My Ántonia is above all else a story of stories. It is a story of how we tell stories, and it is also a story of reading, of how we read the stories before us. On a grand scale, it tells the story of America's immigrants, the story of their settlement, their assimilation, their adaptation of colonial notions of the new frontier. More locally, My Ántonia tells the story of Midwest farming. Exploring agriculture both realistically and metaphorically, the novel tells the story of how certain kinds of "crops"—both vegetable and human—moved from east to west. In the novel's exploration of the interaction between the Midwestern landscape and the migrant and immigrant farmers who attempted to transplant their crops, it tells the story of how the land receives what is put into it and what harvests it yields to those attempting to work it. In its exploration of the interaction between the social landscape and those attempting to settle into it, the novel tells the story of how Americans received the tide of immigrants that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in this country.

In telling both stories, the novel suggests the possibility of a radical reconfiguration of the constructs of community characteristic of the time. Those constructs reflected a growing distrust of importation, a distrust represented in political nativism, and which culminated in the National Origins Act of 1924, which halted immigration from the Orient and restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe. In its complex pattern of stories set within small farming communities, Cather's novel argues
against such social and political constructs by subverting and ultimately deconstructing the entire notion of nativism, thereby reshaping the reader’s understanding of what constitutes a community.

Because the term *nativism* has necessarily social and political connotations, and because its parallel use in recent ecological restoration debates has gradually become just as politically charged, I want to look at this restructuring of the way we understand social communities in the way that ecologists look at paradigm shifts in plant community theory. In a dramatic example of the slippage between political and ecological nativism, Albert Seifert, a prominent German landscape architect, proposed in 1933 that Germany forbid the use of all non-native plants. In “Garden-Variety Xenophobia,” a 1997 excerpt from his chapter “The Mania for Native Plants in Nazi Germany,” published in the book *Concrete Jungle*, Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn points to Seifert’s 1933 proposal to “ban all that until now has pleased the heart of a gardener: everything high-bred, overfed, conspicuous, foreign,” as indication that the “native-plants ideology is highly political: its advocates sometimes connect the call for native plants with nationalistic and racist ideas about society.” Pointing to legal attempts to “purify” the landscapes that were made into the ‘40s, Wolschke-Bulmahn traces German landscape architects’ insistent identification of invasive plants with invaders, strangers, and competitors. German botanists used overt social analogies, comparing the fight against invasive plants to “the fight against Bolshevism,” arguing that with one, “our entire occidental culture is at stake,” while with the other, “the beauty of our home forest, is at stake” (21–22).

In such arguments, we need to recognize not simply the metaphorical possibilities of plants and the societies for which they might somehow “stand in,” but, more significantly, native versus exotic growth as it represents individual and national ways of thinking about what constitutes community. We see, as well, that ideas such as “natural” versus “artificial” and “introduced” factor into our construction of community and are often used interchangeably with terms such as “native” and “exotic.” In ecological theory, Nebraska ecologist Frederic Clements’s long-
standing view of plant communities as naturally organized and integrated units, a theory that emphasized the "individualistic concept" of vegetation association units, gave way to Henry Gleason's understanding of plant communities as constructs of human thought. In exploring Cather's texts in light of these theories, I do not suggest that Cather had any expertise in ecological theory beyond her open admiration for Edith Clements's botanical guides, *Flowers of Mountain and Plain* and *Rocky Mountain Wildflowers* (the latter written in collaboration with her husband), nor do I suggest that she studied Frederic Clements's theories, or those of Gleason. Instead, I suggest that the urge to conflate plants with humans is not a simple exercise in anthropomorphism; instead, it represents significant ways of thinking about how humans exist in their environment. Specifically, in Cather's *My Ántonia*, with its deeply layered analysis of the way a "native" like Jim Burden can tell the story of an "exotic" like Ántonia Shimerda, the potentially pejorative link made between exotic plants and peoples opens the possibility of a new way to view a problem with which many readers have grappled for a long time and which feminist criticism has yet to comfortably resolve: that is, why did Cather insist on constructing Ántonia through a male narrator, one who seems to use her for his own nostalgic purposes? Understanding the paradigm shift in community that Gleason articulated is at the heart of the reader's ability to see Ántonia as more than the sentimentalized Earth Mother figure of Jim Burden's account.

