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THE QUEST FOR WHITENESS IN WILLA CATHER'S *MY ÁNTONIA* (1918) AND HENRY ROTH'S *CALL IT SLEEP* (1934)

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ABSTRACT. *The aim of this paper is to trace the assimilation process of European immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century in Willa Cather's* My Ántonia *(1918) and Henry Roth's* Call It Sleep *(1934). Bearing in mind the historical relevance of race and whiteness in the United States, I analyse the changes performed by Cather's and Roth's protagonists in order to achieve the status of white. To this purpose, I provide a brief overview of the nature of whiteness in the United States and its epistemological changes to account for its importance within the novels. I then look at the transformations characters perform in terms of religious faith and gender norms, as well as their interaction with English and spaces to become integrated in the new land. In doing so, differences between the novels arise, but so does a subtext of violence common to the immigrant experience.*

Keywords: Whiteness, race, assimilation, migrant literature, Willa Cather, Henry Roth.

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LA LUCHA POR LA IDENTIDAD BLANCA EN *MY ÁNTONIA* (1918), DE WILLA CATHER, Y *CALL IT SLEEP* (1934), DE HENRY ROTH

RESUMEN. *El objetivo de este artículo es trazar el proceso de asimilación de los inmigrantes europeos a su llegada a Estados Unidos a comienzos del siglo XX a través de* My Ántonia *(1918), de Willa Cather, y* Call It Sleep *(1934), de Henry Roth. Dada la importancia histórica de conceptos como raza e identidad blanca en Estados Unidos, analizamos las transformaciones que los protagonistas de ambas novelas llevan a cabo para lograr el estatus de blancos. Partiendo del concepto de identidad blanca en Estados Unidos y los cambios epistemológicos que experimenta, señalamos las transformaciones de los personajes en lo que respecta a la religión y los roles de género, así como su interacción con la lengua inglesa y los espacios en aras a lograr dicha integración en el nuevo mundo. Un análisis de esta índole destaca las diferencias entre las novelas, pero también el subtexto de violencia común a la experiencia del inmigrante.*

Palabras clave: identidad blanca, raza, asimilación, literatura migrante, Willa Cather, Henry Roth.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is possible to argue that the notion of whiteness has been key in the larger socio-political context of the United States. Not only does it link from its origins to a history of domination and privileges that date to colonial times (Jacobson 1998: 4), but it has also been subject to political interests and epistemological changes throughout history.

Although the 1790s Naturalization Law granted citizenship to "any alien, being a free white person", the waves of European immigrants arriving between 1840 and 1920 to the New World will lead to a reconsideration and complication of the term. Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) provides a valuable insight into the transformations undergone by the concept of whiteness in the scientific discourse throughout the 19th and early 20th century. As shown by Jacobson, such texts aimed at a further differentiation among races, but also within the white race, paying attention to colour, as well as facial angle or head size and shape to support their arguments.[2] Underlying

2 These texts often assumed a link between physical and moral traits, as seen in Samuel Morton's *Cranea Americana* (1839), where Caucasians are regarded as the most intelligent race: "[…] characterized by a naturally fair skin, susceptible of every tint; hair fine, long and curling, and of various colors. The skull is large and oval, and its anterior portion full and elevated. […] This race is distinguished for the facility with which it attains the highest intellectual endowments" (5).

this racialist, pseudo-scientific discourse lies a sense of difference connected to cultural assets such as religion: while those referred to as white in the 1790s Naturalization Law were Protestant, the first wave of immigrants who arrived in the 1840s in the United States were Irish Catholics. In other words, Protestantism granted individuals the independence and self-reliance to read and interpret, endowing them with the ability of self-government; Catholicism, on the other hand, did not.

Nonetheless, the shift in the immigrants' origins at the end of the century will lead to a further redefinition of whiteness, with Irish Catholics becoming whit*er* against the background of Chinese migration in the 1870s and Eastern and Southern Europeans at the turn of the 20th century. The inferiority of the newly arrived will be echoed, once again, in the scientific discourse of the period. For instance, John R. Commons stresses the link between religion and self-governance, as well as social class, to support such claims:

> But the peasants of Europe, especially of Southern and Eastern Europe, have been reduced to the qualities similar to those of an inferior race that favor despotism and oligarchy rather than democracy. […] Thus it is that the peasants of Catholic Europe, who constitute the bulk of our immigration of the past thirty years, have become almost a distinct race, drained of those superior qualities which are the foundation of democratic institutions. (1907: 11-12)

However, despite Nativists' and Eugenics' claim at the time "that Southern European, Semitic and Slavic immigrants held as *poor* a claim to the color 'white' as the Japanese" (Jacobson 1998: 77), the concept of race will undergo an epistemological change during the first two decades of the 20th century. In this sense, Franz Boas' *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1911) could be seen as representative of a new trend which points towards the destruction of race as a biological, unflappable concept by showing the transformations in the bodies of immigrants and their children:

> […] the bodily traits which have been observed to undergo a change under American environment belong to those characteristics of the human body which are considered the most stable. We are therefore compelled to draw the conclusion that if these traits change under the influence of environment, presumably none of the characteristics of the human types that come to America remain stable. The adaptability of the immigrant seems to be very much greater than we had a right to suppose before our investigations were instituted. (Boas 1911: 2)

Race will go in this period from being a biological category to comprehending a set of cultural and social traits (Frankenberg 1993: 13), and in the years following 1924's Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, the issue of whiteness will decay.

