire to dissolve.

The absence of physical descriptions of his bodily experience in places where his body is implicated as vulnerable and central to the action, suggests that Jim shies away from his concreteness, a characteristic that lends itself to his yearning to recede from the surface of the text and from distinction in the landscape. Jim is confronted with an unfamiliar environment which challenges an identity and self-perception which has thus far been rooted to the Virginia landscape, where man-made structures and familiar mountains provided a comfortable, bounded experience of the landscape. Jim stands in the midst of the tall, yet to be cultivated, prairie: “Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I” (15). Again, Jim characterizes the lack of familiar structures in the landscape as nothingness, a reaction that mirrors the language of settler colonialism and a view of prairies as an ecosystem of deficiency in contrast with wooded, mountainous regions. Cather subsumes Jim’s body in the surrounding landscape by first centering Jim’s corporeal identity, the reach of

his eye/“I” and his height in relation to the grasses, then emphasizing that his presence in the vastness of the landscape is insignificant.

Jim’s desire for closeness with the land, which initially appears to contradict the settler colonial project, is predicated upon his distance from the early settlement of Nebraska and his relative safety within an established community. Jim shifts uneasily from espousing a colonial rhetoric of domination that others the landscape and an inner desire to break the boundaries enforced by his community. On one of Jim’s first days on the prairie he ventures out to the garden with his grandmother: “I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away. The light air about me told me that the world ended here: only the ground and sun and sky were left” (16). Jim’s characterization of the Nebraska prairie, in reality the center of the continent, as “the edge of the world” recalls the language and awe of early European explorers who, in encountering lands outside of their referential frames and maps, expressed a disembodiment from their known world. According to Jim’s definition, the known world encompasses an established societal network of people and places rooted, for him, in Virginia. In this passage, Jim draws a distinction between society (the world) and “the ground and sun and sky” which constitute an othered, unknown and alternative space. Jim’s construction of humanity against nature aligns with prevailing settler colonial viewpoints which built the category of the enterprising American settler in opposition to an untamed, hostile, and unproductive wilderness. Jim, however, does not initially express a yearning to plow or subdue the prairie, wishing instead to dissolve into it and become one. The apprehension which typically clouds the settlers’ awe at experiencing a new landscape, is absent from Jim’s musings as he is “left alone with this new feeling of lightness and content” (16). Foregoing the safety in numbers logic, Jim expresses a desire to abandon an identity rooted in his

model of the known world, a world of settler colonialism, and embrace the insubstantiality of his body within the land, temporarily relinquishing the drive to conquer.

Jim's desire to merge with the land necessitates a sense of safety and security in the landscape predicated upon the struggles of earlier generations of settlers, and the forced removal of Indigenous peoples. His sense of peace and desire for dissolution negates the violence of producing an empty landscape and demonstrates the language system Cather operates within where the violence of colonization is blurred by nostalgia and the glorification of national landscapes. Jim's apparent resignation of power as he reclines into the earth cannot erase the colonial precedent that positions Jim as fundamentally the extension of an invasive body. Beneath his seemingly innocent dissolution project, Jim seeks in his relationship to the earth to become exempt from responsibility, to recuse himself from the impact of his community, and to recede from the uncomfortable closeness of violence. As Jim reclines in the garden, he reflects "I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire...that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great" (17). Jim's language in this passage repeatedly recalls a disavowal of the individual and a desire to contradict the human-nature binary which places humanity apart from and above nature. Jim refers to himself as a *something*, rather than a *someone*, likens himself to an inert pumpkin, abandons the pursuit of "anything more," and declares that this lack of conventional ambition is happiness. Jim alludes to death as the ultimate mingling of self and land, and the ultimate happiness, yet the insertion of death conjures a sense of grief and loss which consistently undermines harmonious imagery throughout the novel. Cather's language of erasure, although concentrated in the voice of Jim, expands outside his character. Despite a surface-level peace, the

desire to dissolve relentlessly evokes a larger system of sinister dissolution: a project of erasing Indigenous peoples and the crimes committed against them.

Jim recalls his childhood sense of becoming one with the pumpkins in his grandmother's garden from the distance of middle-age and a nearly erased prairie. The narrative is inevitably tinged with nostalgia and a feeling of having lost the peace of that afternoon, but the sentiment, closely tied to escaping the responsibilities and awareness of adulthood, persists through the stages of Jim's life, reappearing in similarly reflective scenes. At the spring picnic with the hired girls before Jim leaves for college, he again feels himself "overcome by content and drowsiness and by the warm silence about me" (118). Cather's diction again suggests that Jim relishes feeling subsumed by nature and that his mind returns to this feeling of completeness within the prairie throughout his life. Visiting *Ántonia* for the first time since having left Black Hawk, Jim feels again "the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there" (157). Jim's imagined childhood oneness with the earth returns, tantalizing and mythologized in adulthood, triggering thoughts of ending that echo Cather's previous language of death and becoming "a part of something entire" (17). The plausibility of dissolution, of truly becoming one with the land is relegated to childhood dreams, suggesting that in mature society the idea of closeness is superseded by the demands of productivity and the narrative of progress from nature to culture. In the concluding pages of *My Ántonia*, as Jim indulges himself again in *Ántonia*'s company and their shared childhood, he returns to that feeling of being "overcome by that obliterating strangeness" and of "coming home to myself" (179). Returning to Nebraska evokes reminders of feeling obliterated and overcome in the embrace of the earth, a space housing an essence of the self which is perhaps a childlike, magically uncorrupted version of the adult.

Cather is by no means the first chronicler of the fraught relationship between colonial settler and environment. The notion of dissolution persists in other texts which are central to the narration of the settler colonial project and the reframing of this project as a harmonious homecoming. In Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, published in 1902 and largely considered the first Western, the Virginian expresses sentiments similar to Jim's as he and his bride camp on an island in a stream deep in the mountains of Wyoming. The protagonist, known only as the Virginian, shares a kinship with Jim whose childhood in Virginia structures his first impressions of the prairie and places him within a class of settlers who move west from the more populated east coast in pursuit of greater economic opportunity, or the freedom of self associated with a sublime, untouched nature. In a moment of uncharacteristic vulnerability, the Virginian "opened his shy heart deep down" expressing his desire to live like an animal who, he observes, "would say to me: 'Come and roll on the sands. Where's the use of fretting? What's the gain in being a man?...the trouble is, I am responsible'" (298). The Virginian's discontent with the demands of his life that keep him from mixing with the environment mirrors Cather's portrait of Jim who "did not want to be anything more" than a something existing beside the pumpkins (17). The Virginian, however, gives voice to the barrier between self and land that makes Jim's frequent urge to dissolve an unattainable fantasy and a marker of discontent rather than radical environmentalism. The Virginian's, and Jim's, responsibility to conform to their roles in society clashes with the desire "to become the ground, become the water, become the trees, mix with the whole thing. Not know myself from it. Never unmix again" (Wister 299). As a cowboy and a railroad lawyer respectively, the Virginian and Jim enforce a national project that relies on maintaining distance between the land as resource and the self. Sublime landscapes may form a part of the American identity, and thus come close to the self, but within a resource-driven model

of nation-building the power hierarchy requires human ownership and possession of land, not the other way around.

