Walking Backwards: Chronology, Immigration, and Coming of Age in My Ántonia and How the García Girl Lost Their Accents

Author(s): Stephanie Lovelady


Published by: Modern Language Studies

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30039805

Accessed: 16-02-2017 01:49 UTC
WALKING BACKWARDS:
COMING OF AGE IN
MY ÁNTONIA AND
HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS
LOST THEIR ACCENTS

STEPHANIE LOVELADY
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
For years I misread Julia de Burgos’ poem “Yo misma fui mi ruta” (“I Was My Own Route”), particularly the lines “mis pies planos sobre la tierra promisora / no resistían caminar hacia atrás, / y seguían adelante, adelante” (56). I was intrigued and delighted by the paradox of the speaker’s feet, not resisting walking backwards, yet continuing ever forward. It was only when I read Jack Agüeros’ translation: “my feet level upon the promissory earth / would not accept walking backwards, / and went forward, forward” (57) that I realized de Burgos probably meant “no resistían caminar hacia atrás” in the sense of not being able to bear (another meaning of “resistir”) walking backwards, rather than in the sense of not resisting it. Nevertheless, I stubbornly prefer my old, erroneous reading, which recognizes the recursive nature of progress. Walking backwards is nearly inevitable in most long-term projects, whether one is coming to terms with a new culture, coming of age, writing a dissertation, or conducting an academic job search. Perhaps de Burgos, a Puerto Rican bilingual poet, teacher, journalist, and labor and political activist, would have understood this. While living in New York in the 1940s and 50s, de Burgos often wrote of her homesickness for Puerto Rico and may well have felt the frustrations of walking backwards. By considering chronology and its occasional regressions, we can see the connections between two very different women’s immigration and coming-of-age stories. Both Willa Cather’s My Ántonia (1918) and Julia Alvarez’s How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (1991) play with chronology in order to stress the backward-looking nature of immigration and coming of age.

Gulfs of time, ethnicity and immigration status separate Willa Cather and Julia Alvarez. Cather, born in 1873, was descended from Irish immigrants who settled in Virginia during colonial times. At the age of nine, she moved with her family to Nebraska. My Ántonia takes place in the Nebraska of her childhood and youth in the 1880s and 1890s and focuses on the relationship of its native-born narrator, Jim Burden, with a Bohemian immigrant girl, Ántonia Shimerda. Julia Alvarez was born in 1950 in New York. Shortly after her birth, her family moved back to the Dominican Republic, and when she was ten the family immigrated permanently to the United States in response to

Despite these differences between their authors, what these two novels, as well as many other immigration and coming-of-age narratives, have in common is a persistent tendency to look backwards. The pull of the past is evident, as in the refrain in Cristina García’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, “quieres regresar, pero es imposible” (“You want to go back, but it’s impossible”; 39). However, this pull is particularly notable in *My Ántonia* and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. There are striking stylistic and thematic similarities between these novels. Each employs complex, indirect narrative strategies (including non-chronological order, gaps, fragmentation, and multiple narrators). Each novel is also notable for the extent to which it looks back while moving forward. Richard Millington has argued that *My Ántonia* is not a bildungsroman at all, but engages in “a reversal of the logic of the bildungsroman” by portraying “Jim’s endangerment by and eventual rescue from maturity” (699). Similarly, Yolanda journeys backward through time from the age of thirty-nine to sixty by the end of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. In both novels, narrative style which returns the reader to the past by way of narrative gaps and non-chronological ordering, as well as the characters’ tendency to return to the past through storytelling and/or visits to the homeland, stress that the process of coming of age in a new land is not a linear process, but one that requires an occasional backwards step.

Cather’s experiments with chronology and use of storytelling to circle back in time have been the subject of much critical inquiry. Janis Stout and Jo Ann Middleton have noted that Cather’s long narrative gaps and returns to the past through storytelling and/or visits to the homeland, stress that the process of coming of age in a new land is not a linear process, but one that requires an occasional backwards step.

Cather’s experiments with chronology and use of storytelling to circle back in time have been the subject of much critical inquiry. Janis Stout and Jo Ann Middleton have noted that Cather’s long narrative gaps and returns to the past through storytelling and/or visits to the homeland, stress that the process of coming of age in a new land is not a linear process, but one that requires an occasional backwards step.