We must first look at Jim as both a storyteller and reader, for his is perhaps the most important story contained in the novel. Discussions of *My Ántonia* often center on the novel's difficult narrative structure, difficult in that the novel's male narrator "owns" Ántonia's narrative, constructing her in what seem to be highly "masculinist" terms. The novel opens with a three-page introductory section in which the narrator describes a summer day when she ended up crossing Iowa with her childhood friend, Jim Burden, now in a clearly unhappy marriage. Jim mentions to the narrator that he has been writing a book about Ántonia, a girl whom they both knew, and months after the train ride, at the narrator's request, Jim brings her the completed manuscript. Jim's gesture upon handing the portfolio to her, the way he takes back
his manuscript, frowns at it for a moment and then changes the title from Ántonia to My Ántonia, an act, the narrator observes, that “seemed to satisfy him,” suggests exactly how we might interpret the subsequent novel, told in Jim’s words, as no more than a now unhappy man’s vision of the Bohemian girl with whom he shared his happy childhood. Such male-centered construction echoes, for many critics, the problem with much of America’s literature about land. The American pastoral, as Annette Kolodny defined it, constructs the pioneer territory as “Eden, Paradise, the Golden Age, and the idyllic garden” all rolled into one. In literature, Kolodny argued, R. W. B. Lewis’s American Adam was able to achieve “a resurrection of the lost state of innocence that the adult abandons when he joins the world of competitive self-assertion” because “at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (6).

Thus, Cather’s narrator, Jim Burden, who meets Ántonia when she is a young, non-English-speaking immigrant, teaches her to speak and read English, and explains to her how to behave like a lady, is seen by many as simply another American Adam, one whose name appropriately suggests his role. He sees not Ántonia herself, but simply a feminine territory, one which he occasionally perceives as enough of a wilderness to need taming, but which eventually becomes an idyllic, pastoral, Golden Age, the “primal warmth” of a feminine landscape.

Jim’s construction of Ántonia is a relevant part of the novel, but not because of what it says about her. It is significant because of what it says about him, and the way he “reads” Ántonia, and because of what such a singularly constructed narrative says about storytelling as the art of constructing. Cather’s own art of storytelling is important here, as Susan Rosowski has already successfully argued. Reading Cather’s consistent subversions of storytelling traditions, Rosowski demonstrates in “Willa Cather’s Subverted Endings and Gendered Time” that Cather’s plots reject conventional ideas “of progress and mastery” thereby empowering “qualities traditionally restricted to women—feeling
and, particularly, the capacity for love" (73). Cather's particular methodology—subverting the conventional romance plot while at the same time including familiar ingredients of it—allows her to free those very conventions from culturally imposed restrictions. Rosowskia points to Niel Herbert, who, in A Lost Lady, continually attempts to impose his fictions upon Marian Forrester. His final abandonment of that attempt, a gesture he "tells" as one of resignation, is "another way in which Cather presented alternatives, [when] a character gives up the attempt to tell a story, or to order experience by linear time" (Rosowski 76). Rosowski thus allows readers to understand Niel's failure to maintain his rigid construction of Marian as a way to understand Marian's own resistance to the rigid cultural impositions that bound women.

Niel's failure and the subversive role it plays in the novel serve as significant clues to understanding his predecessor, Jim Burden. Along with his desire to construct stories in traditionally masculine, linear time, Jim shares with Niel Herbert a superficial desire to master the classics and an inability to either accept or wholly reject women who break the boundaries of conventional feminine construction. Both men represent a kind of limited thinking that Cather's novels suggest was prevalent in her own social order. In both, we see that the traditionally masculinist ordering of society simply will not fully encompass the complexities of the real world. Read in this light, Jim Burden's construction of Ántonia must be seen as both unacceptable and unavoidable. That is, as a young man trained to accept the masculinist ideology of his day, Jim would, even as he was in the process of growing up with her, "tell the story" of Ántonia in conventional terms. We, as readers, must be able to see that his story is too confining. His straining to make Ántonia fit into the story with which he is most familiar must be read in larger terms, then, as the conservative social attempt to "tell the story" of how women and minorities should behave in the new world.