Jim reclines into the landscape and is seemingly exempt from the usual chores of agricultural life. He desires oneness with a calm landscape on the cusp of a temperate autumn that demands no defensive measures such as withdrawing indoors or shielding oneself from the sun. Had Jim encountered a rattlesnake next to the pumpkins, as he does later on, it is unlikely that he would have expressed a desire to meld with a member of nature that to him represents “the ancient, eldest Evil” (31). Jim’s emphasis on his blissful interactions contrasts sharply with *Ántonia*’s forced and sometimes painful closeness to the earth. His celebration of beauty within the landscape becomes even more selective as his desire for oneness largely ignores the frequently tragic interactions between the settlers and their environment in the novel, including Mr. Shimerda’s suicide and the tramp’s death in the threshing machine.

Jim’s desire for dissolution evokes death and the complete loss of self to the land gesturing to a darkness that Cather interjects throughout the text in the form of Mr. Shimerda’s suicide during the Shimerdas’ first harsh winter on the prairie and the wandering tramp’s sudden jump into the threshing machine. What connects these moments is a violent beginning to the process of becoming one with the earth in a grave, but they are also both witnessed by *Ántonia* who is in this way abruptly confronted with a landscape that consumes lives even as it supports them. In Bohemia, Mr. Shimerda was “a weaver by trade; had been a skilled workman” but he has no farming experience and according to *Ántonia*, “he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him” (18, 51). Mr. Shimerda’s depression, his longing for his friends and music back home, and his inability to quickly adapt to the environment and survive in the landscape of Nebraska paint a portrait of a lone figure moving across a landscape with “no purpose” (27). The

contrast between his respectability, sense of community, and skilled workmanship in Bohemia and his reliance on neighbors, especially the dishonest Peter Krajiek, in Nebraska contribute to a sense of Mr. Shimerda floating through the landscape, reluctant or unable to put down roots.

As Mr. Shimerda takes his life during the family's first winter in Nebraska, Cather positions his death as both a return to nature and Mr. Shimerda's final escape from the harshness of the landscape, in sharp contrast to narratives of settler colonial victory. Describing the scene of Mr. Shimerda's death and his meticulous planning, Otto Fuchs, the Burdens' farmhand states: "He done everything natural. You know he was always sort of fixy, and fixy he was to the last" (54). Cather's use of the word "natural" assumes that the manner of his death was "existing or present by nature; inherent in the very constitution of a person or thing; innate" (*OED*, A.1.). Positioning Mr. Shimerda's death as natural implies that this was his inevitable end as a result of his disposition, but the use of the word also evokes nature in the sense of environment suggesting that Mr. Shimerda's death is linked to the Nebraska landscape. Jim's assertion that "it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda" further suggests that Mr. Shimerda was motivated by an inability to distance himself from the Nebraska landscape and return to his home in Bohemia (56). This movement away from the misery Mr. Shimerda associates with the land proves futile as, in death, Mr. Shimerda returns completely to the soil.

Jim, left alone as the rest of the household descends in sympathy on the Shimerdas' dugout, senses that Mr. Shimerda's spirit has returned to the homey peace of the Burdens' house as an escape from the elements. Jim supposes that "his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow, was resting now in this quiet house" (57). Jim positions Mr. Shimerda as seeking out the comfort of the insulated frame house as a refuge from his struggle with nature. In the context of the dominant settler colonial narrative which pits

a masculine settlement force in a desperate battle against nature, the narrative anticipates a victorious outcome, a taming of the wilderness and the triumph of the self. Mr. Shimerda would seem to fit this narrative in his role as a recent settler, but his suicide subverts the image of eventual domination instead representing humanity succumbing to a persistently hostile land. On Cather's literary frontier, the colonizer does not always prevail as can also be seen in the tragic trajectory of Mr. Shimerda's Russian friends, Pavel and Peter. Cather's resistance against this trend of Western American narratives underscores her tendency to evoke familiar tropes and narratives before complicating their outcomes.

Mr. Shimerda's grave on the prairie returns him fully to the earth, a dissolution into the substance he could not escape, and a marker of human passage that ironically preserves a patch of the red grasslands. Jim reflects on Mr. Shimerda's gravesite:

Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there...the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island. (64-65)

The language Cather uses in this passage suggests the oppression of the landscape as it is repeatedly plowed under, *all* the fields are bounded by fences, and the roads which once changed course with the undulations of the landscape now follow section lines supporting the settler system of ownership. The power relation between settler and national landscape has tipped towards the order and control enforced by plow, fence, and road. Jim, however, speaks of the ending of the frontier days with regret for the loss of the wild aspects of the landscape in a divergence from his more frequent celebration of the progress of cultivation: “[the corn] yield

would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war” (74). Cather contextualizes this passage within Jim’s grief over the death of Mr. Shimerda, facilitating a transfer of this melancholy tone to the landscape so that a faint acknowledgement of loss, not only of childhood but of the environment as well, seeps into the image. The reality remains, however, that a human body rests in this patch of land and it is for that reason that it remains untouched, consecrated in the eyes of the community by the cross and fence that denote a grave, not by the simple existence of the land itself.