Yet, even if the Golden Door is gradually opened to different groups, upon their arrival in the United States, immigrants are forced to undergo certain changes to become part of this new society. In this sense, the literature of immigration is fraught with examples of such transformations.[3] In this paper I analyse the construction of and quest for whiteness in two novels on European immigration to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century: Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) and Henry Roth's modernist masterpiece, *Call It Sleep* (1934). Cather's novel depicts the journey of the Shimerdas, a Bohemian family that moves to Nebraska at the end of the 19th century. As well as documenting extensively the challenges in the life of frontiersmen and women (John 2019: 187), the text records Ántonia's transformation and coming of age. Yet, readers never get direct access to the girl's stream of thoughts, for they are always filtered through the hegemonic voice of her friend, Jim Burden, a white Anglo-Saxon boy. Meanwhile, Roth's work follows the first steps of the Schearls in the New World, a Jewish-Galician family that settles in New York at the beginning of the 20th century. Narrated from the perspective of David, an immigrant boy, this novel is at once a psychological exploration of how a child's identity is reshaped in this new environment.

These novels are the perfect example of the richness and diversity of migrant literature, given the disparity in the origin and cultural background of the characters –and their authors–, as well as the difference in the setting of the novels. In fact, the journey portrayed in each of them could not differ more from one another. Cather's work stresses the difficulties of new settlers on the West and the frontier. Due to that, a large portion of the research on *My Ántonia* has focused on the relationship between immigrants and the construction of an American national identity (see Tellefsen 1999; Goggans 2003; Brown 2005), as well as on its female protagonist and her intersectionality, that is, Ántonia's disadvantageous position because of her gender and ethnicity (see Wussow 1995; Irving 2000; Hoffmann 2002). Roth's novel, on the other hand, leaves testimony of the experiences Irish, Italians and Jews might have had in urban spaces at the beginning of the century. In the city, familial unity is opposed to material improvement, and alienation and anonymity become a continuous threat (see Abramson 1982; Maior 2017: 113). One of the aspects that has caught the attention of scholars is Roth's portrayal of the immigrant Jewish urban experience (Walden 1984; Adams 1989; Wirth-Nesher 1995; Rosenbloom 1998; Maior 2017). In this regard, many studies have delved into the use of language in the novel (Diamant 1986; Wirth-Nesher 1990, Wirth-Nesher

3 While Edward A. Abramson's article (1982) highlights the importance of Scandinavians, Germans, Irish, Italians and immigrants from Eastern or Middle Europe as the biggest migratory groups at the turn of the century, Dorothea Schneider (2003) adds Chinese and Japanese to the former, noting how they have also left "a relatively rich trail of documents and a literature that dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century".

2003) and into the employment of Modernist techniques to narrate such processes (Altenbernd 1989; Capell 2007; Zuckerstatter 2021).

Thus, there is no denying that the immigrant question lies at the centre of Cather's and Roth's novels. Despite their differences, both narratives depict the problems of adaptation and assimilation inherent to the immigrant experience. They both shed light on a context of general distress due to mass migration (Tsank 2018: 39), marked by the transition from one concept of race to another, and from one view on whiteness to another. The pioneers, as well as the immigrants in the city, are in a quest for success, but the looming threat of failure remains. Therefore, in both environments there is a tangible existence of dreams, courage, but also hostility, a frontier of a different nature in each case. This dichotomy is further enlarged by the ambivalent feelings towards assimilation or Americanization, for it comes with the price of losing one's own culture and language.

In the upcoming pages I will delve into the most notable transformations characters in the novels undergo for the sake of adaptation. These works have been studied against the background of mass migration and the national anxiety it caused during the first decades of the 20th century. However, neither *My Ántonia* nor *Call It Sleep* have been directly linked to the notion of whiteness. By addressing issues concerning religion, gender roles, language use and spaces in these novels, it is possible to demonstrate that the concept of whiteness lies at the core of the changes performed by characters in both narratives. Whether it is in the secluded, half-tamed landscape of Nebraska or on the streets of an overpopulated, increasingly industrialised New York, all immigrants must experience the same transformations to attain whiteness and the privileges attached to this concept. Additionally, in analysing how characters interact with their environment, it is possible to see their increasing assimilation, but also their impact on their surroundings, uncovering the multiculturality of America. Finally, in drawing a comparison between these works, I will expose the different models of assimilation proposed by each author.

2. THE ABANDONMENT OF RELIGIOUS FAITH

Although the period compressed between 1901 and 1920 constitutes a new era in the United States, two out of five American residents were still in political or social disadvantage due to ethnical or racial matters at the time (Heinze 2003: 132). As mentioned above, one of the most salient traits of immigrants was their religious faith (see Alba and Nee 2003: 282). With the question of identity at its core, immigrants clung to traditional beliefs and faith in an attempt to preserve

a solid cultural identity against the background of constant change (Hirschman 2004: 1211).