The best way to accomplish such a reading is to begin with Jim, the frustrated Latin scholar who, alone in his room one night, believes he has found the answer to life when he is taught, by one of his professors, the third book of Virgil's The Georgics. "Optima dies . . . prima fugit," Jim sighs, believing at that moment that
Virgil has explained it all. But Jim does not fully understand the Latin he is reading in college. To see the extent of his miscomprehension, we must see *My Ántonia* not simply as a novel that includes a reference or makes an allusion to some Roman farming poetry by Virgil. For many years, critics noted Cather's familiarity with classical literature and brought in biographical material indicating Cather's early exposure to classical mythology and her later study of Latin at the Lincoln Latin School and the University of Nebraska. But not until quite recently have studies of Cather's work begun to indicate that there exists more than allusions or even mythological themes, especially in *My Ántonia*. "The single novel by Cather in which Virgil clearly informs the whole," Theodore Ziolkowski writes in *Virgil and the Moderns*, "is the one usually regarded as her masterpiece, *My Ántonia*" (150). Ziolkowski goes on to argue that in the novel, Cather makes an "elegiac *laudes Americae* and a Virgilian appeal for the preservation of agrarian values in the face of the encroaching industrialization that was everywhere evident in the United States" (150).

Ziolkowski's analysis of the role of *The Georgics* in *My Ántonia* points to the seasonal movement of both texts and the novel's evocation of Virgil's thesis in book 1, "*labor omnia vicit / imporbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas*" (Toil conquered all / obdurate toil, and unrelenting need). But, somehow, Ziolkowski can acknowledge that "Cather wants us to understand Virgil's works, and especially *The Georgics*, as the lens through which Burden organizes the material of his own experience into recognizable patterns" (152) without acknowledging the difficulty that lens poses for readers seeking an autonomous identity for Ántonia herself. Indeed, Ziolkowski never seems to see a difference between Ántonia and Jim's Ántonia, concluding his section on Cather with the claim that "For Cather, in sum, Ántonia represents the agrarian values that she imposed romantically on the Nebraskan landscape of her youth and whose loss she began to lament in the years following World War I, when modernization, with the ills accompanying its benefits, swept across America. And Virgil is the poet whose works epitomize the values of that idealized, traditional America" (112).

But it is not Cather reading Virgil. It is Jim Burden who, in or-
ganizing the material of his boyhood into his own opus, uses Virgil as a lens. One of the most significant and often overlooked factors in Jim’s reading of Virgil is the fact that it is filtered through his instructor, Gaston Cleric, who by Jim’s admission “narrowly missed being a great poet,” because “his bursts of imaginative talk were fatal to his poetic gift. He squandered too much in the heat of personal communication” (260). Cleric has introduced Jim to the traditional and masculine “world of ideas,” and Jim’s willingness to let “everything else [fade] for a time,” indicates the extent to which Cleric leads him and reads for him. Indeed, one of Jim’s most vivid memories is of Cleric’s explanation of “Dante’s veneration for Virgil.”

Cleric went through canto after canto of the “Comedia,” repeating the discourse between Dante and his “sweet teacher,” while his cigarette burned itself out unheeded between his long fingers. I can hear him now, speaking the lines of the poet Statius, who spoke for Dante: “I was famous on earth with the name which endures longest and honours most. The seeds of my ardour were the sparks from that divine flame whereby more than a thousand have kindled; I speak of the ‘Aeneid,’ mother to me and nurse to me in poetry.” (261–62)

It is through this multilayered approach that Jim Burden comes to Virgil: Cleric, translating Dante, who is at that point speaking through Statius.1 Released from centuries of purgation to complete his climb toward heaven, Statius acts as a guide for Dante, whose heaven is Beatrice. Thus, in the passage above, we find all the elements in place for Jim’s misreading of Virgil—and Ántonia; he associates fame on earth with the epic poetic tradition, particularly with a poetics of feminine idealization, the conversion of a woman into a divine property. Given Jim’s instruction, it’s not surprising that he reads Virgil similarly and that he would, ultimately, attempt to do the same with Ántonia.