Cather’s experiments with chronology and use of storytelling to circle back in time have been the subject of much critical inquiry. Janis Stout and Jo Ann Middleton have noted that Cather’s long narrative gaps and returns to the past through storytelling and/or visits to the homeland, stress that the process of coming of age in a new land is not a linear process, but one that requires an occasional backwards step.

Cather’s experiments with chronology and use of storytelling to circle back in time have been the subject of much critical inquiry. Janis Stout and Jo Ann Middleton have noted that Cather’s long narrative gaps and returns to the past through storytelling and/or visits to the homeland, stress that the process of coming of age in a new land is not a linear process, but one that requires an occasional backwards step.

Cather’s experiments with chronology and use of storytelling to circle back in time have been the subject of much critical inquiry. Janis Stout and Jo Ann Middleton have noted that Cather’s long narrative gaps and returns to the past through storytelling and/or visits to the homeland, stress that the process of coming of age in a new land is not a linear process, but one that requires an occasional backwards step.
he knew while growing up. These children are also familiar with Jim’s own childhood stories. Antonia explains, they “know all about you and Charley and Sally, like as if they’d grown up with you” and later the children ask him for clarification of one of the stories (324). He is shown photographs of old friends and of himself as a boy. Events that have taken place since Jim’s departure from the prairie are only obliquely referenced, as when Jim learns of Antonia’s early years on her farm: “the first ten years were a hard struggle” (332). Antonia’s own husband in speaking of the time since he immigrated, exclaims “it don’t seem like I am away from there twenty-six year!” (356). For Jim, the reminders of his childhood and the brevity of mentions of events in the narrative gap allow him to feel close to Antonia at the end of the novel and to proclaim “Whatever we had missed, we possessed together, the precious, the incommunicable past” (360). There are hints, however, even in this section, that Antonia sees the past differently and has passed on a different version of it to her children. When Jim tells her sons, “I was very much in love with your mother once,” Anton replies, “She never told us that...But she always talked lots about you and about what good times you used to have” (335-36). It is a gentle revision, but a revision nonetheless, one that re-asserts Antonia’s version of events within Jim’s narrative.

Throughout the novel, Antonia is the character most often seen telling stories of the past, despite the frame narrative which stresses that the novel is the product of Jim’s memory. In fact, Anne Goodwyn Jones contrasts the two characters, speculating that Jim has suppressed his grief over his parents’ death and his move from Virginia, while Antonia “vividly recollects her home in Europe, experiences the pain of loss that these recollections elicit, and moves on to engage in a new life in a new world” (89).2 Antonia tells Jim a story about a woman in her Bohemian village as soon as she is able to speak English, and eight years after her immigration, she tells him, “if I was put down there in the middle of the night, I could find my way all over that little town; and along the river to the next town, where my grandmother lived. My feet remember all the little paths through the woods, and where the big roots stick out to trip you” (230). Indeed, Antonia insists on memory, even when she is counseled against it. While her family is living in the dugout, Jim’s grandmother tells her, “You’ll have a better house after while, Antonia, and then you’ll forget these hard times” (73). But once she hires herself out to the Harling family, Jim and the Harling children love to hear Antonia’s stories about the prairie. Later it is this phase of her life Jim wants to undo, telling her, “You ought never to have gone to town,” but she protests “I’m glad I went!” (333).

Antonia tells or retells most of the inset stories of My Antonia, sometimes in her own words, and sometimes retold again by Jim. While some critics consider these stories as distractions or structural flaws, Michael Peterman sees them as serving the function of myths or fairy tales, which simplify and universalize human problems for children. The stories he considers—the story of the sleighs pursued by wolves, the tramp’s suicide and the Cutter murder-suicide—are all violent, as fairy tales tend to be, and are the object of fascination for children, either Jim and Antonia when they are children, the Harling children Antonia minds when she is a teenager, or Antonia’s own children. In every case, either Antonia or her offspring tell the story and the stories and their telling strengthen social bonds by creating a shared culture.3