Although it fails to speak to the genocide of Native peoples, Mr. Shimerda’s grave acts as a reminder of the human costs of the settler colonial system and imbues the land with a sense of loss and the conflicted reality of true mingling. Stephanie LeMenager, in a discussion of John De Forest and Walt Whitman’s Civil War literature, has theorized the idea of “a land-based notion of U.S. nationhood,” a concept that Cather interacts with in her narrative of westward expansion closely following the Civil War (556). LeMenager describes Whitman’s metaphorical imagining of the role of the landscape in a riven and reunited North and South: “every inch of U.S. soil potentially bears the chemical components of Illinoisans, Louisianans, Vermonters, Texans, and so on, and moreover every American potentially ingests these individuals in the produce of the soil...Whitman claims that we eat our citizenship” (570). Cather’s emphasis on death and the bleeding boundaries between human and land suggest that she adopts a similar view, as does her ongoing conversation with Whitman’s work, notably “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” as the epigraph of Cather’s *O Pioneers!* The “tall red grass” atop Mr. Shimerda’s grave blends human and nonhuman beings as its roots extend into Mr. Shimerda’s decomposing body and capture his remaining energy for the growth of the larger ecosystem. LeMenager contextualizes death within a nation-building or re-nation-building effort, suggesting that although death involves a loss of

self and the breaking of human-nature boundaries, it may also be co-opted by the settler colonial system as a sacrifice that leads to a consecrated and justified presence in the land. The finality of death, the undeniable mingling that occurs and asserts ownership and citizenship at the level of “chemical components,” sets in motion a process of exchange that cannot be undone.

Ántonia’s second visceral exposure to the risks of dissolving human-nature binaries occurs in the heat of summer when settlements work together to harvest the wheat and separate the grains from the chaff using a threshing machine. Ántonia narrates the appearance of a tramp among the threshers: “his eyes was awful red and wild, like he had some sickness...He says: ‘The ponds in this country is done got so low a man couldn’t drownd himself in one of ‘em’” (93). Cather’s diction associates wildness with sickness, implying that the tramp has caught a malady from too much friction with the environment, which has broken the barriers between the constructed binaries of civilized self and wild nature. Even the ponds are conspiring to prevent the man from killing himself as nature becomes a nagging constant that seemingly infiltrates the man’s humanity. Ántonia continues: “he waved his hand to me and jumped head-first right into the thrashing machine after the wheat” (93). The man positions his body as a sheaf of wheat, enacting the rending violence of the thresher upon himself. The tramp embodies both farmer and crop, collapsing the space between automation and the resulting increase in production, and the over-working of the land that accumulates after decades of monocrop agriculture into a depleted topsoil and irreparable prairie ecosystem. With this image, Cather suggests that the human body is not exempt or separate from the machines it has developed in pursuit of greater yield. Cather demonstrates the bleed that occurs between human bodies and the environments they inhabit, ultimately positioning Ántonia’s approach to body *as* environment as an alternative to the passive admiration and outsize damage Jim enacts.

Bodies—their owners, their aches, their assertions, and their absences—are a central theme of *My Ántonia*. Through Jim’s body, curiously invisible and yet central to his desire for oneness, and Ántonia’s body, hyper-visible and always in relation to the body of the land, Cather interrogates the intersections of body, self, and environment. In discussing the formation of identity in his seminal disability studies book, *Exile and Pride*, Eli Clare highlights “the body as home, but only if it is understood that bodies are never singular, but rather haunted, strengthened, underscored by countless other bodies” (10). Clare’s approach to the body as a composite home inhabited by a multitude of other bodies informs Cather’s exploration of the body as environment, and the environment implicated as body through the literary trope of land-as-woman. Clare offers a reading of the body as a palimpsest so that Ántonia’s body can be understood as underwritten not only by Jim’s narration, but by narratives about Eastern European immigrant women, women or “hired girls” who work outside of the home, and women who have children out of wedlock. Ántonia’s body is haunted, and nearly obscured, by the weight of these narratives. She is all of them and none of them at once, simultaneously embodying a multitude and remaining a singular, puzzling figure whose selfhood remains incomplete and unknowable in the confines of the text.

IV. Ántonia’s Body as Environment: Queering the Land-as-Woman Trope

In Jim’s repeated assertions that Ántonia assumes qualities of the land, Cather suggests that he operates within a constructed association between women and land, forwarding the colonial language of dominance and assault. Working within and against this discourse, Cather’s Ántonia resists value judgments of the land-as-woman trope as beneficial (supporting environmental movements) or degrading (reducing women to fertile landscapes). Cather suggests

that a close relationship between women and their environments which is entered into freely, may empower women to know their environments and know themselves as ecologically inextricable beings. Jim equates *Ántonia* with the land from the first breath of the novel: “this girl seemed to mean to us the country,” introducing a persistent interlocking analogy of land-as-woman and woman-as-land (8). Cather links *Ántonia* and the land throughout the novel, lingering with points of contact, sometimes grating and sometimes pleasurable, between body and environment. Cather expands the scope of contact beyond the enforced colonial association between woman and land to include *Ántonia*’s embrace of her body as an environment and her active curation of natural spaces, resulting in a metaphorical landscape where *Ántonia*, rather than Jim, maintains control.

Jim’s obsession with *Ántonia*, and his unreciprocated attempt to kiss her, assert the potential for a heteronormative romance between the two characters that would reenact the land-as-woman imagery of a male settler (Jim) coupled with a body coded as landscape (*Ántonia*). Cather, however, chooses to queer and displace the heteronormative structure of the land-as-woman trope through *Ántonia*’s centrality as a cultivator of feminized land. The placement of *Ántonia* behind the plow maintains the reproductive theme of the trope—the crops germinate regardless of the planter’s identity—but destabilizes the narrative of masculine conquest.

Annette Kolodny, a prominent feminist literary scholar, tracked the land-as-woman metaphor, particularly in American colonization narratives, in *The Lay of the Land*. Kolodny argued that this trope has damaging real-life implications as it provides a framework for repeatedly violating the environment, projecting the assault of women’s bodies in the language of taming and seducing the American landscape. Kolodny discusses this trope as a function of settler colonialism: “to make the new continent Woman was already to civilize it a bit” (9).

Constructing the land as virgin, mother, or lover imposed misogynistic ideals of submissive domesticity onto a wilderness perceived as hostile, while also suggesting the land as a fickle temptress figure, someone to blame when the weather didn't cooperate. Although I use Kolodny's phrase, "land-as-woman," to refer to the naturalized and colonial feminization of land throughout this thesis, it is my intention to move beyond her scholarship and to examine Cather's corruption of this metaphor, what I term her land-*and*-woman approach, as a bridge to a contemporary queer ecocritical lens.

