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- 1 Stéphanie Durrans, editor, *In the Country of Lost Borders: New Critical Essays on My Ántonia*.
- 2 Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2017. Pp. 188 ISBN: 978-2-84016-257-5
- 3 Amy Doherty Mohr
- 4 *In the Country of Lost Borders: New Critical Essays on My Ántonia*, edited by Stéphanie Durrans, offers intriguing new directions arising from the traditional concerns of Cather scholars: the environment, the experience of migration and immigration, the significance of silences and storytelling. The provocative interpretations include close readings and productive applications of contemporary critical theories. Writing from transcultural perspectives, the scholars counter a regional or national focus. To grasp the significance of this novel, the authors suggest, the reader must practice the qualities associated with sensitivity towards nature—stillness, empathy, and listening, as well as an awareness of tracks, paths, and directions—as they lead to a greater understanding of this evocative novel.
- 5 With an opening epigraph from Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*, editor Stéphanie Durrans applies the notion of “a country of lost borders” to *My Ántonia*, “in which Cather interrogates the borders between humans and their natural environment, between nature and civilization, between Nebraska and the outside world, between languages, cultures, and even between madness and conformity” (10). With a range of scholarship addressing issues related to nature, the environment, disability, ethnicity, and mobility, “this collection points to the amazing modernity of a novel whose concerns are still relevant to 21st-century political and social issues” (13). Such critical readings shed light on the characterization of such marginalized figures as Blind d'Arnault, Marek Shimerda, and the Scandinavian “hired girls,” as well as Ántonia

herself. As Durrans writes, the risk of possession, indicated in the title of the novel (12), extends to the power relations between individuals, who, far from living in isolation, act out the tensions between social groups in this period of increased immigration and migration. In addition to environmental and sociological interpretations, the collection attends to Cather's inimitable "*démeublé* style that would become her trademark in the 1920s" (13), with a focus on silences and symbolic representation. The collection also includes a pedagogical essay addressing the role of place in her novel, using digital technology to trace the significance of geographic and cultural influences. Essays on the significance of *Ántonia's* Bohemian background, and the cultural and literary context of the Czech translation complete the collection.

- 6 The three essays of the first section, "Interacting with Nature," provide interpretations based on environmental and animal studies. In each essay, the author considers the tension between Cather's love of nature and her qualified acceptance of society's impact on the natural environment. In "Bringing the Environmental Muse to Nebraska: An Ecocritical Reading of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," Sarah Dufaure references Lawrence Buell's ecocritical scholarship in her analysis of the relationship among the land, author, and characters. Writing in dialogue with several essays from *Cather Studies*, Volume 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination (2003), she interprets the significance of the land in *My Ántonia*, embodied in her reading of the relationship between "the plow and the pen," with reference to Cather's own comparison, "the pen [is] fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow" (Cather, *My Ántonia*, 143, qtd. in Dufaure 19). Developing the metaphor, Dufaure explains how Cather wrote her way into the canon of American literature through her knowledge of natural and social landscapes. The essay also explores the journey motif in Jim's migrations and internal journey, and the indelible imprint of the land on Jim's character, noting that "his testimony sheds light on how place helps shape human identity, how landscape and mindscape become fundamentally interconnected" (24). Finally, she considers the novel's ambivalence towards human impact, drawing to a thoughtful conclusion: "Cather poetically shows that the human relation to nature is ruled by an ethics of temporary stewardship rather than definitive ownership" (35). With carefully rendered arguments and close reading, unearthing treasures of poetic language, Dufaure offers a compelling interpretation of the novel within the field of environmental studies.