In the next chapter, Jim is reading the third book of The Georgics, focusing on line 66, “optima dies . . . prima fugit,” or what he terms Virgil’s “melancholy reflection that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee” (263). Significantly, Jim
reads this line out of context and links it immediately with the opening lines of book 3. In doing so, he literally reads over the contextual meaning and superimposes onto Virgil’s lines his own understanding of melancholy, one that is strikingly similar to Cleric’s own story. In the 56 lines that separate the quote about the brief span of mortals’ lives and Virgil’s claims that he will be the first to bring the muse into his country, Virgil makes several poetic shifts, from his opening rumination on the state of Roman poetry, to his prediction that Caesar will be the greatest of all rulers, to his acknowledgment that the subject at hand is, after all, animal husbandry. It is at that point, while he is explaining the most appropriate age at which to mate a heifer, that he suddenly and without preparation makes the observation that for wretched mortals the best days of life are the first to flee; diseases come on, and sad old age, and the harshness of implacable death. The suddenness of the shift is further enhanced by the phrase miseris mortalibus, a construction alternately read as a dative case or ablative absolute. In either case, the grammar allows the meaning to “hang” there, provided with only a suggestive context by the sentence before it. That sentence claims that the farmer can provide himself with generation upon generation by breeding his stock carefully, making sure that the female is the right age and stature, and that the bulls are young and lusty. But in the sentence after, Virgil moves on to the bland observation that the farmer will always have some beasts he needs to exchange and encourages him to do it swiftly. The bookended observations—the young, lusty breeders, which promise generations of cattle, juxtaposed against those who need to be replaced—may be ironic, or may, more seriously, emphasize the brevity not of existence as a universal, poetic concept, but of useful existence—usefulness that Virgil has defined through metaphors of marriage, through an invocation of Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, and through his detailed description of the best years in a cow’s life for breeding.

Jim sees none of this, ironically, for despite his upbringing on a farm, he knows nothing of what Hamlet called “country matters.” Jim’s grandparents left the realities of farm life to the hired hands, just as the townspeople leave the sexual realities of courtship to “The Hired Girls,” not the town girls. Jim is one of
the vanishing breed of American men that characterizes so much of modernist literature. Like Quentin and Benjy Compson, like Jake Barnes, Jim has no procreative powers but words. Thus, he reads Virgil's line as homage to the immortalizing potential of poetry, the only generation he will ever breed.

Turning back to the early line, "Primus ego in patriam mecum ... deducam Musas," Jim remembers that Cleric had translated the context of patria to mean "the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse (but lately come to Italy from her cloudy Grecian mountains), not to the capital, the palatia Romana, but to his own little 'country'" (264). Jim goes on to reflect on Cleric's idea that when Virgil was dying, facing the "bitter fact that he was to leave the 'Aeneid' unfinished ... then his mind must have gone back to the perfect utterance of the 'Georgic,' where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow; and he must have said to himself, with the thankfulness of a good man, 'I was the first to bring the Muse into my country'" (264).