Elizabeth Ammons describes My Antonia as a book which “moves forward in a time-removed way, with part of itself seeming to happen slightly behind itself” (78). Ammons observes, “Beginning with the opening frame, which stages the idea of complex negotiation of time-frames and framing itself, the book resists clean, unitary, forward motion in favor of an almost dreamlike, enveloping constant in which past, present and future participate” (78). This non-linear narration is evident in much contemporary U.S. Latina fiction as well, which is even more notably fragmented and also
plays with time. Sandra Cisneros’ classic Chicana coming-of-age novel *The House on Mango Street* consists of series of forty-four loosely connected vignettes, Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* of forty letters and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* of fifteen stories. In each case the component parts can be read separately or as a whole. Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* intertwines two timelines with letters from the 1930s to 50s alternating with narration from the 1970s and 80s, while the order of events in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is indeterminate. In the most radical departure from linear chronology, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is narrated backwards, with each chapter occurring before the chapter that precedes it in the text, thus mimicking the characters’ persistent search through the past for meaning, and creating what Joan Hoffman calls “a topsy-turvy wandering into remembrance.” Julie Barak speculates that the disconcerting shift back in time at the end of each chapter creates “uncertainty and instability” (163) for readers, thrusting them into a situation analogous to that of the ambivalent and often confused characters.

In ordering her novel backwards, Alvarez has chosen a technique used by writers in both English and Spanish. Reverse-chronological texts follow different rules. In some, time runs backwards not only between chapters or sections but within them as well, as when burning candles grow taller in Alejo Carpentier’s short story “Viaje a la semilla” (“Journey Back to the Source”). This reversal has the effect of changing the meaning of events. For example, in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, the protagonist experiences his life backward in an attempt to undo his own collusion with the Nazis, to transform the moment he put Jews in the ovens into a rescue. In other texts, characters experience time moving forward within chapters, but the chapters are arranged backward so it is the reader who experiences layers being peeled back one by one, to get to the source, the reason for the state of affairs described at the beginning of the novel, as in Elizabeth Howard’s *The Long View*, which examines the evolution of an unhappy marriage. Carlos Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*) operates similarly as the revelation of the protagonist’s dispossessed childhood puts the history of his rise to power in a very different perspective. As the boy’s uncle thinks, “si empezaba a tirar del hilo de la historia, todo el tejido se vendría abajo y que tendría que llegar al origen” (“if he began to trace one thread of the story, the whole story would have to come out. He would have to explain the beginning”; 286; Hileman 278). *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* falls into the second category of reverse-chronology texts. Time is not experienced backwards by the characters and causality is not reversed, but as in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, the desire to change or understand a life, inspires the character to look further and further into the past. Writing her life, Yolanda finds herself, “collapsing all time now so that it fits in the hollow of my story” (289). In all reverse-chronology texts, there is in the character, readers, or both, what Carpentier’s protagonist feels as “la percepción remota de otras posibilidades” (“[being] dimly aware of other possibilities”; 403; Partridge 115). It is the haunting presence of these other possibilities, of the life she might have led, that keeps Yolanda looking over her shoulder.

The gaps and loops in *My Antonia* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* demonstrate the fractures and messy overlaps in their narrators’ attempts to make sense of the crossing between childhood and adulthood and between one country and another, either their own or someone else’s. And in the case of Cather and many ethnic writers, this complexity has often been denied. Though Cather is now considered within the context of modernism, for decades she was considered independent of this movement in what Middleton calls “a critical blindness” to her “extraordinary experiments with point of view” (20).

Both *My Antonia* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* could be said to be about mem-
ory and the effort to regain access to the past and past selves. While Antonia tells her stories orally, Yolanda begins to write as a child in order to find herself in what seems like a hostile and alien environment. Feeling “she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (141). Yoyo becomes an avid reader and writer and she delights when she “finally sounded like herself in English” (143). Each section of the novel she writes begins by noting time range of the chapters in it (e.g. 1989-1972). By the end of the novel, Yolanda is Yoyo, a six-year-old child and the year is 1956. Rather than learning directly who Yolanda and her sisters became upon migrating, we learn who they were before, which helps us piece together a picture of the family. Ultimately it is through language, through story-telling, that the girls forge an identity as a unit and as individuals. Sometimes this is a confusing process, for as Alvarez observes in “A Note on the Loosely Autobiographical”: “Memory is a composite of what we remember and what we are reminded to remember” (166). In the novel, Sandi makes a similar point: “I've heard so many versions of that story, [...]. I don't know which one is true,” she says and Fifi, who is the subject of the story, replies “Neither do I” (62). When the family flees from the Dominican Republic, their maid Chucha predicts: “They will be haunted by what they do and don't remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive” (223). Indeed, Yolanda reconnects with her homeland by means of the storytelling so prominent in the novel, just as Antonia does. In both novels the portrayal of the immigrant girl's adult life is always marked by backwards looks and steps.