Cather displaces the heteronormative romance between Jim and *Ántonia* to the margins of the narrative, and in doing so alters the heteronormative language of the land-as-woman analogy into a queer relationship between *Ántonia* and the land. Timothy Morton writes of the queer undercurrents in pursuing an intimate, non-heteronormative land relationship:

Tree hugging is indeed a form of eroticism, not a chaste Natural unperformance. To contemplate ecology's unfathomable intimacies is to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts. (280)

Morton envisions a queer environmental relationship as a consideration of the intimacy, and the ecological inextricability, between human bodies and the environments they inhabit, a relationship that transgresses distinctions between human and nature. Cather's representation of *Ántonia* as an ecological entity whose body blurs into the landscape around her and as a creative sculptor of natural spaces allows a glimpse into the "unfathomable intimacies," both physical and emotional that merge the concept of the land with the concept of *Ántonia*.

Much like Jim, *Ántonia* espouses a utilitarian approach to land. Her lifestyle, however, forces her to live with the choices she makes in relation to the landscape. If *Ántonia* plows the

fields year after year and the prairie ecosystem suffers, then she must live with the loss of it daily and negotiate her farm's threshold for modifying the landscape beyond regrowth and recognition. The energy she invests in the land transforms the land-as-woman relationship into a reciprocal system where power is shared between body and environment rather than accumulated within a masculine settler polity.

While she is less directly involved in the hugely impactful industries of environmental degradation, *Ántonia* must also be understood as a beneficiary of the settler colonial system who claims land and a relationship to land that differs from Jim's only in her recognition of her body as an extension of environment. Within *Ántonia*, Cather centers the body as a local environment which adapts and transforms as a result of its interactions with the larger environmental factors of sun and soil. The reciprocal changes that both body and land undergo as a result of their meeting are curiously absent from Jim's environmental relationship which involves a dissolution, a decentering of the corporeal self. Contrary to Jim's insulated experience of the prairie, *Ántonia* must delve into the sometimes harsh physicality of the landscape in order for her family to survive. *Ántonia* attempts to communicate her family's precarious existence to Jim: "things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us" (76). Following her father's death, *Ántonia* eagerly takes on the traditionally masculine-coded role of fieldworker. Jim, interested in preserving his idealized vision of a prettily feminine and companionable *Ántonia*, chafes against her transformation which moves her away from the role of his sidekick to a fiercely valuable body in her family's survival.

Cather suggests that *Ántonia*'s sense of belonging to the land hinges upon an environmental relationship of reciprocity and a deep, committed understanding of environmental processes which extends to a consideration of her own body as environment. Confronting the

land as one would confront oneself reveals commonalities in both parties. When the borders between self and land begin to dissolve, the dangers posed to one body seep into the other. When Jim and *Ántonia* recline in a draw as a chilly autumn sunset descends, they find a cricket, “the palest, frailest green,” struggling to move in the cold grass (26). While Jim observes the cricket, “waiting for something to come and finish him,” *Ántonia* makes “a warm nest for him in her hands; talked to him gayly and indulgently in Bohemian” (26). *Ántonia* reaches into the workings of nature and presents the warm environment of her own body as an alternative to an inevitable death.

Ántonia’s environmentalism is not without alteration to natural processes—to live is to impact the world around us—but she demonstrates a willingness to relate to the plight of non-human beings and a recognition of her body as an environment in its own right. In doing so, Cather implies that *Ántonia* is conscious of her body’s dependency on, and participation within, the earth. Although it is late autumn, “Tony was barefooted, and she shivered in her cotton dress and was comfortable only when we were tucked down on the baked earth” (25). Due to her family’s poverty, *Ántonia*, like the cricket, is vulnerable to the cold and must bed down in a sunny, sheltered spot of the earth to find warmth. *Ántonia* cups her hands and makes a nest of her hair for the cricket in an action that mirrors the draw’s shelter of her own body. Cather positions *Ántonia* and the landscape as similarly sheltering bodies by constructing a parallel encircling of *Ántonia* by the earth and the cricket by *Ántonia*. The language of this passage, “we were tucked down,” further suggests that the earth is an active presence that gathers in the bodies of the two children. Cather emphasizes *Ántonia*’s movement towards the land, her comfort within it, and her recognition of the value in the smallest of creatures.

In her exploration of “The Body as Bioregion,” Deborah Slicer suggests that “to be ‘home’ is first to inhabit one’s own body. We are each, as body, a biological ecosystem as complex, efficient, and as fragile as the Brooks Range, the Everglades, a native prairie” (113). *Ántonia*’s pride in her body’s ability to strengthen and adapt to meet the needs of her environment suggests an ability to fully inhabit her body, to recognize its power and feel its soreness without the shame that society, and Jim, try to impose. As *Ántonia* comes in from the fields, Jim observes that “her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulder, like the bole of a tree out of the turf” (66). With the comparison between *Ántonia*’s neck and a tree, Jim naturalizes *Ántonia*’s body while ironically intending to denaturalize and point out the wrongness of her masculinization. The image of *Ántonia* emerging from the ground like a bole, “the stem or trunk of a tree,” imparts a rooted strength and stability to *Ántonia*’s place on the prairie and further establishes a link between *Ántonia*’s labor and her increased sense of becoming intertwined with the landscape (*OED* n.1.a.). Cather’s recognition of the bleed between human bodies and the land, her emphasis on *Ántonia*’s changing body in relation to cultivation—the tanning of her skin and the hardening of her muscles—illustrates Cather’s awareness that bodies and land are inherently intertwined and impact one another. Comparing *Ántonia* to a tree alludes to both bodies as highly visible silhouettes against the grassland prairies, helping to draw a distinction between Jim, who wishes to dissolve, and *Ántonia* who recognizes that she cannot disappear into the land, instead managing the heightened impact she has as a farmer.

Cather’s projection of the land into *Ántonia*, and *Ántonia* into the land, initially appears to function as an extension of the classic trope, especially because it is enacted by the male authorial voice of Jim. The heteronormative structure, however, of a masculine settler plowing

and finding harmony with a feminized land no longer holds sway as *Ántonia* quite literally takes the reins of the metaphor, asserting a feminine body as cultivator of historically feminized land. Cather positions *Ántonia*, not as a passive actor within the land-woman analogy, but as a woman who seizes power by embracing the land and her role as cultivator. Jim finds it exceedingly “disagreeable” that “*Ántonia* ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached” (67). *Ántonia*’s body articulates her exhaustion and soreness at the end of the workday as a direct result of a grating (to Jim) yet gratifying (to *Ántonia*) closeness with the earth. Jim’s insertion of the disbelieving phrase “as if they ached” reveals his unwillingness to acknowledge *Ántonia*’s physicality and, significantly, his predilection for looking away or to the side of her pain. In this scene at the Shimerda’s dinner table, *Ántonia*’s body simply takes up space in an assertion of physical power that angers and unsettles Jim but also destabilizes the ideal passivity of both women and land in the land-as-woman trope. *Ántonia* eats noisily, audibly projecting an increased need for nourishment, and stretches her arms out into space in a gesture that suggests the unabashed embrace of using her muscles, sureness in herself, and a sense of having fulfilled the promise of her body’s energies.

