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On Not Naming *I*: Onomastic Absence in Cather's *My Ántonia* (Or, The Name Démeublé)

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> She looked at me, her eyes fairly blazing with things she could not say. "Name? What name?" she asked, touching me on the shoulder.
>
> Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, p. 19

> I would say that this desire is at work in every proper name: translate me, don't translate me.
>
> Jacques Derrida, in Christie McDonald's *The Ear of the Other*, p. 102

Abstract
There is a prevalent critical tendency to name *My Ántonia*'s unnamed introductory narrator (in either its original or its revised incarnation) Willa Cather, "Willa Cather," or lesbian sexuality; "On Not Naming *I*" treats the impetus to identify and nominate the narrator as a catachrestic attempt to impose understanding on what remains a beguiling gap. *I* narrates the story of the conception, generation, and dissemination—via *I* as its mediating agent—of Jim's memoir, witnessing a history from which *I* is absent and that Jim describes as "incommunicable." The unnamed, unclaimed, equivocal *I* embodies a Catherian aesthetics compellingly rife with contradiction, a Catherian history legibly lined with loss and indirection.

Keywords
Cather, *My Ántonia*, names, history, gap, figuration, absence, witness, trauma, indirection

There are ostensibly two authors of *My Ántonia*: Willa Cather, who wrote the 1918 novel, and her protagonist Jim Burden, who writes the identically-named elegiac memoir within the novel. Jim's narrative, with its romantic, sentimental nostalgia for which Cather's novel has been both admired and vilified, offers a retrospective account of his former and his revived friendship with the Bohemian immigrant, Ántonia Shimerda, as well as the pioneer past—the places and the people—that they share. There is, of course, another fictional author who makes a crucial, albeit fleeting, even fleeing, appearance: the unnamed narrator of the Introductions—for there are two[1]—to Jim's memoir. In the original Introduction, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1918, the narrator is a woman who promises, but fails, to write her own memoir to share with Jim. Excised from the revised version (for the publisher's reissue of the novel in 1926) are the narrator's gender, her expressed intention to write, and the bulk of her description of Jim's wife, whom the narrator strongly dislikes.[2]

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[1]I allude here to another of what Jonathan Goldberg calls Cather's "double starts" (*Willa Cather* 3), Cather's 1931 *Colophon* essay about *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers!* entitled "My First Novels (There Were Two)."

[2] In this paper, I cite Houghton Mifflin's *My Ántonia* (1995), in which "Willa Cather's Original Introduction to the 1918 Edition" appears as an appendix and the revised 1926 version as the Introduction. The revised Introduction differs from the original not only in its abridged content, but also in its visual presentation: strikingly, the revised Introduction is fully italicized. Few critics note this italicization; fewer still abide by the italicization when citing it (Gelfant is a notable exception). To my mind, this is a crucial oversight, especially given Cather's well-documented concern with the visual aesthetics of her texts. In letters to both Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton Mifflin, and R. L. Scaife, the production editor at Houghton Mifflin, Cather discusses the "visual effect[s]" of *My Ántonia* (I cite here the digital *A Calendar of Letters*, which provides paraphrases of Cather's letters; Cather's will famously bars scholars from direct citation): "Will try to finish the manuscript in time for fall publication. Doesn't want illustrations unless she can find just the right person. Would like a cover of dark blue with perhaps a bright yellow jacket" (Letter 0383 to R. L. Scaife); "Wants same type as *O Pioneers!* on rough, cream-colored paper. Please send proofs of the pages they set for

While critics disagree about the effect of these Introductions, there is a prevalent critical tendency to name the introductory figure (in either incarnation) Willa Cather and to claim that the storyteller that she introduces, Jim Burden, is a dissembled version of her.[3] In my reading, such naming is a catachrestic attempt to impose understanding where it is not, to fill in and to stabilize what remains a critical, and critically intriguing, lacuna. To resist the impetus to identify and to name *My Ántonia*'s introductory narrator immediately calls into question the title of the novel, that not only names, but names in the possessive; not naming, on the other