In the case of *Call It Sleep*, cultural practices connected to religion such as the "parents' desire to keep a kosher house or to send their children for religious instruction […] and celebrating Jewish holidays" (Frankenberg 1993: 217) are present in the novel. Their aim is to maintain a sense of Jewish identity. David, the narrator and child of the family, even attends cheder in order to learn "what it means to be a Jew" (Roth 2006: 207), reaffirming his identity outside the normative margins of American society.

However, even if spatially there is a Jewish community that remains cohesive in the Lower East Side, once the protagonist leaves his neighbourhood, Judaism works as a constant reminder of David's otherness and non-whiteness, alienating him. His exclusion is evidenced at the police station,[4] when American teenagers confront him,[5] or when he meets Leo: "'Davy. David Schearl.' 'My name's Leo Dugovka. I'm a Polish-American. You're a Jew, ain'tcha?'" (Roth 2006: 299). David's friendship with Leo can be considered the starting point for his assimilation, as it is his first contact with the white community. Despite being Polish and Catholic, just like Irish people against the background of slavery (Jacobson 1998: 44), Leo is constructed as white in opposition to David: "Leo belonged to a rarer, bolder, carefree world" (Roth 2006: 302). Yet, the fact that his mother works as a cleaner in a bank denotes the hierarchical structure of whiteness, where Leo and his mother stand at the bottom. Though low, Leo's position within the hierarchy of whiteness entitles him to instruct David: "'Crosses is holy […] All of 'em. Christ our Saviour, died on one o' dem.' 'Oh! (*Saviour! What?*) I didn' know'" (Roth 2006: 301).

The narrator's friendship with Leo sets his process of acculturation in motion, with David being willing to give up his community and his faith for the sake of being accepted and acknowledged by his new friend. Not only does he let him mock Jewish customs,[6] but he will go as far as to sacrifice his cousin Esther for a rosary: "'Shut up! I ain't! So if he gets her – down there – what? What'll do? I'll ask. Just ask, that's all. I'll say, give it to me, them lucky beads, c'mon! You said you would before. And now he'll give it to me. Has to.'" (Roth 2006: 345).

4 "'[…] Barhdee Street! Sure Barhdee! That's near Parker and Oriol – Alex's beat, Ain't that it?' 'Y'yes.' Hope stirred faintly. The other names sounded familiar. 'Boddeh Stritt.' 'Barhdee Street!' The helmeted one barked good-naturedly. 'Be-gob, he'll be havin' me talk like a Jew. Sure!'" (Roth 2006: 99)

5 "'W'ere d'yiz live?' 'Dere.' He could see the very windows of his own floor. 'Dat house on nint' stritt. My mudder's gonna look oud righd away.' […] 'Dat's a sheeney block, Pedey', prompted the second freckled lieutenant with ominous eagerness. 'Yea. Yer a Jew aintchiz?'" (Roth 2006: 246)

6 "David had described the 'Tzitzos' that some Jewish boys wore under their shirts, and the 'Tfilin', the little leather boxes, he had seen men strap around their arms and brows in the synagogue– had described them, hoping that Leo would laugh. He did." (Roth 2006: 302)

The relinquishing of religious faith takes place in *My Ántonia* too. While the Shimerdas are Catholic, Jim Burden, the narrator and Ántonia's friend, is Protestant. In the text, his family is portrayed as the epitome of whiteness; Mr. Burden is even described as physically white, with "snow-white beard", "bright blue" eyes, "white and regular" teeth, as well as being further characterised by "deliberateness and personal dignity" (Cather 1988: 11-12). Matching these physical and moral traits, he is also a religious man who "put on silver-rimmed spectacles and read several Psalms" (Cather 1988: 13). This character is therefore constructed under racialist ideas embodying the so-called attributes for "self-government" that supposedly characterise Protestants. In this context, the Shimerdas' Catholicism stands as a reminder of their otherness and will be diminished by the other characters. Thus, when Mr. Shimerda kneels down, crossing himself, before the Christmas tree (Cather 1988: 87), the imagery suggested is counteracted by Mr. Burden, who "bowed his venerable head, thus Protestantizing the atmosphere" (Cather 1988: 87). In fact, Mr. Shimerda's death early on in the novel entails to a certain extent the removal of Catholicism from the text. Having committed suicide, Ántonia's father cannot be buried either in the Catholic or the Norwegian cemetery. Instead, he is buried in a future cross-road of two paths, which do not intersect, as the narrator points out, "so that the grave [...] was like a little island" (Cather 1988: 119), forever excluded from America (Tellefsen 1999: 240). Even his burial is Protestantised by Mr. Burden's prayer as well as Fuchs' hymn (Cather 1988: 117-118). From this point onwards, Catholicism becomes virtually non-existent in the novel, constituting the first step in Ántonia's path towards assimilation.[7]

The First Amendment of the American Constitution that guarantees religious freedom is thus broken by its citizens in the novels. Bearing in mind the role of religious faith as a means for cohesion, the fact that it loses its relevance in the novels seems to point at the characters' estrangement from their roots, which appears to be a *sine qua non* condition for assimilation.