Jim directly cites *Ántonia*’s challenge to the gendered labor divisions of farm life which, as Chad Montrie discusses in “‘Men Alone Cannot Settle a Country:’ Domesticating Nature in the Kansas-Nebraska Grasslands,” had returned to their pre-homesteading conventions in most established households, such as the Burdens’. *Ántonia*’s destabilized family structure, struggling to remain fed and clothed throughout their first winter on the plains, leads to a destabilized gender division and an expanded role for *Ántonia*. As Montrie notes, women’s roles expanded to include tending livestock, planting, and harvesting crops during the first fragile and critical period of settlement. This relaxing of gendered spaces was positioned, however, as a regrettable

necessity to be remedied as soon as was financially feasible (250). Jim, who disapproves of *Ántonia*'s embodiment of a masculine role, bemoans the loss of her "nice ways" to hard work (67). *Ántonia*, however, refuses to conform her body to the expectations of a gendered labor system, instead proudly declaring: "I can work like mans now...I help make this land one good farm" (66). Cather steadily edges *Ántonia* into a contested gender space, portraying convention and normalcy as malleable in a frontier context and laying the groundwork for *Ántonia*'s rupturing of the human-nature divide integral to the Western settler colonial tradition.

While Jim gratefully departs Black Hawk for a classical education in Lincoln, *Ántonia* makes plans to marry Larry Donovan, a dishonest passenger conductor, and move with him to Denver. As Jim drifts away to college, his narrative gaze draws inward, becoming reflective and increasingly academic, while *Ántonia*'s parallel embodied experiences and the prairies of Nebraska recede. Returning to Black Hawk in "The Pioneer Woman's Story," Jim apprehensively confronts *Ántonia* whose failed marriage to Larry Donovan and illegitimate pregnancy have made her a subject to be "avoided all evening" (145). When Frances Harling references "poor *Ántonia*," Jim seethes at this new moniker, "I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity" (145). Knowing only that *Ántonia* has transgressed social norms by becoming an unwed mother, Jim immediately condemns her for bringing notoriety and pity upon herself. His reaction to the prefix, "poor," being added to her name recalls his own possessive addition in titling the book: "'*Ántonia*.' He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it '*My Ántonia*'" (8). Jim is satisfied with *Ántonia* as an object of *his* possession, angering when the pitying gaze of others appropriates her name and person into a larger conversation outside of Jim's narrative control. The stigma surrounding *Ántonia*'s transgressive

sexuality simultaneously exiles her from communal spaces and evokes her person in the breath-space of gossip and dire warnings about following a similar path.

Cather notably titles this section, “The Pioneer Woman’s Story,” inserting another layer of mediated storytelling into the novel and assigning authorship of this particular chapter either to *Ántonia* or to the Widow Steavens who fills Jim in on *Ántonia*’s experience. The ambiguity of the pioneer woman’s identity suggests that Cather addresses a broader class of pioneer women in this chapter, *Ántonia* most prominently, but also Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball who both achieve “solid worldly success” in their seamstress and Klondike mining ventures respectively (146). The pioneer woman identity emerges as a tendency to stretch gender conventions in pursuit of a foothold in Western frontier spaces. Although this figure complicates the system of settler colonialism, she also unmistakably benefits from the legitimized appropriation of Indigenous lands: “after nearly ten years in the Klondike, Tiny returned, with a considerable fortune” (147).

In Denver, Larry steals *Ántonia*’s money and then abandons her, pregnant, leaving *Ántonia* with no choice but to return to Black Hawk and seek refuge with her family. Whether or not the sexual relationship between Larry and *Ántonia* was consensual is unclear, but the prospect of abuse of *Ántonia*’s body, as well as her goodwill and hard-earned money, hangs over *Ántonia*’s return. The Widow Steavens confronts *Ántonia*’s vulnerability in the image of her exposed bridal garments: “the lines outside the Shimerdas’ house was full of washing, though it was the middle of the week...all those underclothes we’d put so much work on, out there swinging in the wind” (151). *Ántonia*’s choice to wash her underclothes immediately upon returning suggests an urgency to cleanse them of their association with Denver and Larry Donovan. Setting them “swinging in the wind” allows light and air to pass through them again,

but it also exposes the most private parts of *Ántonia* as the garments closest to her skin are removed. Predicting the stigma of unwed motherhood, *Ántonia* retreats from the visibility of Black Hawk into the countryside. Widow Steavens relates: “folks respected her industry and tried to treat her as if nothing had happened. They talked, to be sure” (152). *Ántonia* internalizes and performs the expected shame of her situation and is “crushed and quiet,” predicting and enforcing the ostracism of the community which “tries,” but implicitly fails to overlook her transgression (153). While it is unclear whether the town community, or even her family, are aware of her pregnancy, Cather emphasizes *Ántonia*’s avoidance of town and the persistence of gossip whether it focuses on the implied scandal of living unmarried with a man, or a known pregnancy. *Ántonia* further transgresses the reaffirmation of cultural norms and institutions, such as marriage, following the early settlement period of cultural and moral vulnerability. In his exploration of evolving gender norms in the Kansas-Nebraska grasslands, Chad Montrie finds that following a high-risk homesteading period, “the gendered division of labor became more rigid, and as their sphere was increasingly limited to the home and its surrounding area, women’s relationship with the physical and organic environment changed” (246). This rebalancing of gender roles does not appear to apply to *Ántonia*, however, as she redoubles her time spent outdoors, refusing to embrace the reestablished distance between humanity and nature.

