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***“Between that earth and that sky”:
The Idealized Horizon of Willa Cather’s
My Ántonia***

Miriam A. Gonzales

At times, it feels like marriage is the only endpoint for literary characters that have been placed in each other’s paths. It is difficult to be certain from the beginning that *Pride and Prejudice*’s Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy will fall in love and marry despite her early resistance, or that the lovers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* will find their better halves even as parents interfere and fairies meddle, but it becomes obvious as we read on that the couples in these texts will all reach this form of romantic fruition. In the century since its initial publication, numerous readers have cast Jim Burden and Ántonia Shimerda—the narrator and subject, respectively, of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*—as one of those pairs. Instead, I offer in this essay the idea that while the two may be “meant for” each other, their connection, while it nurtures both characters, also lacks a conventional romantic or sexual understanding. The idea of a thwarted romance between the two is not new: Cather highlights both Ántonia’s masculinity and Jim’s femininity, making it easy for some critics to read their relationship as homosocial, rather than heteronormative. However, I propose that it is the tie to nature that the author has given Jim and Ántonia, as well as a queer theoretical model that illuminates this concept, which instead explains this pair’s platonic distance.

All of this evidence notwithstanding, it may still be tempting to view this project at first glance as the story of two characters who will eventually fall into some sort of romantic entanglement. However, Cather dismisses this idea in the text’s opening pages when the nameless narrator of the novel’s introduction informs us that she does not care for the woman who, “[for] some reason...wishes to remain

Mrs. James Burden,” and who is not *Ántonia* (712). From this narrator, we also learn that Jim’s lingering memories of his childhood companion are fond and detailed, clearly colored by the pair’s enduring connection. However, it is Cather’s choice to leave the portion of their relationship between childhood, when the two were each other’s closest companions, and early adulthood, which sees them become unsuccessfully involved with others, open to interpretation, thus allowing for readings that both affirm and deny the possibility of a connection that reaches beyond non-romantic or nonsexual friendship. Among those who subscribe to the latter idea is feminist critic Judith Fetterley. In her essay, “*My Ántonia*, Jim Burden, and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer,” Fetterley claims that Jim and *Ántonia* end up married to others not because of any specific textual reason, but because Jim’s inherent femaleness, as she writes, casts the two as a lesbian couple, making it culturally and legally impossible for the two to wed (158). While I appreciate Fetterley’s careful attention to Cather’s text, I must also disagree with her: it is only in considerations of domestic affairs that either character resists an easy gendering, and many of the aspects about which Fetterley writes grow fainter as the narrative proceeds.

In search of a different and potentially affirming view, I seek clarification through the words of queer theorist and critic José Esteban Muñoz, who has written about the practice of queerness as that of an ongoing search for a utopic future. In his essay “Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism,” Muñoz introduces an idea that he calls the “Not-Yet-Conscious,” which represents a logic of futurity rather than one that is strictly dependent upon the present (452). Questioning the reasoning of those who are preoccupied with the idea of a fixed past or present tense, Muñoz entreats readers to consider instead a search for a future that we may not yet believe exists—a horizon, or that which is both imaginable and potentially visible while still remaining intangible and technically nonexistent. This is one way of understanding Jim’s relationship with and to *Ántonia*: the two grow (and remain) close, even though they are out of each others’ sights for long stretches of time, thus acknowledging the atemporal aspects of Muñoz’s theory. The relationship that these two form early on is profound enough to allow each of them some sense of certainty regarding the other’s

eventual reentry into his or her life, thus illustrating the future leanings of Muñoz's horizontality. Simultaneously, each character appears secure in their knowledge of the other's undertakings, and each has their own images of what may have occurred during their years apart—essentially imagining an unknown present paralleling his or her own life.