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the dummy, so she can see the visual effect" (Letter 0398 to Greenslet); "Sending back twenty-seven corrected galleys. Please send proofs of the eight Benda drawings so she can mark where they come in the text" (Letter 0420 to Greenslet); "Likes the appearance of the volume, though she wishes the paper were a yellower cream color" (Letter 0434 to Scaife); "Why have the Benda drawings been dropped from *My Ántonia*? At least they could drop the line on the title page referring to the drawings, if they're going to do that. Would like them to be restored and once she can get her possessions out of storage, can provide the originals if the plates are too worn" (Letter 1028 to Greenslet). Cather's careful attention to all aspects of *My Ántonia*'s aesthetic suggests to me that the "visual effect" of the italics should not be disregarded or discarded; accordingly, I italicize all citations from the revised Introduction and refer to its narrator as *I*. I call the original Introduction's narrator "I" (the quotation marks differentiating between the first person of that Introduction and the first person of this essay). For a detailed history of the novel's composition and production, including analysis of letters from Greenslet and Scaife to Cather and vice versa, see the "Textual Commentary" in Charles Mignon's edition of *My Ántonia* (481-521).

[3] This is especially true of critics who read Jim's story as Cather's own and construct the signifying chain as follows: Cather is indubitably *I*, and *I* is a dissimulated Jim, whose memoir is actually Cather's fictionalized autobiography. In her Introduction to *New Essays on My Ántonia*, Sharon O'Brien acknowledges the text's autobiographical dimensions but notes that it is important to remember that it is a work of fiction. She writes that in *My Ántonia*, "Cather most fully transformed memory into art" and that several childhood friends inspired Cather's characters, especially "Annie Pavelka, who was the source for Ántonia Shimerda. The story of narrator Jim Burden's childhood uprooting from Virginia and transplanting to Nebraska was also Cather's own" (1). O'Brien immediately reminds her readers, however, that "[o]f course the novel is fiction" (1).

hand, renders suspect the identifactory claim. Not to name and not to claim a proper name for *My Ántonia*'s introductory figure creates a critical position of unknowing even as it installs another teller, another point of view, in the narrative; this narrator becomes another "I" to which the titular possessive adjective, "My", may correspond, vexing reference from the outset. I read the introductory narrator as a beguiling gap, a figure for a Catherian aesthetics rife with contradiction, somewhere and sometime between Cather and Jim rather than necessarily and simply a figure for either or both. A "between" figure who thus comprises both a gap and link, the introductory narrator is an unnamed Catherian character whose putative lack—of name, of story—has much to tell; as Jim's first reader, *I* is another—and an other—eye (and ear), a departing and betimes returning reminder of history as necessarily "unclaimed experience," to borrow Cathy Caruth's phrase.[4]

Despite both his title's possessive adjective, "My," and his manuscript's concluding line, in which he claims to possess "the past" (238), Jim cannot possess a past that inextricably eludes his grasp. Cathy Caruth articulates the inherently traumatic nature of memory and history in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*; she argues that the "peculiar and paradoxical experience of trauma" (11), as well as the central problems of "listening, of knowing, and of representing" (5) that emerge from it, offer the "the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential" (11). Her understanding of history in terms of its indirect referentiality "does not deny or eliminate the possibility of reference but insists, precisely, on the inescapability of its belated impact" (7). Moreover, this "rethinking of reference" (11), with its "delayed appearance" and "belated address" (4), is not "aimed at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where understanding may not" (11). Using an accident as an exemplary scene of trauma,

[4] I say "betimes returning" because, in various editions of the novel (including the one that I cite here), the two Introductions bookend Jim's narrative; *I* gets the first and the last word, and its voice is the first and last that I hear. The phrase "unclaimed experience" comes from Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.

Caruth is not interested in the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but in the fact that "the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself" (17). Caruth then argues that the

> experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never fully be known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.
> (17)

Caruth's theorization of history as experience that we attempt to grasp always belatedly and to which we do not have direct access is useful for understanding Jim's writing as a historical act and his text as a historical event. As *My Ántonia*'s initial narrator, *I* sets up and situates Jim's history; moreover, in arising in place where easy understanding and direct reference are not, *I* embodies the inherently traumatic nature of history, the lapse or gap that constitutes—that is—experience as Caruth theorizes it. In the Introduction, *I* designates Ántonia as "*a central figure*" (2) for the past, not "the" central or the only figure; *I* is an equally important figure who queers Jim's history—not because *I* is Cather, but because its narrative vexes Jim's claim to Ántonia and the history for which she is made to stand.[5] While *I* and Jim treat the