Ignoring for the moment that Cleric reinvents Virgil's meaning for the sake of romance, a romance that leaves his young students "conscious that we had been brushed by the wing of a great feeling," we need to look at Cleric's claim that Virgil was not boasting, for by all accounts he was, but probably not in a way that Jim Burden would understand. Jim has been thoroughly taken up by Cleric's Byronic vision of Virgil, a dying man humbly grateful that he will be immortalized by his singular act of bringing poetry home, in the same way that Jim Burden believes that his "creation" of Ántonia, his construction of her as an idealized, idyllic, and isolated example of how beautiful the prairie once was, will immortalize him. His biased reading reflects not only his instructor's melancholy interpretation but Jim's own hope of immortalizing himself, in misconceived Virgilian terms, through his homage to patria, the text titled Ántonia, which he hands over to his traveling companion, takes back, changes, appropriately, to My Ántonia, and then, ostensibly "with the thankfulness of a good man," thinks to himself, "'I was the first to bring the Muse into my country'" (264).
But *The Georgics* are not generally read as a single poet's swan song. They are a political conversation. The poem moves from book 1, which presents the problem of colonization and argues that the energy and ambition of an expanding nation threatens, potentially, to spread chaos, to book 2, which explores momentarily the idea that such energy might be contained in the rustic life, which represents contemplation, to book 3, which acknowledges that the very Golden Age quality that characterizes book 2 indicates the impossibility of that solution and that then goes on to suggest that the Romans will move beyond their own frontiers. In that movement, Gary Miles suggests, Virgil is claiming that "now rather than spreading chaos, they will reduce the entire world to order by bringing it under the single coherent command of their own nation and its unequaled leaders" (166). Finally, book 4, in its exploration of bees and retelling of the Orphic myth, confirms book 3 by acknowledging that the essential nature of a colony is to expand. Thus, the poem ends with an admonishment to keep one's eyes forward at the same time that it acknowledges the mistake of not learning from the past.

In such a detailed explication of Jim's reading of Virgil, I have hoped to show that the issue is not, as many have argued, whether or not Jim is an unreliable narrator. The novel insists on him as such, emphasizing his uninformed and superficial reading of a text on which he bases his vision of writing; and he is a writer. We are made to see he is unable to read correctly either Virgil or Ántonia. The issue, then, is what we are to make of Jim's patently biased reading, why it has been constructed into our understanding of the novel.

Certainly, the notion of a constructed identity is central to this novel. Biographical links to what we now call social constructionism suggest that Cather was acutely aware of the problems for the individual when social categories served as a means for others to perceive an individual's identity.

Cather's own experiment with transcending social identity began in 1888, when, according to Sharon O'Brien, "the fourteen-year-old Cather decided to become the hero of her own life story when she created the masculine persona she sustained for the next four years. Employing the transforming power of dress and
disguise, she distinguished herself from other Red Cloud girls by cropping her hair, donning boyish clothes, and naming herself 'William Cather, Jr.'" (96). O'Brien's description of Cather's experiment with identity comes in a chapter titled "Enter William Cather," with the appropriate epigraph, "I like to be like a man," from My Ántonia. The quote indicates the limitations Cather understood in gender constructions. The notion of being "like a man" is, for Ántonia, the notion of being meaningful in the world. When her father's suicide leaves her family facing potential economic ruin, Ántonia, who previously indicated some concern over how pleasing she was to Jim, can no longer be bothered with his opinion of her. "I can work like mans now," she tells him when he suggests she enroll in school with him. "School all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm" (123). And, the following season, when she has gone to work for Jim's grandmother, she indicates her preference for outdoor work, telling Jim "I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man" (138).

Inherent to the construction in both Cather's performance as William and Ántonia's appropriation of masculinity is the admission that men and women are defined by social attitudes. As O'Brien suggests in the following passage, appropriating the male standard is, essentially, accepting it as well:

In adopting a male persona Cather was being rebellious, theatrical, and bold, but she was not being particularly creative. To construct this alternate self she could only tap a cultural inventory of roles and selves; understandably, she was trapped by her contemporaries' polarization of gender traits and roles, the same dichotomy that [Louisa May] Alcott evinces when she referred to her adventurous self as her "boy's spirit." Other nineteenth-century women who donned male dress similarly were unable to transcend Victorian sex roles. Desiring the autonomy and freedom that it seemed only men possessed, such women decided to cross rather than to blur gender boundaries. (100)

But Cather did differ from writers such as George Sand. O'Brien locates the difference in small "feminine" touches of apparel,
which she reads as signs of gender transformation in the photographs Cather posed for during her years as William. "The ribbon, the ruffled blouse, and the scarf suggest the girl's desire to redefine rather than to reject female identity, to find a way to express the human possibilities her society divided between male and female" (O'Brien 101).