Cather's text would seem to confirm this interpretation of Jim and *Ántonia's* relationship. Early in Jim's narrative, which tells of his life both alongside and separated from *Ántonia*, the author employs descriptive language linking Jim to the sky and *Ántonia* to the earth—sky and earth, of course, being the two elements that are visually and definitionally necessary to the concept of a horizon. "I remembered what the conductor had said about [*Ántonia's*] eyes," Jim muses. "They were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark color" (727). For both Jim and the reader, these colors and textures tie *Ántonia* to the Nebraska prairie in which both characters reside—the "rich, dark color" of her cheeks echoes the initial description of the land around Jim's grandparents' house as "...the color of wine-stains" and her brown skin and eyes recall the "soft brown earth" in which their crops are planted (722-723). Even later in the text, after *Ántonia* moves to town to work for the family next door to Jim's new home, the same descriptive elements linger: "She has such fine brown legs and arms," enthuses the family's eldest daughter, "and splendid color in her cheeks—like those big dark red plums" (810).

While not connected quite so closely as *Ántonia* is to the earth, Jim nonetheless carries with him an association with the prairie sky. Upon their first meeting, the new-to-the-United States *Ántonia* can barely communicate in English and Jim speaks no Bohemian, *Ántonia's* native language. The two are compelled to employ a sort of visual shorthand in order to connect with each other, which *Ántonia* commences almost immediately. "*Ántonia* pointed to the sky," Jim explains, "and questioned me with her glance. I gave her the word, but she was not satisfied and pointed to my eyes...She pointed up to the sky, then to my eyes, then back to the sky... 'Oh,' I exclaimed, 'blue; blue sky'" (729). This coloring persists into his middle age, as readers will recall the introduction's narrator describing Jim for the

first time: “His fresh color and sandy hair and quick-changing blue eyes are those of a young man...” (712). The language with which Cather depicts both Jim and *Ántonia* changes very little over the course of her novel, making it clear that she wished these interpretations to linger with her readers. According to Joan Acocella’s profile, “Cather and the Academy,” the Nebraska landscape served as a “bonanza” for both Cather the observant child and Cather the author (59-60). Cather’s connection to her adolescent home stayed intact even long after she relocated to the East Coast. It is possible that her characters are reminders of her own Nebraska childhood and adolescence, and that she wanted to secure them to her geographic past.

Perhaps, however, there is a different explanation at work. Recent readings of Cather’s oeuvre have tended toward casting both the author and her characters in a queer light; I concur, at least to the degree that Jim and *Ántonia* both represent aspects of a more generously queer, rather than a specifically gay or lesbian, stance. This becomes legible when we juxtapose *My Ántonia* with “Queerness as Horizon.” While Muñoz employs language that does not specifically refer to any of Cather’s work, it certainly echoes much of it. For instance, it is quite conceivable—from a traditionally gay- or lesbian-focused viewpoint—to relate *Ántonia* and her apt hand at farmwork to a more traditionally masculine stance as Marilee Lindemann does in her essay “Filling Out Nice,” from the book *Willa Cather: Queering America* (64), much as it seems easy to assign Jim to a feminine one due to his comfort in domestic and female-populated settings, as illustrated in Fetterley’s piece (156-157). Using Muñoz’s text as a guide, however, means that we must not necessarily reassign the genders with which Cather has inscribed each character. Rather, we might instead designate them as “queer,” or non-normative in a way that exists even outside of more familiar non-normative behaviors: “[The queer category] is drawn,” Muñoz writes, “to tastes, ideologies, and aesthetics that can only seem odd, strange, or indeed queer, next to the muted striving of the practical and normalcy-desiring homosexual” (458). Although no single character in *My Ántonia* might be paradoxically described as “traditionally” homosexual, Jim and (particularly) *Ántonia* stand out against their contemporaries due to their outsider positions—Jim is transplanted to

Nebraska as an orphan at the age of ten, while *Ántonia*'s family relocates around the same time and becomes the first Bohemian family in the area (Cather 715 and 724-725). The two are naturally drawn to each other from their initial meeting, though not necessarily because of romance, or proximity of locality and age. Instead, it is because each of them is able to recognize the inherent queerness of the other when compared to those who surround them.