As *Ántonia*’s pregnant body is edged into the in-between space of physical absence and potent presence, Cather places her in a corresponding environmental borderland where she may reclaim her corporeal identity. *Ántonia* once again takes on masculine-coded farm roles, eventually embodying Lena Lingard’s role as shepherdess in which Lena was falsely targeted for “making Ole Benson lose the little sense he had” as she watched her family’s cattle (87). *Ántonia* moves into a similar unsupervised natural space ripe for social deviance but, in her case, her

reputation and bodily autonomy have already been compromised: “it was a fine open fall, and [Ántonia] liked to be alone. While the steers grazed, she used to sit on them grassy banks along the draws and sun herself for hours” (153). Ántonia’s fondness for nestling down in the prairie grasses to soak up the sun establishes an imagery of photosynthesis where Ántonia’s body, and the developing body of her daughter, absorb the energies of the earth. Ántonia initially occupies the borderlands between culture and nature as a means to shield herself from the accusative gaze of the townspeople. However, the calm and peace Ántonia projects in this environment transforms her exile into a space of regenerative and generative refuge.

The Widow Steavens’s account of Ántonia after she returns from Denver exudes an impermeable silence blanketing Ántonia’s body in her refusal to go into town and the immense solitude of her work in the fields. This silence is no doubt another side effect of Jim’s distanced narration and the unreachable center of Ántonia’s corporeal identity during her illegitimate pregnancy. Encompassing the weight of grief, shame, loneliness, and impending motherhood, Ántonia’s silence asserts itself as a mounting internal pressure that leaks out the edges of the text: “Sometimes I feel like I’m not going to live very long, so I’m just enjoying every day this fall” (153). Ántonia feels as if she lives under the threat of death, a feeling that may be connected with the risk of childbearing, but one that also speaks to the death of a certain identity—we continuously outlive our past selves. Ántonia’s womb becomes a small-scale ecosystem with conditions fine-tuned to support the development of human life. Pregnancy modifies her body, enacting processes which are largely beyond her control. In her analysis of the semiotics of birth in *My Ántonia*, Ann Fisher-Wirth argues that “pregnancy and especially birth are absolute...it matters not at all that she is married and indeed little that she is human” (186). Fisher-Wirth situates the processes of pregnancy and labor within a natural space rooted in the biological

processes that persist across mammal births and enact the urgency and inescapability of labor within *Ántonia's* body. The cultural practices built around the scene of birth, notably the institution of marriage, become secondary to bodily processes, forcibly reorienting the body as an environment.

Cather establishes a connection between *Ántonia's* pregnancy, which largely progresses in the fields, and a heightened relationship with and awareness of the environment. Cather creates a causal relationship between *Ántonia's* feeling that “I’m not going to live very long” and her intentional, appreciative approach to “enjoying every day this fall” (153). The “so” structure suggests that *Ántonia's* inner emotions, although often opaque, assert themselves in the space of her relationship with the environment, in this case moving her to luxuriate in the fall days.

The tone of the novel shifts in the episode of *Ántonia's* labor as the narrative uncharacteristically looks away from a scene that concerns *Ántonia's* body, and ironically amplifies the stretched-to-the-breaking-point silence. The Widow Steavens observes *Ántonia* driving her cattle home late in a December day: “She got her cattle home, turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room behind the kitchen, and shut the door. There, without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child” (153-155). The step-by-step simplicity of *Ántonia's* chores, carried out even as she begins to labor, imparts the same uncomplicated, almost impersonal tone to an extremely embodied and intrinsically personal process. These sparse lines, in an already sparse novel, contribute to a deeply unsettling tone and passage as they nearly erase the boundaries between human and nature, body and environment, which are foundational to the settler colonial setting and Jim’s worldview. By the Widow Steavens’s own account, there is no one to witness or assist *Ántonia's* labor, destabilizing her claim that *Ántonia* gives birth “without a groan,” and emphasizing the

solitude of *Ántonia*'s labor in contrast to the socially typical gathering of family around the scene of childbirth. Reflecting upon *Ántonia*'s ostensibly silent labor, Fisher-Wirth writes: "she who has always been so communicative, so expressive, retreats in her labor into silence, birthing like an animal...about this birth, there is little to be said" (191). Fisher-Wirth associates silence and solitude with nonhuman births constructed against the ritual gatherings of human births.

Cather's sparse representation of *Ántonia*'s labor moves her further into the blurred space of body as environment as *Ántonia* progresses through labor without the assistance and guidance of other mothers and midwives. While the Widow Steavens narrates only that *Ántonia* "bore her child," the reality of any birth, human or nonhuman, is undoubtedly more complex than the syntax applied to it. Her body's instinctive response to the pressures of birth and Cather's pared down narrative feel unnatural because they move against the culturally naturalized scene of supported childbirth, and towards a naturalness of innate biological processes. Moving indoors from an outdoor space previously constructed as the site of solitude and self-sufficiency, *Ántonia* chooses to remain in a mental space that views the body as environment and trusts in the routine processes of a bodily ecosystem, even as the comforts of a supportive social system, which she already lacks, recede.

What is unsaid, but underlying, about this birth, are the discourses on the human-nature divide and the land-as-woman trope that Cather evokes and complicates. America, characterized as virgin land to be enjoyed, overpowered, and transformed from wilderness to civilization, undergoes a revelation of fertility in response to colonization in the land-as-woman construction. Carolyn Merchant argues that this narrative gendered the American wilderness as "a land to be surveyed, laid waste, praised, and made to bear fruit in the process of creating an American paradise" (124). Within this discourse, pregnancy and birth are framed as productive processes,

similar to cultivation, constructing a woman's body and the land as valuable entities only when they are cultivated: "seduced, plowed, planted, and watered by male ingenuity" (125). This construction of the land as womanly and passive against the active role of the male cultivator establishes an imagery of sexual violence against women with the common narrative of passivity (she didn't fight back) invoked in a fruitful land response that is represented as welcoming, joyful, and as a justification of dominance. Jim's narrative situates *Ántonia's* pregnancy within a prairie landscape that has been transformed by the plow: "enriched and mellowed...all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility" (149). Jim's language suggests the economic, enriched value of cultivated land and its pleasing submissiveness in response to human labor which is inserted into the land and emerges in an imagery of willing conception and birth. *Ántonia's* fecundity, which Jim later elevates to a mythical level: "like the founders of early races," is bounded by this opening image of Jim's return to a fruitful landscape so that the language of fertility is established in relation to the land and extended to the body of *Ántonia* (171). Cather repeatedly leans on the language of the land-as-woman trope, positioning *Ántonia's* pregnancy within imagery of the land maturing through cultivation, implying a connection between the productivity of women and land. *Ántonia*, however, gives birth outside the marriage-bed, thus breaching the conventions of one narrative as her body is invoked in relation to the land-as-woman trope. *Ántonia's* illegitimate pregnancy, coded as natural although it transgresses convention (a constructed naturalness), suggests that she is defined outside of conventional narratives of virtue and that she may similarly stretch the confines of the land-as-woman trope. In the "human effort" infused into *Ántonia*, Larry Donovan plays the meagerest of roles, as *Ántonia* endures pregnancy, labor, and motherhood alone, but for the company of the land where she states, "all the ground is friendly" (156). In contrast to the

imagery of the male-coded plow cultivating the female-coded earth, the most significant actors of *Ántonia's* pregnancy are the land and herself, suggesting a land *and* woman relationship that empowers rather than oppresses.