Nowhere are those possibilities more thoroughly opened to redefinition than in the prairie women of Cather's novel. In Alexandra Bergson and in Ántonia Shimerda, Cather created the literary equivalent of the ribbons and scarves in her portraits. In the harsh environment of a Nebraska farm, new definitions of meaningful work posed the opportunity for new definitions of meaningfulness, definitions that transcended the limitations of gender imposed by society. After exploring such possibilities in the life of Alexandra Bergson, Cather seems to have decided that she could most fully realize the complexities of social constraints in the story of Ántonia Shimerda, whose cultural ties, appearance, and accented English give her the kind of "exotic" status that allowed Cather to explore constructions of gender, class, and ethnicity, and to pose the possibility for transcendence of all three. In Ántonia, Cather analyzed on the grandest scale the issue of identity. Arguing openly against the notion of a natural system by which people might be grouped, Cather subverted the American notion of community by refusing to acknowledge identity as defined by one's gender, one's nationality, or one's social position. In doing so, she shifted the paradigm by which Americans knew community, for, in effect, she robbed them of their means of identifying it. Instead, Cather opens the possibility that one constructs one's own identity through the community into which one plants oneself. In My Ántonia, the practice of agriculture serves as the literal and metaphorical means by which one can establish oneself at a place and begin to construct a community-based identity.

My Ántonia opens in "summer, [the] season of intense heat," when the narrator is "crossing Iowa on the same train" as Jim Burden. "While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over
everything. The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things."

The passage goes on to indicate that the narrator and Jim share the experience of a childhood lived heavily in response to agriculture:

We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as a sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry.

The "freemasonry" to which the narrator refers at the end of the passage suggests both the general definition of the word, "a natural sympathy and understanding among persons with like experiences," and the practices associated with the guild of Freemasons, a society founded to recognize the skilled itinerant mason who was free to move from town to town without restraint by local guilds. Thus, the opening passage is critical. It works to establish the heavy influence of the land on those who live in response to it, an influence that associates them in a way that others, who do not share the experience, cannot understand, and it suggests the possibility that an identity constructed in that way functions beyond the place at which it is established. The itinerant nature of the Freemason, and Cather's insistence on using the term, argues for membership in a community whose boundaries are not rigidly defined by place, but whose identity comes from place. This flexible notion of place-based community is the central principle of *My Ántonia*, for it explains how immigrants and migrants, the two protagonists of the novel, as represented by Jim and Ántonia, are able to establish a sense of identity. The novel refuses to accept the principle of a closed community system, one which is inherent to the place; instead, it acknowledges the ongoing reconfiguration of community in a country where
all the inhabitants were at one point immigrants and where, as Joseph Urgo argues in *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, “migration is paradoxically the keystone of American existence, and migrants gather paradoxes as they move from one ‘permanent’ residence to the next” (13).

Cather’s understanding that “those who have not moved are the exceptional ones” (12) informs her understanding of community boundaries as shifting. Subsequently, the ability to “switch behavior according to context,” is, in Cather, “a habit of mind crucial for anyone who possessed the culture Cather projects” (Urgo 68). Keeping out the “exotics” is impossible because American communities are made up of different levels of exotics. Political nativism, a popular response to the influx of immigrants at the time, is also impossible in this paradigm, for all communities become constructed. Thus, while it is obvious that some people settled in America before others, the notion that any people inherently “belong” to a place—the notion that we use to construct meaningful communities—no longer exists. The biotic equivalent of this argument comes at the novel’s end, when Jim has returned to Black Hawk after visiting Ántonia and her family. He finds himself disappointed with town and left at loose ends. He takes “a long walk north of the town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks” (370). Out there, he feels “at home again.” But the land he sees is not as it was in “early times,” for Jim’s view encompasses both native and exotic plants, the weeds and agricultural crops that make the place seem home to him. “To the south I could see the dun-shaded river bluffs that used to look so big to me, and all about stretched drying cornfields, of the pale-gold colour, I remembered so well. Russian thistles were blowing across the uplands and piling against the wire fences like barricades. Along the cattle-paths the plumes of goldenrod were already fading into sun-warmed velvet, grey with gold threads in it” (370).