[5]I borrow this concept of queering history from Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon. Although they do not cite Caruth in their "Queering History," Goldberg and Menon are similarly interested in a different approach to and understanding of history. Queering history, which they also call unhistoricism, "insists on queering historicism, with all its concomitant notions of ontology, teleology, and authenticity" (1610); queering history requires questioning the presuppositions of a historicism that claims a "determinate and knowable identity, past and present" (1609). History, for Goldberg and Menon as for Caruth, as well as for Cather, is comprised as much by what cannot as what can be known. The prefix "un" ("expressing negation" [*OED* 1]) in Caruth's notion of history as "unclaimed experience," in Goldberg and Menon's

eponymous Ántonia as a metonym for history, the anonymous *I* is also a central figure of and for a history that resists disclosure and bears witness to multiple absences; the equivocal *I* embodies a Catherian history lined with loss and indirection. *I*, who first introduces the concept of figuration, figures the "departure" (13)—the leaving the scene of an accident—that Caruth theorizes as the very possibility of history.

Like Jim Burden and Ántonia Shimerda, Jim and *I* are "*old friends*"; *I* recalls that, "*[l]ast summer*," they "*happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train*" (1), a happy accident that occasions mutual reminisces of their shared Nebraskan past. Ironically, the repressive, suppressive elements—the heat that wilts, the wind that burns, the dust that overlays—conjure memory: they "*reminded us of many things*" (1). Having grown up "*together in the same Nebraska town*" and finding themselves on the "*same*" train, the landscape through which their train "*flashed*" and at which Jim and *I* peered from "*the observation car*" (1) seems to evoke the same memories of small town prairie life, of its vegetation and its climate, of its colours and its smells, and of Ántonia as a metonym for the whole of it:

> *During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had both known long ago. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. I had lost sight of her altogether, but Jim had found her again after long years, and had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him. His mind was full of her that day. He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her.*
> (2)

If *I* is merely a dissembled Jim, presumably they have the same story to tell and, indeed, the Introduction repeatedly suggests such seeming sameness. Ántonia, that figure ostensibly "*lost*" and "*found*," "*seemed to mean*" the same for *I* as for Jim. Not only do their memories appear undifferentiated, so, too, do their voices: "*We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said*" (1). Although

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concept of "unhistoricism," and in my attention to "unnaming" foregrounds a contradictory and resistant history.

their shared history cements a bond between them, simply to collapse their stories is to neglect the crucial gap between them, and, in effect, to neglect the Introduction's narrative, which tells stories that are nowhere to be found in Jim's: *I* offers a retrospective account of his/her abiding friendship with Jim, of how Jim's story came to be, and of the way in which *I* shares Jim's story—both in the sense of partaking in its past and in the sense of passing it on to a wider audience. Jim's text is framed by a narrative of its history; our way into Jim's "My Ántonia," our point of departure, is indirect, via a history of its history. The history that *I* offers remains external to Jim's, functioning as its para or extratextual material, articulating from the outset stories missing from Jim's ostensibly authentic and authoritative history. *I* is, then, simultaneously a figure of loss and of excess, demonstrating the generative potential of loss, the possibility—even necessity—of telling the story differently; loss, in other words, requires other words, a telling otherwise.

The Introduction establishes and emphasizes a kind of acknowledged inaccessibility that becomes a central theme in Jim's narrative. Jim and *I* say "*freemasonry*" (a "secret or tacit relationship of brotherhood or mutual support; instinctive sympathy, rapport, or fellow feeling between people with something in common" [*OED* 3]), paradoxically announcing what they name a secret and silent affiliation. In writing the "tacit," *I* gives voice to the "unvoiced" and words to the "wordless" (*OED* 1), rendering their relation an open secret.[6] As Jim's first audience, *I* simultaneously