Even as My Antonia re-visits past time through storytelling, it also moves forward. Jim observes about half-way through the novel, “When boys and girls are growing up, life can’t stand still, not even in the quietest of country towns; and they have to grow up, whether they will or no. That is what their elders are always forgetting” (187). Cather signals here that though the novel has reached an idyllic moment, with Jim and Antonia reunited as she works at the house of a benevolent neighbor family, it will not last. Just as change disrupted their relationship before when Antonia's father died and she had to assume more responsibility, the arrival of the dancing tent signals her sexual awakening, another change that will alarm Jim as well as Antonia's employers. Their lives will move forward, even as they loop back from time to time, through the story-telling so prominent in the novel, through Antonia's traditional, agrarian lifestyle, and through Jim's nostalgia.

Antonia’s ethnic alliances also continually change, even as her identity as a Bohemian is constantly stressed. She tells Jim, “I ain’t never forgot my own country” and this is true, but upon arriving in Nebraska, Antonia befriends people of various ethnicities, both immigrant and native-born, and this pattern continues in town (230). She works for a Norwegian family, and socializes with a multi-ethnic group of hired girls. (She later names a daughter after one of her employers' children and another after a Norwegian friend.) Finally, and most problematically according to the rules of her society, she becomes engaged to Larry Donovan, an Irish-American.

When the engagement falls through she returns to her roots and marries a Czech, but for both Anton and Antonia Cuzak there is no permanent return to the past. Joseph Urgo characterizes not only Jim's representation of Antonia's adult life but the life itself as an "erasure" because she marries someone of her own ethnicity, returns to farming and to speaking Bohemian (66). However, the lives the Cuzaks lead as bilingual, land-owning farmers whose oldest daughter drives a Ford car are Czech-American, not Czech, not the lives they would have led without immigration. While their fruit cellar holds Bohemian spiced plums used for making kolaches, their orchards and their fields produce those quintessentially American crops, apples and wheat. Antonia loops back to her ethnic past, but she only goes halfway back, taking
from each stage of her journey the cultural values and practices she wants to make hers. Ántonia constructs her ethnic identity out of a mix of Old and New World values.

Yolanda finds achieving this kind of balance difficult. On immigrating, she feels a pervasive sense of loss. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* ends with a description of Yolanda’s lifelong experience of being haunted by the image of a mother cat whom she carelessly separated from her kitten when as a six-year-old child she steals and then abandons it. In the novel’s closing words, she sees the cat “a black furred thing, lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art” (90). The image neatly parallels the closing image of the first chapter, which is chronologically the last scene in the book. Yolanda is visiting the Dominican Republic, secretly hoping to move back for good. She spies a poster advertising Palmolive soap (significantly an American product named after tropical and Spanish produce) in which “the Palmolive woman’s skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance” (23). Yolanda, who has come to the island with the wish “Let this turn out to be my home” has no fixed home, as the double ending of the novel demonstrates (11). In the United States, the mother cat wailing for its lost kitten calls her back to the Dominican Republic. In the Dominican Republic, the image of the white, sexualized, commercialized woman calls her back to the United States. Yolanda is caught between these competing calls.

In another symbol of her conflict, at the beginning of her visit, her relatives present her with a cake in the shape of the island to welcome her and when the children begin to squabble over who gets what piece, Yolanda’s cousin Lucinda hands her the knife and says, “It’s your cake, Yoyo. You decide” (12). Because the novel is written backwards the question that is raised in the first chapter—will she stay or will she go—is not answered until the sequel. Yolanda remains precariously balanced in her indecision. The reader must guess what will come from what has gone before.