In the plant world, the edges have blurred. As Michael Barbour writes in “Ecological Fragmentation in the Fifties,” “prior
to the 1950s nature was simplistic and deterministic; after the 1950s nature became complex, fuzzy edged, and probabilistic" (233). Barbour’s essay explains the paradigm shift that occurred in ecological thinking when Henry Gleason challenged Frederick Clements’s definition of biotic interdependency: “Clements argued that groups of species living together in a given habitat were highly organized into natural, integrated units called communities. Gleason countered that such communities were only constructs of human thought and that in reality the distribution and behavior of every species were unbounded by imagined holistic bonds to all the surrounding species” (234). In terms which could so easily apply to Cather’s own view of human communities as constructed, rather than inherent, Barbour explains the major shift in thinking that occurred. Describing the Clementsian landscape as one that looks like a “simple, harmonious patchwork pattern,” Barbour explains that “the central tenet of the association-unit paradigm is that plant communities are objective reality. That is, plant species are organized into natural, recognizable units of vegetation called formations, association, or communities, and these entities are steady-state balance points in nature that exhibit stability and constancy over time” (236).

Gleason’s theory of vegetation, which he published in 1917 and again in 1926 and 1939, argues that “formations and associations are not real, natural units; they are merely artifacts and human constructs or abstractions” (237). Instead of groups of species that “rise and fall in abundance synchronously across the landscape,” Gleason theorized that “each species spreads out as an independent entity, individually distributed according to its own genetic, physiological, and life-cycle characteristics and according to its way of relating both to the physical environment and to other species” (237).

The “revolution” that Barbour cites as occurring by 1960, when “the majority of ecologists had shifted their opinion of the community from Clements’s view to Gleason’s” (234) was already underway in My Ántonia. Gleason’s argument that plants group according to their way “of relating both to the physical environment and to other species” is Cather’s argument about
people. The novel’s many stories tell us that one’s perspective—the means by which we perceive what is before us—changes with each teller of the same story, just as each person reading the story will read something new or different in that story with each reading. Jim’s closing reading of the land and its diversity of plants argues for an acknowledgment that configuration, and reconfiguration, of community lies in the eye, so to speak, of the beholder. At the core of that perspective is “the stretched drying cornfield,” the crop so much a part of both Cather’s agricultural novels, O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. Farming, which requires the farmer to read a landscape and visualize a story on it, serves for Cather as a literal means to establish identity while at the same time it serves, as it did in Virgil’s Georgics, as a metaphor for a new vision of the land, a vision that relies on new formations of community, formations based on transplanting and cross-breeding. Farming serves as the perfect metaphor to explain how the intersection of people and place contains both stasis and change, past and future. The farmer’s understanding of the land includes an awareness of what the land has “traditionally” been able to grow and a vision of what it will grow in the future. Thus, the farmer must see the land as it was, is, and may be.

Cather’s successful farmers have that vision. Alexandra Bergson, the successful farmer of O Pioneers! whose father bequeaths the management of the farm not to her brothers, but to her, understands that her life is “all made up of weather and crops and cows” (131). She tells Carl Linstrum that “the land did it...it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still” (116); but Alexandra has aggressively pursued innovative planting methods, planted new types of crops, and bought new land. “A pioneer should have an imagination,” she knows, “should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (48). Even Jim Burden’s grandfather has a forward-looking vision that marks him as a successful farmer: Jim notes that “it took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather’s to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas’ cornfields, or Mr. Bushy’s, but the world’s cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great eco-
nomic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war” (137). The difference between Alexandra’s vision and Jim’s grandfather’s is the difference between O Pioneers! and My Ántonia; his vision represents an understanding that farming is a process of changing the way we look at, and understand, the land. The new understanding of agri-political boundaries, the enlargement of the local cornfields into “the world’s cornfields,” is parallel to the new understanding of social boundaries for which My Ántonia argues. Nebraska’s “crop” of dwellers is also the world’s, and its “yield” provides us with a way to read and understand Ántonia herself. Her life as a farmer has established her ability to produce and to reproduce. If her agricultural crops represent a new understanding of farming, her children, American citizens who speak the “mother tongue” of two mother countries, will challenge the notion of community even more than she was able to do.