3. GENDER ROLES IN THE NOVELS

The process of acculturation entails not only the abandonment of certain cultural traits, but also the acquisition of new ones, including the language, norms and values of the new society (Berry 2013: 47). Cather's and Roth's protagonists will not only have to learn new social norms, but also memorise and enact them (Berry 2013: 47). This particular aspect is exemplified in the novels in the way

7 In a symbolic key, the death of Ántonia's father illustrates the consequences of not adjusting to the new society, for he seems to be "completely lost in this rough new country, lives in the past, having lost the will to adjust, and ends by committing suicide" (Daiches 1951: 46)

they adjust their actions according to gender roles. Because of the publication date of the novels, the 19th-century ideal of the angel in the house (see Hartnell 1966) intersects with capitalism in both texts, leading to different images of womanhood.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather's protagonist seems to adhere to a more traditional view of womanhood. She begins early on in the novel helping Mrs. Burden; she "learn[s] about cooking and housekeeping" (Cather 1988: 31). During her period in Black Hawk, Ántonia will take after Mrs. Burden and Mrs. Harling. In fact, the latter is convinced that, despite the protagonist's rough manners, "[she] can bring something out of that girl. She's barely seventeen, not too old to learn new ways" (Cather 1988: 153).

In contrast to Ántonia, Lena Lingard portrays a more modern type of woman. Her experiences and hardships as a child due to poverty and isolation determine a different path for her. She will take advantage of the capitalist system to climb up the social ladder: her choice of setting up her own business contrasts Ántonia's domestic farm-life at the end of the novel; but her refusal to marry constitutes furthermore a rebellion against gender expectations and women's position within the patriarchal society:

> Well, it's mainly because I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers, even the wild ones. They begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to nobody. (Cather 1988: 291)

This "self-made woman" is by no means exempt from criticism. On the contrary, she is going to be rejected due to the prevalence of traditional gender norms. In this regard, immigrant women are going to be subject to general disapproval. Against the background of Black Hawk women, who "had a confident, unenquiring belief that they were 'refined', the country girls who 'worked out' were not" (Cather 1988: 199). Instead, the hired girls –as people call them– "have a reputation for being free and easy" (Cather 1988: 207). Paradoxically enough, even if Ántonia disapproves of Lena's lifestyle, in being herself a working-class immigrant too, she is part of the group that is rejected by the wider society.

Nevertheless, it is core to remember that this narrative is told from Jim Burden's perspective. His depiction of Ántonia as a woman who adheres to a more traditional view of womanhood could be read, in Goggans words, as "the conservative social attempt to 'tell the story' of how women and minorities should behave in the new world" (2003: 157). In fact, Jim's view is contested by the protagonist herself. Just like Lena's life choices, Ántonia's decisions pose a

challenge to traditional gender norms. For example, going dancing despite the reputation she might earn, or not being brought down when she gets pregnant by Larry Donovan. The prejudices held against immigrant women hide the fact that these characters bring a breeze of fresh air into Black Hawk. Because of that, they "[are] considered a menace to the social order" (Cather 1988: 20), for they remind American society that the Other exists and is intrinsic to America (Tellefsen 1999: 233-234).

Despite choosing different paths, it is undeniable that both Ántonia and Lena undergo a process of acculturation once they enter and settle into the new society. Drawing on the psychological notions of process, competence and performance, John W. Berry (2013) applies these terms to the process of integration carried out by immigrants and notes the relevance of the cognitive tasks of learning and memorising. To adapt themselves, immigrants must acquire cultural features of the new society, such as language, norms or values and retain those new traits. Conversely, the opposite experience to memorising – shedding or forgetting – is part of the integration process as well, "in which some […] features are selectively cast aside, often after a period of nonuse in the new society" (Berry 2013: 47). Ántonia seems to partake of this dual experience. While acquiring new traits, she also forgets older ones, such as Catholicism. Although there remains the possibility that she does not forget her religious faith – this information could simply be omitted by the narrator – it is clear that any reference to Catholic religion is obliterated from the text after Mr. Shimerda's death.

But Berry's notion of forgetting or shedding could be made extensible to the entire immigrant experience as portrayed by Cather in her novel. It is possible that America wants these girls to *forget* the poverty and hardships they have endured upon their arrival to succeed in the New World. Integration can only happen at the expense of forgetting the dim side of their experience. Mrs. Burden is first in stating this: "You'll have a better house after a while, Ántonia, and then you will *forget* these hard times" (Cather 1988: 75 my emphasis); and so does Mrs. Harling: "The girl will be happy here, and she'll *forget* those things" (Cather 1988: 154 my emphasis).

In *Call It Sleep* it is also possible to discern two different models of femininity. While Genya, David's mother, represents a more traditional ideal of femininity, Bertha, the protagonists' aunt, has several jobs outside the house. The latter is furthermore the case of a woman entering the consumerist society and taking part in the cult of beauty: "Bless is the Golden land […] Such beautiful things to wear" (Roth 2006: 153). In buying new clothes, using make up or going to the dentist, she participates in everyday activities in the new society.