There are early hints, however, that Yolanda’s decision will be to return to the States. Jacqueline Stefanko has speculated ordering her text backwards, Alvarez is “decentering and questioning her own return to the island” and presumably Yolanda’s as well (56). On the very first page of the novel Yolanda begins to imagine how her relatives will react to her appearance: “Yolanda sees herself as they will, shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband. Like a missionary, her cousins will say, like one of those Peace Corp girls who have let themselves go to do dubious good in the world” (3-4). Accustomed to casual American dress, she in turn, is put off by her cousin’s appearance: “In her designer pantsuit and frosted, blown-out hair, Lucinda looks like a Dominican magazine model, a look that has always made Yolanda think of call girls” (4-5).

The day Yolanda sees the Palmolive poster, she is on a mission to find fresh guavas. The guavas, which to the surprise of a cantina owner she prefers over Coca Cola, stand for the indigenous, the authenticity Yolanda hopes to find in the Dominican Republic. Yolanda enlists the help of several local boys to pick the fruit. They quickly fill the basket and afterward, “[e]ach addition to Yolanda’s beach basket causes a spill from the stash already piled high above the brim” (17). The escaping guavas represent the sense of belonging Yolanda longs for but will never quite have on the island, having moved away at the age of ten. She can be Dominican to a certain extent, but not beyond, just as the basket will only hold a finite amount of fruit, despite Yolanda’s attempts to pile more on top. Yolanda’s struggles in this chapter with Dominican assumptions about gender and class complicate her simple desire to pick and eat some guavas. “This is not the States,” her aunt protests when she wants to drive to the orchard, “A woman just doesn’t travel alone in this country”
“The doña will get hot, her nice clothes will get all dirty. José will bring the doña all the guavas she is wanting” (16), the cantina owner cries in alarm when Yolanda arrives at the orchard and wants to pick her own guavas. These conflicts also show the extent to which Yolanda has miscalculated the society she wishes to rejoin. As Juan Bruce-Novoa puts it, “she is caught in a sign of racial, class and national conflict, which ironically, turn out to be the real roots she is hunting for” (516).

Frightened by the approach of two strange men after her car breaks down in the orchard, Yolanda panics and seizes upon her identity as an American to protect herself. When one of them asks her “¿Americana? [...] as if not quite sure what to make of her” she feels as if “a road is opening before her” (20). She speaks to them in English, knowing they will not understand, but will be “rendered docile by her gibberish” (20-21). Believing she will be safer if the men think she is an American, she gladly claims this identity, and in doing so chooses to take the road she sees opening before her, the road that leads out of the guava orchard and back to the Palmolive woman.

Though the scale is tipped toward assimilation, Yolanda constantly feels divided. Her many nicknames attest to her multiple identities. She is “Yolanda, nicknamed Yo in Spanish, misunderstood Joe in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, Yoyo—or when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains Joey” (68). (Alvarez uses the italics for both Yo and Joe, marking both names as foreign words.) She is also called Yosita by her mother, Josephine by her second husband and, when a pencil company substitutes “Jolinda” for Yolanda, she is stuck with a set of pencils with her “so-called name” (90) on them. Beyond their telling number, the names themselves are often significant. “Yo” means “I” in Spanish, which both playfully alludes to Yolanda’s status as an autobiographical character and points to her ongoing search for identity. Writing about her “head-slash-heart-slash-soul” (78) in a letter, Yolanda stops herself. “No, no, no, she didn’t want to divide herself any more, three persons in one Yo” (78). Playing a rhyming game with her husband, in which one comes up with rhymes for one’s name, she complains nothing rhymes with Yolanda and he suggests she use Joe. When she wants to use “I” to rhyme with “sky,” and he won’t let her, she notes that “Yo rhymes with cielo in Spanish” (72). Yo is not the only name with meaning. The name Joe, Yolanda’s place as a middle daughter in a family of four girls and her status as the writer of the family suggest an allusion to Little Women. Finally, Yolanda’s childhood nickname Yoyo recalls a toy which reels back and forth, just as she does. While the sequel, ¡Yo!, makes clear that Yolanda’s choice is to stay in the United States and also portrays her reaching a kind of emotional equilibrium in her middle age, at the end of How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, the question of Yolanda’s ethnic identity is unresolved.