The argument in My Ántonia that one’s identity is constructed by the community into which one plants oneself, comes to fruition in Ántonia herself, the character who does the best “job” of establishing herself at a place and beginning to construct identity in relation to that place. Throughout the novel, Ántonia has been learning to farm successfully. The fact that Jim, who cares little for farming, does not emphasize or admire her skills, does not mean she is without them. When Jim asks Ántonia if she would like to go to school with him, she tells him, “School all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (123). In a later conversation with Jim about the pregnant and unwed Ántonia’s return home, Widow Steavens says, “The next time I saw Ántonia [she] was out in the fields ploughing corn” (314). According to the widow, even while pregnant, Ántonia harvested, threshed, and herded cattle so well that her family did not hire a man to help out on the farm. Barely twenty-four when Jim first returns to see her, Ántonia already knows her identity. She tells Jim that in the city, “I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly.” And twenty years later, when Jim returns, the facts of Ántonia’s abilities speak for themselves. Her farmhouse is “set back on a swell of land,” next to which is a barn and “an ash grove, and cattle
yards in front that sloped down to the highroad." (329). Teeming with life—ducks, cats, but mostly with children—Antonia's farm is thriving because she is a successful farmer, a woman who has spent her whole life learning the process of agriculture and can now successfully grow and farm. Although Jim frequently wanted what he would define as "more" for Antonia, her "special mission" is fulfilled in Nebraska. At the novel's end, Antonia tells Jim, "I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here" (343). Significantly, Antonia, the "exotic" who has come from another country, has more successfully established herself than any of the Burdens.

Antonia is certainly a fertile woman, but that fertility does not constrict her to the kind of representative "Earth Mother" so much of American Western literature constructs—that is, not unless we allow our reading of her to be limited to Jim Burden's reading of her. As an American hero, he is ambivalent about much of what is "American" in his life, and strong arguments have been made for reading his interpretation of Antonia in exactly the kind of worrisome terms that feminist criticism outlines when it suggests the psychoanalytic process by which pioneers came to terms with their need to conquer and colonize a wilderness they wanted to be nurtured by while simultaneously raping.

Jim's is indeed a masculinist reading of Antonia. He is throughout the novel unable to see her fertility as a strength or her strength as an asset. As a boy he was nearly obsessed with delimiting her; in town, her insistence on an open sensuality, evidenced by her love of dancing, rankles him in the way that Marian Forrester's open sexuality and refusal to stay within the limits of lady-like behavior grates at Niel Herbert. Both men spend years trying to fit either woman into the context of the manuscript of their own lives. And it is precisely their inability to do that that makes it such a huge mistake for readers to see Antonia only as Jim does (or Marian only as Niel does), for such a reading ignores, in Jim's case, the novel's clear indications that we are to understand the limitations of Jim's reading of Antonia. Readers are meant to
see how poorly skilled Jim is as a reader of literature, of people, and also of the time in which he lives, a time marked by shifting social boundaries and new means of constructing identity. Understanding Ántonia through our understanding of Jim Burden’s limitations is the only way to fully appreciate the complexity of My Ántonia, a novel rich with social analysis and optimism for a new understanding of the term American.

NOTE

1. Even here, Jim's understanding of the material is suspect. Cleric has in his explication approached the poet and the speaker of the poem as one and the same, a conflation already under question by the time of Cather's writing. The separation of poet from speaker was suggested in Ezra Pound's 1909 Personae and would become a formally articulated theory only a year after My Ántonia, in Eliot's 1919 "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

WORKS CITED