Gender and capitalism are further intertwined in the modernist novel. It is worth exploring how David interacts with these social norms, for it is from his androcentric perspective that events are presented. Unlike Cather's narrator, Jim – who is a member of the white American community –, David is undergoing a process of acculturation and integration, just like Ántonia and Lena. This process becomes conspicuous in the way that he commodifies women. Even if Genya fits into the image of the angel in the house, the fact that she is always described by David as performing some type of chore shows a correlation between his mindset and the utilitarian image of women created by American capitalism. This objectification will culminate in David symbolically engaging in this system of exchanges. The protagonist will go as far as to trade his cousin for a rosary, as already mentioned in the previous section.

The rise of ethnicity in conjunction with the transformations these characters undergo in terms of religion and gender expectations show how American society impacts on immigrants upon their arrival to the New World. Moreover, these changes unveil how the characters must fight layers of otherness in different ways. In the case of religion, it is something they will get rid of, shedding in the case of David, forgetting in the case of Ántonia. As far as gender roles are concerned, characters seem to mould themselves and perform changes based on the models provided and according to the capitalist system. Hence, these novels could be read as "a document of cultural passage" (Wirth-Nesher 1995: 390). It is yet to determine whether American white society will enable cultural pluralism or force a choice between the characters' two cultures.

4. THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH IN THE NOVELS

In the early decades of the 1900s, for the Americanization Movement teaching English included "English and civics, along with the ideas about the 'American way of life'" (Ullman 2010: 5). At the period when Cather and Roth write their novels, traits of foreignness in speech were regarded negatively. According to Zuckerstatter: "Numerous manuals on correct diction were published in order to remedy, or purify, the corrupted and polluted ethnic traces […] found in the immigrant's use of English" (2021: 181). Far from being a sheer linguistic practice, language permits individuals to negotiate new positions for themselves within society (Norton and Toohey 2011: 418). Bearing these aspects in mind, it is worth analysing the effects and implications of learning English in the novels.

Language acquisition and removing traces of native speech such as accent manifest the immigrants' yearnings for assimilation and will distinguish first- from second-generation immigrants (Wirth-Nesher 2003: 111). While Albert and Bertha's

speech in *Call It Sleep* is marked by traits of foreignness, and Genya never learns English at all, there is an evolution in David's command of the language. From speaking exclusively Yiddish, he then learns enough for his mother to tell him that "[his] Yiddish is more than one-half English" (Roth 2006: 118). English is furthermore the language David employs to communicate with other children:

> 'Don't be offended with me, Yussie.' In the blank immobility of her face, a bare mechanical smile stirred her lips. 'Go on. Speak further if you like.' 'Yea.' Impatiently Yussie summarized his narrative, not bothered to switch tongue. 'I wuz tellin' him about a fiyuh' crecker wod a boy wuz holdin' an' id wen' bang! So aftuh id we'n bang, id hoided him de hand so he had t'pud a bendige on like Misteh Schoil.' […] He stopped, regarded her in perplexity, and then uneasily to David, 'Don' she wan' I sh' talk t'huh in Engklish?' 'I don' know,' he answered sullenly. His mother's fixed, unseeing stare, her trembling lips, trembling as if to an inner speech, was anguish enough for him to bear without the added humiliation of having Yussie notice it. (Roth 2006: 137)[8]

The use of English evidences David's increasing assimilation. But at the same time, it also denotes the exclusion of those who do not have a good command of the language, as demonstrated by Genya in this scene.

Yiddish and English seem to stand in a diglossic relationship within the novel: While David associates the former with his family, his neighbourhood and, by extension, Jewish culture, it does not fit outside of his community. This is something he realises when he gets lost and asks for directions (Roth 2006: 95), or when he goes to the museum with Bertha (Roth 2006: 145). Meanwhile, English stands for the new gentile world, where the protagonist must shape a new identity (see Maior 2017: 110; Mann 2018: 453). However, diglossic situations are usually unstable. Pressures, as Fasold names them (1984: 39), may tilt the balance towards one language or another. In this sense, Book IV in the novel puts an end to David's in-between situation. When Roth's protagonist is almost electrocuted, there is a convergence of people, but also of allusions to different cultures and languages: "'Christ, it's a kid!' 'Yea!' 'Don't touch 'im!' 'Who's got a stick!' 'A stick!' 'A stick, fer Jesus sake!' […] 'Oy! Oy vai! Oy vai! Oy vai!' 'Git a cop!' 'An embillance – go cull-oy!' 'Don't touch 'im!' 'Bambino! Madre mia!' 'Mary. It's just a kid!' 'Helftz! Helftz! Helftz Yeedin! Rotivit!'" (Roth 2006: 418-419). Among the different voices, American slang appears: "Christ, it's a kid!". Wirth-Nesher (2003: 123) notes how the word "kid" has become recurrent ever since David is asked by the rabbi to translate the traditional Jewish song Chad Gadya into Yiddish (Roth 2006: 230). Like the kid in the song, David stands at the bottom of the power chain; he is the subject of the