While in My Ántonia, immigrants may miss home to the point of committing suicide as Antonia’s father does, they do not return home, while returning is “an ever-present, physical and/or textual possibility” for Yolanda and other contemporary immigrant characters (Stefanko 50). The closest Antonia gets to a return to Bohemia is by proxy when Jim visits that country and sends her photographs of her native village, which she hangs in her parlor. Not only does Yolanda visit her homeland and contemplate a permanent return, so do the protagonists of The Mixquiahuala Letters and Dreaming in Cuban. Authorship by actual immigrants may explain contemporary U.S. Latina texts’ greater focus on the impossibility of completely severing ties to one’s place of origin. Cather is acutely aware of the pain of separation, a pain that kills some of her immigrant characters. Nevertheless, her characters tend to adapt or not to adapt, rather than living in the hazy, uncertain middle ground the Latina characters such as Yolanda often inhabit.

Earl Shorris has devised categories of migrants, reserving the term “immigrant” for those who make the mental as well as physical journey,
who adapt to their new country and become successful in. Sojourners and exiles intend their stay to be temporary, regardless of whether or not it is, while they attempt to make money or wait for political changes in their home countries that will allow them to return. While Shorris invented the categories to describe Latinos/as in the United States, the fictional characters who fit best into one slot are earlier immigrant characters such as Antonia who immigrates in Shorris's sense of the word. Yolanda fits into the categories of immigrant and exile at once, adapting to life in the United States in real ways, while longing or intending to return at the same time. Yolanda would recognize Cordelia Chávez Candelario's definition of home as "that place of known people which produced the protagonist who wants to leave it, but who yearns for it when absent, and is disappointed when s/he returns, but despite the disappointment, still desires it" (186-87). Parts of this definition would be familiar to Antonia as well. Hence the unending cycle of returns in narrative form, in storytelling, and in physical journeys back to the homeland.

Notes

1 As Cather herself wrote of My Antonia, "There was the material in that book for a lurid melodrama. But I decided in writing I would dwell very lightly on those things that a novelist would ordinarily emphasize, and make up my story of the little every-day happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone's life and happiness" (Bennett 47). She also wrote, "My Antonia, for instance is just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern" (Bennett 211). Cather understood that, as David Herman puts it, "The processing of narratives is more complex when they inhibit what might be termed as the naive application of scripts and promote instead reflection on the limits of the applicability of the scripts being invoked" (1055).

2 One question my own students ask me most repeatedly and most insistently about Jim is why this ten-year-old orphan does not seem to grieve for his parents after the first few pages of the book.

3 Guy Reynolds notes that, "The proponents of Americanisation felt that the persistence of the old world heritage, with all its attendant memories, threatened America with cultural atomisation" but he asserts that the storytelling among immigrants of different nationalities in My Antonia instead, "poses an alternative hypothesis: through transmission of memories, a sense of community is fostered" (88).

4 Narrative techniques such as these are not unique to coming-of-age stories or stories of immigration. The authors are influenced by the literary trends of their day and the past, whether they be classical epic literature, Golden Age Spanish literature, U.S. and European modernism, Latin American boom novels or postmodernism. Nor do all coming-of-age stories or immigration narratives use such techniques. These combinations of themes and styles, however, form felicitous pairings, because, as Priscilla Wald notes, immigrants are not only in transit between countries, but also between narratives (238).

5 Literally, the title is "Journey to the Seed." Ilan Stavans also recognizes a kinship between Alvarez's novel and this story, seeing each as "a journey to the source [...] from maturity to adolescence, from knowledge to naivety" (23).

6 Not all readers find the technique effective in Alvarez. A reviewer for The Virginia Quarterly Review, sounding much like some early critics of My Antonia, complains that there is "no clearly delineated thread or plot" and goes on to note that because of the backward progression of time, "there is no return to storylines that are set up, and because the writing is so effective, some frustration results for the reader" ("Notes" 22).

7 Thanks to my former student Avani Parekh for the interpretation of this image.

8 One result, as Mona Pers notes, is that conflict with friends or relatives at home who cannot understand the immigrant, a common theme in literature by Swedish-American authors, is not present in Cather. Thea, of The Song of the Lark, does return to Europe, if not to Sweden, when she goes to Germany to study opera and Bishop Latour in Death Comes for the Archbishop returns home to France for visits, but they do not move back, or seriously consider doing so.
Works Cited