In "To preserve what technology makes us forget': Nature and Wonder in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," Isabel Maria Fernandes Alves opens with the moment of wonder captured in the Jules Breton painting, *The Song of the Lark*. The essay traces the existence of wonder, "understood as an aesthetic response to nature" (38) as a central mode and theme in the novel, connecting characters in their response to nature, and exemplifying Cather's own vision of the natural world. The references to scholarship on enchantment and wonder, including Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001), and James Gibson's *A Reenchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature* (2009), evoke possibility and hope, as well as the risk of detachment from nature in contemporary society. With reference to Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1992), Alves confirms that wonder was central to initial encounters, with European readers seeking "faith in the new visions which characterize much of the literature of the United States, hoping that today, as in the past, the New World may continue to create images that harmoniously combine civilization and wildness" (47). Like Dufaure, Alves questions whether Cather presents an environmental ethic, acknowledging that the "relationship

between humans and nature as depicted in *My Ántonia* becomes more complex and intricate” (43). However, she focusses on the possibilities for affirmation of the individual and community, or “wonder as a state of acute perception and passionate response to the world as well as a way of inclusion and integration” (41). Alves’s writing offers a restorative balm for readers concerned with the impact of technology and consumption on the natural world. She writes that Cather’s “stories promote encounters with enchantment and wonder, fostering an aesthetic—as well as ethical—response to our everyday world” (47). In the end, Alves proves the novel’s rendering of wonder as central to the meaning of the work.

- 7 Françoise Buisson’s “From the Burrow to the Orchard: Representations of Animality in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*” focusses on the various dimensions of the animal in the novel, from characters who have animal qualities, expressed, for example, in the vitality of Ántonia, as well as the destructive natures of such characters as Wick Cutter, or Peter and Pavel. As Jim struggles with his own position in relation to nature, particularly his disenchantment with his life in the city, he returns nostalgically to his relationship with Ántonia, who possesses the vigour that eludes him, in her adventurous childhood, her large family, and her prosperous farm. Within the novel’s circular plot, Alves explores the centrality of animals, both in the development of the U.S., as settlers confronted the wildness of their surroundings, as well as in American storytelling and literary traditions. She carefully reads the palimpsest of Cather’s use of animal imagery, tracing references to animals in her novel to the influences of American historical and oral traditions, the pastoral and the Gothic, and to classical mythology. The essay demonstrates that a thoughtful application of animal studies to Cather’s work produces original, even startling, insights, beyond the readings of the archetypal wolf and snake episodes often mentioned in Cather criticism. Buisson describes the purpose of her project: “to analyze the animal representations in the novel which can throw a light on the relevance of our animal vitality in the American project of both individual and collective migration” (53). With references to the work of Gaston Bachelard, as well as Leo Marx, the essay unites philosophy with studies of literature, culture, and technology as a critical foundation for her analysis. Buisson demonstrates the influence of animals and their function as a depiction of human society, advancing the theme of humans as part of the natural world: “the whole animal world is actually fraught with symbolic values linking energy with creativity, which eventually makes it possible to leave the burrow and plant the orchard, however ambivalent the outcome may be” (53). Through close reading and a broad cultural perspective based in western civilization, Buisson presents a sophisticated analysis of animals, characters, setting, and their confluence in *My Ántonia*.
- 8 The second section, “Interpretive Issues,” addresses innovative ways to teach the novel in terms of space and place, and provides analyses based on themes related to disability, bodies, and storytelling. Emily J. Rau and Gabrielle Kirilloff’s “Geospatial Approaches to Reading and Teaching *My Ántonia*” opens with a quotation from a reference to the “very individual map” of Chicago that Lucy Gayheart “carried in her mind”: “This city of feeling rose out of the city of fact like a definite composition” (Cather, *Lucy Gayheart*, 26-27, qtd. in Rau and Kirilloff 73). Their essay answers the central question: “What if we consider Cather’s third novel, *My Ántonia*, to be her own map of feeling and memory arising out of the map of fact that is the geography of Cather’s time?” (73) With a focus on geospatial narratives, derived from digital analysis,

close reading, and interactive methods combining maps and texts, Rau and Kirilloff encourage their students' awareness of actual locations and emotional and social resonances (85). In an interdisciplinary approach, the study illuminates the personal, historical, and social meanings arising from a location, especially the varied associations with "home," including the migrations that allow for the creation of a new home. The discussion of place and space includes the local, Black Hawk, in its intersections with Red Cloud, Nebraska; references to Italy, influenced by Cather's visit and channeled through Gaston Cleric; and the more imprecise references to Eastern Europe and Russia, based on imaginative connections and distant memories of immigrants. Rather than a concrete sense of place, such references "highlight the dislocation and isolation faced by immigrant communities" (83). Referencing Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) and Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), Rau and Kirilloff provide an educational model at the intersection of literary interpretation, pedagogy, and digital humanities scholarship.