Cather's model of conscious inhabitation of the environment requires a breach of the human-nature binary that begins with a consideration of the self as environment and extends to local environments, such as the sheltering structures we build around us. In his exploration of modernist space in Cather's novels, Guy Reynolds sets Cather and the architect Frank Lloyd Wright in conversation as they both demonstrate a desire to find "'fit' (a kind of spatial symbiosis between the man-made and the natural) [which] constitutes the regionalist style... a recurrent emphasis on the interdependence of the built and the natural, the human-made and the found" (175). Cather represents Jim as unable to find "fit" in the environment as he drifts through the landscape, entering the novel as a blur on a moving train and departing the novel by lingering in the incomplete and faulty landscape of memory. In contrast, *Ántonia's* interaction with the built environment around her and the home she eventually builds for her family, enact Wright and Cather's shared emphasis on interdependence and "fit."

Cather establishes *Ántonia's* affinity for living in spaces that combine aspects of built and natural environments early in the novel when the Shimerdas are still living in their dugout, or sod house, which to the Burdens, represents a lower form of inhabitation, degrading in its similarity to animal dens. Mrs. Burden links the dugout to an undeveloped and inhuman mode of living: "I hate to think of them spending the winter in that cave...it's no better than a badger hole" (18). Mrs. Burden espouses the conventional belief of the settler society that timber houses consistent with European-style architecture in the eastern United States were a progression from dugouts with their uncomfortable and dirty closeness with the environment. *Ántonia*, however,

consistently embraces what Rachel Collins terms a “bioregional fusion,” or the practice of modifying one’s behaviors and habitations to accommodate a specific environment, such as the exposed prairies of eastern Nebraska, in both the Shimerda dugout and later with her first self-directed, built home (44). The extreme heat in summer and cold in winter are mitigated by the insulating function of sod walls, a benefit that *Ántonia* appears to recognize as she defends her sleeping arrangements: “this is warm like the badger hole. I like for sleep there” (43). Where Mrs. Burden condemns the badger hole as unfit for human habitation, *Ántonia* references its warmth and welcomes the positioning of her own body in a space that mirrors the shelter of a non-human member of the environment. This affinity illustrates her willingness to subvert the boundaries imposed by the settler colonial system of domination between human and non-human nature, and anticipates *Ántonia*’s active implementation of “bioregional fusion” in the home that Jim visits twenty years after *Ántonia*’s first illegitimate pregnancy.

Although the home *Ántonia* builds for her family of ten children following her marriage to Anton Cuzak is not a sod house, Cather’s description suggests an aesthetic that represents what Reynolds describes as an environmentally integrated home. Reynolds discusses the in-between materiality of dugouts as they “accept the constraints of the environment and find an aesthetic emerging from the necessities of the landscape” (176). In response to the constraints of extreme temperatures on preserving food, *Ántonia* and her family build a fruit cellar that remains cool in summer. Jim describes the cellar as a “cave,” mirroring the language of Mrs. Burden and suggesting that *Ántonia* adapts her consumption habits to fit the environment. Cather codes the fruit cellar as a womb as *Ántonia*’s children come running out, “flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight” (164). Cather builds an imagery of rebirth that implicates *Ántonia*’s womb paired with the earth out of which her children

emerge. The cellar, a built environment, implants a womb-like space that depicts the earth as a source of life, irrevocably linked to the lives of humanity. This scene makes visible, via *Ántonia's* modification, the often glossed over reality of interdependence and brightens the dark lesson of Mr. Shimerda's suicide as it lays bare the inevitable mingling of flesh and land. Although Anton Cuzak is certainly involved, he characterizes himself as a city man unaccustomed to farming and is described by Jim as "the instrument of *Ántonia's* special mission" (176). In the space of this farm, the creation of the fruit cellar, the house, and most especially the orchard, *Ántonia* assumes ownership over the narrative of built environments.

Ántonia's authorial hand in the production of dynamic and creative natural space exposes the prevailing partiality of her character, relentlessly underwritten by Jim's narration, as she assumes authorship in the medium of natural space. Jim describes the Cuzak home as nearly consumed by vegetation:

The roof was so steep that the eaves were not much above the forest of tall hollyhocks, now brown and in seed. Through July, *Ántonia* said, the house was buried in them... The front yard was enclosed by a thorny locust hedge, and at the gate grew two silvery, moth-like trees of the mimosa family. (164)

Cather's language in this passage prioritizes the growth and overpowering dominance of plant life as the eaves, the points which define the outlines of the house, are blurred by the growth of hollyhocks, suggesting dissolved boundaries between built and natural space and a realignment of power to both *Ántonia* and the land she is so often compared to. Jim reflects, "the Bohemians, I remembered, always planted hollyhocks" (164). This note suggests that it was likely *Ántonia*, acting upon the traditions of her Bohemian community, who planted the hollyhocks and welcomed their presence and assertiveness around the house. *Ántonia's* cultivator's authorship in

this space contextualizes the subsumption of the house as a deliberate choice in the creation of a bioregional fusion that sets built environments within, rather than against, natural spaces.

Ántonia's comment that the house is buried in hollyhocks in July communicates her intimate noticing of her surroundings, and the use of "buried" further emphasizes an imagery of human environments willingly consumed by and intertwined with persistent, grasping vegetation. With "buried" and "enclosed," Cather imparts the language of death into an image of human and plant life, subtly sketching the novel's shadowy underside into one of its concluding landscapes and emphasizing again the interplay between nature and humanity. The house, buried in hollyhocks and enclosed by thorny locusts, is portrayed as already subsumed by the earth and primed to complete the process of decomposition at a later date. It occupies the in-between space, not only of built and natural environments, but as it represents a pause in the process between the shiny newness of birth and its eventual collapse back into the earth.