8 As seen in this fragment, Yiddish is represented with standard English in the novel, whereas English spoken by characters is presented in a dialectal form.

street boys' mockeries, his father's rage and the overwhelming spaces of the city. But at the same time this phrase connects with another kid, the Christian kid, Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself to redeem mankind from its sins. This intermingling of allusions could support the idea of a multicultural America, for it evokes the Aramaic song and it simultaneously recalls American slang. Jewish and Christian, sacred and profane, elevated and low language, they all appear embodied in one sentence. However, since David is almost electrocuted, this scene could be read as showing his "dying out" and being symbolically reborn (Wirth-Nesher 2003: 124). In this regard, different critics have seen in this incident the key to David's assimilation into American society (Wirth-Nesher 2003: 124; Capell 2007: 33; Maior 2017: 119). His near-death experience seems to bring the boy's Jewish identity to an end while commencing a Christian, American white one. Although Frankenberg contemplates a possible intersection between Jewishness and Whiteness when considering Jewish culture (1993: 216), Roth's solution to the conflict is closer to Wirth-Nesher's term *kulturkampf* (1995: 393). In this case, David's fight materialises in the dichotomy between Yiddish and English, suggesting that he cannot reconcile the two identities.

Just as in Roth's novel, learning English becomes important in *My Ántonia* for the protagonist to integrate within American society. The opposite would support the idea held by Black Hawk's inhabitants that "[a]ll foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English" (Cather 1988: 201). Not only does Mr. Shimerda ask Mrs. Burden to teach Ántonia the language, but Ántonia herself also wishes to learn English, advancing very quickly. Readers learn about her initial steps with the language: "She clapped her hands and murmured, 'Blue sky, blue eyes'" (Cather 1988: 26). Just two pages later, we are told that she "[has] opinions about everything" (Cather 1988: 28).

However, because the story is told from Jim Burden's perspective, readers do not have direct access to Ántonia's thoughts nor her assimilation process. More than how Ántonia is, we see how she *is read* by Jim and by white America as an interpretative community (see Daiches 1951: 44; Fish 1980). Speaking another language is not perceived here as a symptom of an identity split, but of plain ignorance. In controlling language, Jim can manipulate the image of Ántonia. He appropriates her, not only by calling her *my* Ántonia, but also by Americanising her name, calling her "Tony" (Cather 1988: 140). In order to be, characters must speak English, otherwise they are either nonchalant or non-existent. This is evidenced in the case of Ántonia at the beginning, who, according to Jim, "jabber[s] Bohunk" (Cather 1988: 46), but also in Ole Benson, whom people considered "glum" and that "never talked at all" (Cather 1988: 282), something Lena later belies: "Sure he talked, in Norwegian" (Cather 1988: 282).

Unlike the diglossic situation described in *Call It Sleep* and the loss it entails, Ántonia's assimilation takes a different path. Cather's protagonist will fulfil the demands of society by attaining English, but her speech will always retain traits of foreignness. Even if there is a linguistic evolution in the character, after marrying Cuzak she experiences a backlash: "'[…] I've forgot my English so. I don't often talk it any more. I tell the children I used to speak real well.' She said they always spoke Bohemian at home. The little ones could not speak English at all – didn't learn it until they went to school" (Cather 1988: 335). However, unlike in the case of Genya in *Call It Sleep*, this fact does not lead to Ántonia's exclusion. Instead, at the end of the novel she is seen by Jim as a "rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (Cather 1988: 353). Here lies the basic distinction between both novels. Even if Ántonia is ethnically marked, for she has kept and taught her children Bohemian, along with the music and food of her country, these traits are now regarded positively by Jim. In this sense, Cather's attention to practices such as housekeeping or cooking meals allows characters to connect memories from their old lives with their new environment. In doing so, the immigrants arriving to the prairies of Nebraska manage to develop emotional attachments to their new homes (Dixon 2017: 229; John 2019: 199). Thus, while having created an outset of the Old World within the new one, Ántonia has also integrated herself in the new culture. With that sentence, Jim is acknowledging Ántonia's potential to create lives which would constitute a new breed of Americans (see Brown 2005: 100). Because of that, her transformation has a more integrative nature. In other words, her changes entail "the positive evaluation of, identification with, and acceptance of the values of both groups" (Berry 2013: 49). Meanwhile, David's case exposes a more restrictive sense of assimilation, understood as "identification with the dominant group but not with one's heritage group, and acceptance of the values of the dominant group and not those of one's heritage group" (Berry 2013: 49).

5. SPACES

A final aspect worth studying are the spaces in the novels. Far from simply being phenomenologically apprehended, spaces acquire significance for the plot. As critics from the *Spatial Turn* have noted, they become a further semiotic element with signs and symbols that have to be interpreted (Weigel 2002: 160). They are, as Döring and Thielmann have called them, spaces of cultural questioning (2009: 17). Both the streets of New York and the town of Black Hawk are the settings where the assimilation process takes place. As such, they become a further expression of American society and can pressure and/or echo the characters' development and transformation.