- 9 In "What are Marek Shimerda and Blind d'Arnault doing in Jim's Pastoral? Disabled Presence in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," Florent Dubois presents an incisive reading of Marek Shimerda, often overlooked in Cather analysis, and Blind d'Arnault, addressed in a foundational essay by Elizabeth Ammons, "My Ántonia and African American Art" (1999). Dubois unites the two characters in the context of disability studies. To resist the tendency to read the disabled character as "an overly general signifier of difference" (92), Dubois methodically reveals the various levels of interpretation that can be applied to these characterizations. Like the other essays, the analysis combines close reading of the descriptions of these two characters with substantial research, including medical definitions, anthropological discourse, and the history of the treatment of and discrimination against people with disabilities. The core of the essay focusses on the position of Marek Shimerda and Blind d'Arnault in a place of "wildness" in a novel dedicated to the pastoral, which Dubois considers a "middle landscape" between "nature and civilization" (99), with reference to Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (2000). Contrary to the freedom often associated with the wild in American Studies, however, the marginalization of these disabled characters persists, despite their vital presence in literary and memory (102-4). Dubois convinces the reader of the importance of these marginalized characters, who represent Cather's own interest in the manifestations and implications of disability. The essay, written in dialogue with Cather scholarship, will motivate scholars to reread Cather's work in light of new developments in disability studies scholarship.
- 10 Rita Bode's "Between Silence and Speech: Willa Cather's Speaking Bodies in *My Ántonia*," an original interpretation of storytelling in *My Ántonia*, explores the nuances and implications of the gaps, omissions, and silences of Jim's storytelling, and attends to Ántonia's untold stories, which are suggested in brief passages but undeveloped in Jim's overarching narration. Bode writes, "*My Ántonia* suggests that stories can become elided and repressed, but at the same time, Cather also provides the means to locate and interpret them suggesting possibilities that expand and enrich the narrative" (108). While scholars such as Blanche H. Gelfant have attended to Jim's dominating narrative, as well as its "negations and evasions" (Gelfant 82, qtd. in Bode 108), this essay provides further insights into the silences, the role of the body in storytelling, and, drawing on the research of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "the connection between consciousness and the body in the development of the subjective self" (116). With

reference to familiar passages, as well as those that are too often overlooked in Cather scholarship, Bode examines the silences surrounding *Ántonia's* experiences as an immigrant. Revealing Cather's sensitivity to those living on the margins, Bode's reading reveals commonalities across the boundaries of racial and ethnic identification. Such a reading offers an alternative to the focus on the use of stereotypes, particularly in the case of *Blind d'Arnault*, in scholarship by Elizabeth Ammons (1999) and Linda Joyce Brown (2004). Instead, Bode makes a compelling case for a "counter narrative" (117) based on points of convergence between characters that would seem to occupy separate social spheres. With convincing interpretations, Bode presents original ways of reading silence and ethnicity in Cather's novel.