This attraction, as Cather illustrates, continues into adulthood. The adult Jim narrates his story from a future that looks back upon his childhood and adolescence, so each allusion to romance that we might discern in Cather's text can be read as the lingering affective resonance of his past relationship with *Ántonia* illuminating the way the two interact in Jim's writerly present. Though we may continue seek out hints of a romantic involvement, Muñoz's argument allows us to understand that those ideas might not actually be located in the text: "[The past] has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things...These ephemeral traces [of the past], flickering illuminations from other times and places, are sites that may indeed appear merely romantic, even to themselves. Nonetheless they assist those of us who wish to follow queerness' promise...to see something else" (459). Jim demonstrates that he recognizes the influence the past has had upon his lingering relationship to *Ántonia* in a passage depicting their brief reunion after his time away at college. "Do you know, *Ántonia*," Jim intones, "since I've been away, I think of you more often than of any one else in this part of the world. I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to a man...You really are a part of me" (Cather 910). Jim is oddly nonspecific here for a character that we may read as potentially in love with the person to whom he speaks – rather than making a romantic overture to *Ántonia*, he instead expresses a desire to simply have her present in his life and in some form of relation to him.

In the chapter "Other Names" from the book *Willa Cather and Others*, Jonathan Goldberg explains the tendency that this pair has toward parallelism and horizontality by emphasizing the significance of the differences between the two characters: "...Jim's marriage to someone who is the same as he is...is opposed to the kind of union he might have had—and, in a displaced fashion, does with *Ántonia*."

Across time and distance, they are coupled (but not married to each other)” (32). These same terms might be used to describe the visual concept of the horizon. No matter where any of us stands in relation to what we perceive as the junction of earth and sky, we must acknowledge and accept that the two follow each other in perpetuity without ever physically connecting. This is doubly true for Jim and *Ántonia*, who spend significant periods of time separated from each other—while the coloring of the sky and the earth may change, the two continue to parallel each other, even across great distances.

Although both Jim and *Ántonia* ultimately marry others who are more like each of them, Cather’s novel does end on a note that acknowledges not only a future for their relationship, but also the bearing that the past and the present might have upon it. *My Ántonia* closes with Jim reflecting upon a return to his childhood home—which has led to a reunion with *Ántonia* after twenty years apart—while musing upon his intended travels not with *Ántonia*, but instead with her sons and husband. “To the south,” Jim reflects, “I could see the dun-shaded river bluffs that used to look so big to me, and all about stretched drying cornfields, of the pale-gold color I remembered so well...my mind was full of pleasant things; trips I meant to take with the Cuzak boys, in the Bad Lands and up on the stinking water. There were enough Cuzaks to play with for a long while yet” (936). In this passage, it is possible to discern both Cather’s insistence upon the importance of the interplay of earth and sky and Muñoz’s designs of a queer utopic futurity – the futurity of Jim’s imagination—that demands the inclusion of past and present:

To critique an overarching “here and now” is not to turn one’s face away from the everyday. Roland Barthes wrote that the mark of the utopian is the quotidian. Such an argument would stress that the utopian is an impulse that we see in everyday life. This impulse is to be glimpsed as something that is extra to the everyday transaction of heteronormative capitalism. This quotidian example of the utopian can be glimpsed in utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment...[which is] clearly rooted in observation of the affective realm of the present. Yet there is an excess [that is

also conveyed], a type of affective excess that presents the enabling force of a forward dawning futurity that is queerness. (Muñoz 454-455)

As he wanders through the deceptively ordinary Nebraska landscape, Jim creates a set of ideals regarding his prospective relationship not *with*, but rather *to*, *Ántonia*, her family, and their prairie surroundings, recalling the notion of a utopic futurity tied to a quotidian present. However, as Muñoz reminds us, Jim would not have anything concrete upon which to hang his hopes without bringing the lingering effects of the past into his fantasies.

For Jim Burden, the concepts of locality and temporality are inextricably linked to his relationship with *Ántonia*. The bond that connects the two is dependent upon both his own personal history and the landscape that he associates with that period of his life. Cather's text explicitly draws these connections to the Nebraska prairie of Jim's youth and provides readers with evidence of its importance to the story that these two characters share. By placing this narrative in conversation with Muñoz's language—which asks us to connect these locative elements to those of Jim's past, present, and potential but as-yet-unrealized future—we can see that Jim and *Ántonia*'s relationship, equally affirming for both characters, should be read not as a failed romance, but instead as the queerly platonic horizon that it is.

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