From the beginning of the novels, America is presented as a double-edged sword. It grants immigrants the opportunity to fulfil their dreams, as shown in *Call It Sleep*'s epigraph: "*I pray thee ask no questions this is that Golden Land*" (Roth 2006: 9). Yet, it is also a source of hostility, so that the first impressions are starkly contrasted in both novels with reality. Upon their arrival at Ellis Island, Genya and David are confronted with the Statue of Liberty, which, unlike its name, is here characterised by "the rays of her halo [that] were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross […] the blackened hilt of a broken sword" (Roth 2006: 14).

Roth's protagonists will head to New York's Lower East Side. Defined as "the New Jerusalem" (Heinze 2003: 142), this neighbourhood became in 1910 "the densest […] in the world, [which] housed hundreds of thousands of Yiddish-speaking Jews" (Heinze 2003: 142). Immigrant settlements of this period in the United States' urban areas constituted ghettos which were both delimited from the inside, for they are self-selecting entities (Walden 1984: 297), but also from the outside, being marginalised due to race, religion, linguistic barriers or feelings of superiority (Walden 1984: 297). The twofold nature of these segregated areas is evidenced in Roth's novel. The references to the Synagogue, the Cheder in the lower East Side, along with David being sent to buy the *Tageblatt* in Brownsville, suggest that the nature of the neighbourhood as a ghetto is created internally. Yet, David is also reminded by the non-Jewish kids of their difference, so that he realises their shared class condition but also *his* ethnic self because of where he lives: "'Dat's a sheeney block' […] 'Only sheenies live in dat block!' […] 'C'mon Pedey, let's give 'im 'is lumps'" (Roth 2006: 246). Neither the protagonist's language nor his religion can help him in the new context. What is meant to create cohesion and preserve a sense of identity actually prevents him from integrating (Maior 2017: 115).

The dichotomy that exists between Yiddish and English, the Jewish and the American, is paralleled in the relation between his neighbourhood and the city. As the narrative unfolds, David goes further into the streets and beyond the Lower East Side, exploring New York and its inhabitants. This is first perceived when he goes to the Metropolitan Museum, "a stately white-stone edifice set in the midst of the green park" (Roth 2006: 145), where David feels both "his aunt's loud voice and Yiddish speech […] seemed out of place" (145). Or later on in the novel with Leo, when they visit the bank (300), a building that could stand for white America, "wit dem swell w'ite stones an' gold ledders" (300); Leo does not only trigger his assimilation by leading David to reject Judaism, but with him he also enters the city, leaving the ghetto behind.

Much in contrast to Roth's novel, which unfolds fully in the streets of New York and portrays a burgeoning industrial city filled with possibilities but also dangers,

My Ántonia seems to adhere to the pastoral ideal intrinsic to American identity. Analysing the trope of the garden in American literature, Leo Marx underlines the possibilities that the land grants to an ordinary individual: "[I]t means the chance for a simple man, who does actual work, to labor on his own property in his own behalf. It gives him a hope for the leisure and economic sufficiency formerly – which is to say, in Europe – reserved for another class" (2000: 111). The prairies surrounding the farms where Ántonia and Jim grow up seem to partake of this myth. Cather endows this setting with an idyllic regenerative quality and a potential for success. The farms and the fields convey all the hopes that immigrants had upon their arrival in the New World.

Nonetheless, despite the difference in the settings it is possible to identify a similar pattern to Roth's novel regarding the characters' process of socialising. For a start, Jim's first sighting of the Shimerdas is marked by a physical separation; while he is "curled up in a red plush seat" on the train (Cather 1988: 5), Ántonia and her family are "in the immigrant car ahead" (Cather 1988: 4). Additionally, at the beginning of the novel, the Shimerdas seem to mingle only with other immigrants: Mr. Shimerda spends time with Peter and Pavel; Ántonia, meanwhile, meets Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, Norwegian Anna and Bohemian Marys, which would suggest that this type of segregation is self-imposed. However, differentiation is also externally created. Both "country girls" and "hired girls" –as they are often referred to– denote a sense of difference to city girls and bourgeois society. It is only after Ántonia goes to Black Hawk, when she starts working and interacts with other characters, that her language, and manners improve. In short, she begins to fit the demands of American society while familiarising with spaces.

Nevertheless, at the end of the narrative, Cather's protagonist ends up living isolated on a farm and married to a Bohemian man. While acknowledging that she "learned nice ways at the Harlings'", she still "belong[s] on a farm" (Cather 1988: 343), thus, away from the city and society. Neither does she feel detached from her country: "I ain't never forgot my own country" (Cather 1988: 238). Bearing in mind Ántonia's withdrawal from society, it comes as a surprise that she is still regarded positively by Jim at the end of the novel. In this sense, it can be argued that Ántonia becomes throughout the text a sort of symbol; her triumph over the land turns her into a sort of earth-goddess (Sharma *et al.* 2018: 71). It is possible to discern a process of identification, an eroticized nationalism (Tellefsen 1999: 229) performed by the narrator, who matches the land's fertile grounds to Ántonia's fecundity:

> [A]ll the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea. (Cather 1988: 306)

> She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending at last […] It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life. (Cather 1988: 353)

Because of this, in contrast to David's, Ántonia's integration does not entail replacing. What *My Ántonia* portrays is Jim's progressive acceptance of the protagonist's difference, for she keeps her language, as already mentioned, her traditions and lives away from society. Cather's novel, thus, promotes a "culturally pluralistic Nebraska" (Brown 2005: 96), cohabited by Americans, Norwegians, Bohemians and Swedes. The author does not advocate for a hierarchy of cultures (John 2019: 199) – or whiteness, for that matter –, but for the coexistence of different peoples. In this sense, Jelinek's saloon, "where the Bohemian and German farmers could eat the lunches they brought from home while they drank their beer" (Cather 1988: 217), is placed in the middle of Black Hawk and the male bonding we see at the end of the novel between Jim and the Cuzak boys, as well as the promise of the former of going back to visit them points towards this multicultural America in the future.

However, far from offering a plain bright image, if Ántonia becomes a metaphor for America, she also embodies the country's violence. By the end of the narrative Cather's protagonist is "worked down" (Cather 1988: 319), "flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled" (Cather 1988: 331) and "a battered woman" (Cather 1988: 353). As Tellefsen puts it, "she becomes more America than American" (1999: 240). Together with her physical description, the prairie is fraught with misery: Mr. Shimerda's and the tramp's suicide, Peter and Pavel's end in bankruptcy and death, respectively, or Jim and Jake's disappearance are all evidence of the dim side of the American dream. Therefore, the open spaces of the prairies in Nebraska, while embodying the possibilities of a bright future, remain ambivalent, being a source of isolation and alienation too (see Sharma *et al.* 2018: 69).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The protagonists of *My Ántonia* and *Call It Sleep* are engaged in a journey to whiteness. Following different paths and strategies, both Ántonia and David learn English and undergo a process of assimilation. Ántonia's early life on the farm, marked by hardship, is left behind when she moves to Black Hawk. Similarly, in Roth's novel, David becomes more familiar with the city once he meets Leo, starting in this way his assimilation. Both characters give up cultural traits such as religion and perform changes requested by society, as shown in the characters' interaction with gender norms. In doing so, these novels evidence a series of

changes that were occurring at the time in racial matters, showing that race is connected to ethnicity rather than biology.

However, there is a notorious difference that sets these narratives apart. *My Ántonia* is framed from Jim Burden's perspective. Regardless of Ántonia's efforts, acceptance must be granted by him. The novel does not only record Ántonia's acculturation but also Jim's growing tolerance towards her otherness, that is, Jim's acceptance of the presence of the Other as part of America. Besides, the novel seems to advocate for a pluralistic view of the United States of America. In contrast to Cather's multiculturalism, Roth's depiction is more critical. The events framed from David's perspective highlight the struggles between his two identities. The language and images combined at the end of the book suggest the protagonist's rebirth into an American white identity, leaving no room for Judaism and Yiddish.

Despite the differences in the narrative perspective and the end of the texts, both novels shed light on a subtext of isolation and lack of understanding, triggering the changes in these characters. In both cases there is a contrast to the idealised conception of America prior to the immigrants' arrival. Roth presents the dark aspects of the Golden Land. His novel can be seen as an attempt to prove its own epigraph wrong. Similarly, Cather's multiculturalism is contaminated by a darker side. In equating Ántonia with America, the deterioration of the protagonist's physique by the end of the novel represents the aggressive transformations immigrants must experience once they arrive to the New World, highlighting the violence of their journey. As the novel's epigraph states: *Optima dies... prima fugit.*

The protagonists in both novels are forced to perform changes and to forget the hardships experienced, as evidenced in the remarks of some of Cather's characters, but also in the title of Roth's novel. However, even if David at the end of the novel decides to "call it sleep," the images of the last paragraph in Roth's work suggest the opposite. The end of the novel is the end of David's struggle. Yet, it is at the end that Roth's protagonist finally manages to *call*, as he acquires agency over reality. If sleeping means forgetting, calling conveys just the opposite, it entails drawing attention to the dark aspects which up to then were unspeakable. Likewise, despite the glorification and links established between Ántonia and America, Ántonia's assimilation is completely compromised by Jim's romanticised view of immigrants and their experience.[9] *My Ántonia* is not just about Jim's and Ántonia's pasts. While their childhood is a memorable experience

9 It is precisely because of this that Tsank concludes that "[u]ltimately, neither Jim nor Cather can shed the authority of narration and transcend his or her subject-position, and Jim's romanticizing of Ántonia's person and culture–and in turn, his dismissal of her when she does not cohere to his imagined ideal–suggests the drawbacks of an unexamined pluralistic view such as the elision of structural inequality in favor of embracing and, in some cases, overemphasizing 'difference" (2018: 48).

for him, the novel also tells Peter's and Pavel's story, and the Shimerdas'. Even native Americans, African Americans and the Spanish conquistadors' stories are present in the novel, posing interruptions to the main narrative and questioning the glorified past of the land of opportunity.

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