- 11 In "Storytelling in *My Ántonia*," Brigitte Zaugg examines the contradictions in structure and point of view of the novel, in Jim's recollections as a supposedly "detached observer" (Bohlke 44, qtd. in Zaugg 127); to the contrary, his emotional connection to *Ántonia* belies the appearance of detachment. The essay methodically reveals the form beneath the formlessness in the collection of images, a "story gallery" or a "patchwork of stories that are pieced together by the narrator/quilter" (135), with vivid images of people and places along with memorable scenes from the stories themselves. Zaugg develops the metafictional reading in a focus on the introduction to the novel, and ultimately proves that Cather achieves the effects of authenticity, interconnection, nostalgia, and suspense through an artful rendering of the oral stories, which contribute to her literary masterpiece. A concise and meaningful interpretation, the essay provides a clear analysis of the novel's structure, style, and effect, as both Jim and *Ántonia* speak from the heart (140). In her conclusion, Zaugg writes, "All the vignettes that constitute Jim's narrative—though they are sometimes loosely held together—add up, converge, and build a multifaceted, three-dimensional picture of the people and the country" (140). The essay follows the creative process as memories transform into a novel, with the metafictional narrative testifying to the collaboration behind its creation.
- 12 In "How *Ántonia* Became 'My' *Ántonia*: the 'New' Immigrant Woman as a Model American," Aušra Paulauskienė traces the significance of Cather's pluralist representation of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. She focusses on Cather's "pluralist stance" (160) in her portrayal of *Ántonia* as a thriving and spiritually vital Bohemian, opposing the typical cultural divide between Eastern immigrants and Northern European immigrants, which often subordinated Czechs along a spectrum of whiteness. The author provides a history of the period of the 1880's and 1910's, considering the influx of immigrants and the backlash of nativists, which, she argues, Cather counters in her novels. Although the characters may sometimes evoke the stereotypes of the time, she proves that Cather possessed deep respect for and understanding of the immigrants who became her friends in Nebraska, an empathy that may have escaped the established white population in the more "heterogeneous New York of the 1910s, where the abundance of new immigrants fed nativist sentiments, while the diversity of cultures suggested a necessity for a new model of co-existence" (145). Paulauskienė writes in dialogue with the readings of plurality and nativism in Cather's work, drawing on the work of Walter Benn Michaels (1995), Ann Moseley (1995), and the recent scholarship of Julianne Newmark, who "categorizes Cather among writers who endorse 'plurality represented by specific places'" (xi, qtd. in Paulauskienė 147). Paulauskienė provides a foundation for an analysis of the immigrant groups Cather knew best, captured in the "simplicity of a rural Central/East

European culture that harmoniously integrates art, spirituality and rootedness” (158). Cather supports their honored place in her memory in a novel that “advocates acceptance of ‘new’ immigrants or even a regional fusion between Americans and new Europeans” (160).

- 13 Evelyn Funda’s “Our Toni’/Our Willa: Laying Claims in the First Czech Translation of *My Ántonia*” is a fascinating study of the origins of the Czech translation based on extensive research and personal knowledge of Czech language and culture. Funda confirms Cather’s knowledge and understanding of this culture, as demonstrated in the endorsement of her Czech translator, Karel Pelant, in a preface to the novel, translated by Funda in an appendix to her essay. Along with tracing the publishing history, the essay addresses the cultural significance of *Ántonia*’s embodiment of the population of the Czech settlers in Nebraska, rising above the challenges of environment and society, integrating while still maintaining their cultural background and beliefs. With reference to Pelant’s preface, Funda explains the significance of *Ántonia* as a representation of cultural pluralism, and her treasured place in Czech literary culture through the translation of *My Ántonia* (177). Funda proves that Cather’s Czech readers connected with *Ántonia*’s iconic presence as a pioneer who personifies the experience and influence of Czech immigrants in the U.S. Thus, Funda proves Cather’s remarkable transcultural affinity, nurtured in her friendship with Annie Sadilek Pavelka, and informed by her own research and connection with members of the Czech community in Nebraska. Yet, Funda convincingly argues, Cather’s cultural connection goes beyond sympathy and understanding. Indeed, the essay proves the ways in which “Cather has untangled the labyrinth of the Czech soul” (177), a remarkable feat in its own time and today.
- 14 This collection deserves special notice in Cather Studies as a significant contribution to the ongoing critical debates regarding culture, mobility, and environment in Cather’s work, and as a testament to the profound and continuing influence of *My Ántonia* on literary scholarship.

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