In Ántonia's environmental imagination, land and woman merge their energies to create a safe retreat that, similarly to the fruit cellar, projects the womb onto the landscape—not as a means of exploiting the land's energies but in the creation of shelter and refuge. The smallest of the children enter the orchard "by a hole known only to themselves," reiterating the imagery of birth and foregrounding the orchard as a space, similar to the fruit cellar, that manifests the generativity and nascent life of Ántonia's womb (164). Apple orchards require years of care—they are projects of futurity dotted with episodes of failure—yet they endure for generations, retaining and replenishing the nutrients of the soil. Jim describes Ántonia's interaction with and personification of the trees: "Ántonia kept stopping to tell me about one tree and another. 'I love them as if they were people,' she said, rubbing her hand over the bark... 'I couldn't feel so tired that I wouldn't fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like

children” (165). *Ántonia*’s eager expressiveness and her assertion that she feels they are “people” or “children” reaffirms her environmentally aware mindset and her readiness to approach plant life not as an “other” but as an extension of self, especially so because she invested so much emotion and care into the growth of an apple orchard in an arid environment. *Ántonia*’s relationship with the trees aligns with Morton’s conceptualization of a “queer ecological ethics [which] might regard beings as people even when they aren’t people” (279). Jim describes a sense of deep peace in the orchard, “surrounded by a triple enclosure; the wire fence, then the hedge of thorny locusts, then the mulberry hedge which kept out the hot winds of summer and held fast to the protecting snows of winter” (165). This triple enclosure acts as a further example of *Ántonia*’s reliance on naturally-occurring solutions to the constraints of the environment. The orchard is represented as a space of refuge filtering reality into a dreamscape through an emphasis on light and sensory experience: “the orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup, and we could smell the ripe apples on the trees. The crabs hung on the branches as thick as beads on a string, purple-red, with a thin silvery glaze over them” (165). Cather emphasizes the glossy haze on the crabapples and the sun, concentrated and focused to brilliant brightness, constructing the space as a heightened representation of reality and superimposing the unreal beauty of fairytales and paradise. This scene has the potential to detach the final pages of the novel into Jim’s realm of perfect nostalgia, yet it is grounded by the presence of *Ántonia* who consistently resists reduction, her creative touch evident in the positioning of a grape-arbor over a bench. *Ántonia*’s life in the intervening years represents a layering of complex identity that resists Jim’s description of her as “a battered woman now, not a lovely girl” (170). In the in-between space, condensed to the breadth of a comma in this phrase, and the transition from “lovely” to “battered,” lies a wealth of lived experience—artistic choices made, the strain of

subsistence farming, ten children, and the planting of an infant apple orchard shielded by the native plants *Ántonia* has begun to know, growing in increments and invisibility beneath the face of the text.

Cather suggests a place for women in the narrative of westward expansion that embraces the possibilities of female land stewardship, including the opportunity for an empowering relationship between female cultivators and feminized land. In positioning *Ántonia* as a female cultivator of traditionally feminized colonized lands, Cather inserts a queer environmental relationship that subverts the heteronormative male cultivator of feminized land relationship. This land-and-woman relationship is comparatively reciprocal, retaining the violence of the settler colonial context, while also giving agency and voice to a systemically silenced *Ántonia*.

Ántonia and Cather enact a variation of the land-as-woman conceit that transforms the model to land-*and*-woman, initiating an environmentally crucial collaborative act that may benefit rather than degrade both participants. As *Ántonia* resists Jim's flattening of her dynamic arc into a worn out trope and recognizes the parallel between her own body and the body of the land, Cather suggests the potential in reclaiming a corrupted trope as generative and empowering for the bodies it implicates.

Jim's voice, and infatuation with a particular image of *Ántonia*, blankets the novel with a stubbornly singular perspective that is nevertheless undermined as nostalgia in its glamorization and glossing of complex events and characters. In centering recollections of his childhood and the prairie around *Ántonia*, Jim assigns her a control over the novel's aura that exceeds the silences of the narrative. The control Jim attempts to enforce over *Ántonia* mirrors the fundamentally controlling land relationship he practices in his career and in his desire for dissolution which is, ultimately, a desire to possess the land in its completeness. *My Ántonia*,

often lauded as a wholesome escape to pastoral simplicity, relentlessly reveals itself as an uneasy remembrance of settler colonial origins.

My Ántonia is, in many ways, a meditation on incompleteness and unknowability, lingering with the gaps in nostalgic musings, rewritten histories, and impossibly complex environmental systems. Cather's novel is fundamentally about what we as humans do—the stories we construct and the tropes we lean on—when we do not, or cannot, know something in its entirety. Within the novel, Jim strives to know and define both the environment and Ántonia, failing in both regards. This incomplete image of Ántonia, rendered from Jim's point of view, is likely the driving force behind the pilgrimage of Cather readers to Red Cloud, the prototype for Black Hawk, and the letters and homestead of Anna Sadilek Pavelka, Cather's childhood friend and the inspiration behind Ántonia. In Anna's homey letters in the National Willa Cather Center archive, she writes of potato salad and the health of her chickens, allowing a glimpse of a dynamic, animated woman, who was not Ántonia, but whose parallel life temporarily eases the frustration of accessing a woman who resists any attempt at definition.

Even in the novel's last effort at communication, it undermines itself, placing emphasis on what is incommunicable and incomplete. Cather ends the novel with the following line: "whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past," a statement that at one level reiterates Jim's nostalgia and his need to possess (179). In her choice of diction, however, Cather also centers what is lost, unknowable, and incomplete, beginning with what is "missed" and concluding with the "incommunicable" quality of the past. Possession, colonial and/or personal in character, is never quite absolute, just as the landscape is never quite pristine. Cather's construction of land as a sublime, valuable, and whole possession produces a gasping, unnerving silence around the rending violence of Indigenous erasure and

environmental degradation. *My Ántonia* refuses to settle its shifting narrative particles into clarity, yet their movement demonstrates the lasting potency of Cather's writing and its continued relevance in the era of climate change, a crisis that highlights the ongoing environmental effects of the settler colonial extractive right-to-possess mentality. Cather's realism lives in the characters and the land as they depart undefined and slippery to the last pages of *My Ántonia*, frustrating but true in their incomplete compositions.

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