[6]The diction of open secrecy resonates with various queer readings of *My Ántonia*; such readings often focus on ways to claim Cather as a lesbian forebear—as one of ours—"and to understand her art in the context of her life" (Fetterley 146). This approach reads Jim's love of and affection for characters such as Ántonia and Lena Lingard as an indirect expression of Cather's lesbianism (see Fetterley as well as Joanna Russ, for example). I suggest, however, that we need not limit the queer potential of the text to Cather or to her lesbianism. Not naming or gendering *I*, for example, potentially renders the identificatory bond between *I* and Jim an open secret between men, animating the fraternal connotations of the term "freemasonry." I suggest this reading not to refute or to deny the lesbian potential of the text, but, rather, to open up the interpretive possibilities of the secret instead of claiming finally to know and to access its contents.

passes on Jim's story to other readers and announces that very few of us can know anything about it. This is an extraordinary introductory claim—that, despite reading their accounts, I, "*who had not grown up in little prairie town*" (1), cannot "*know anything about*" (1) their past; Jim and *I* claim to be bound by mutual knowledge and understanding from which they announce that I am excluded. In proclaiming freemasonry, *I* and Jim effectively anticipate the concluding line of Jim's memoir: "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past" (238). Of course, "we" here refers to Jim and Ántonia, but this expression of mutual possession—and the impossibility of communicating its object—applies equally to *I* and Jim. The opening clause of Jim's final line, however, mitigates the subsequent claim of possession, acknowledges unnamed things "missed," thereby suggesting a crucial dispossession of the "incommunicable past." Jim's history is inexorably tinged with—and haunted by—"[w]hatever" is "miss[ing]."

I is one name for the missing that is intrinsic to history. Although Jim and *I* articulate a freemasonic bond based on their shared history, Jim tellingly excludes *I* from his narrative of that very history. When Jim hands over his manuscript to *I*, he makes a case for the connotative power of Ántonia's name: Jim tells *I* that he "'*simply wrote down pretty much all that her names recalls to me*'" (2). Ántonia's name is a point of departure that leads Jim in sundry directions, recalling so many others to Jim, a number of which appear as the Book titles of his memoir. With the possible exception of "The Pioneer Woman's Story," the Book titles proclaim the telling of stories other than and in addition to Ántonia's: "The Shimerdas," "The Hired Girls," "Lena Lingard," "Cuzak's Boys." Ántonia's name recalls to Jim so many other names, so many other stories—but what about *I*? We meet *I* in the prefatory remarks, but if *I* appears at all in Jim's historical memoir—after all, they "*grew up together*" (1)—there is nothing to indicate which character *I* might be. At the outset, then, this anonymous other effectively disappears after yielding—and yielding to—Jim's narratorial presence.

Critics who attend to the narrator's disappearing act do not agree about its effect on Jim's narrative, but most posit that its importance hinges on Cather's gender and sexuality. In her chapter entitled "'Dangerous Crossing': Willa Cather's Masculine Names"

in *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues that Jim's masculine authority depends upon this obscure figure who opens the narrative and "dissimulates" via the "feminine convention" (148) of transferring the narrative to masculine authority, disappearing "into an almost illegible anonymity" (145) as the means "finally to 'possess' the text that she appears to give away" (148). For Butler, this precarious possession is a productive scene of lesbian sexuality. Butler describes the introductory figure as a "receding mark, one who enacts the withdrawal into anonymity, a pronominal mark which comes to erase itself, thereby becoming the unspoken condition that reappears as a nonthematic textual disruption within the very matrix of heterosexual convention" (146). Against those—especially Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—who argue that prohibitive forces closet lesbian presence in Cather's texts, Butler argues that it "is less that the legibility of lesbianism is perpetually endangered in Cather's text than that lesbian sexuality within the text is produced as a perpetual challenge to legibility" (145).[7] While I agree with Butler that *I* is not easy to read, my interest in the "challenge to legibility" that *I* poses takes a decidedly different turn. Rather than

[7]Butler and Sedgwick offer contrasting stratagems for reading the love that putatively "dare not speak its name" in Cather's texts. In her "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that cross-writing or cross-identification (that is, writing as men or as male homosexuals) marks Cather's oppressed and/or suppressed lesbianism—that such self-censoring masks may be removed to reveal and to name an underlying "truth" of identity. According to Sedgwick, "what become visible" in Cather's identificatory refractions and translations "are the shadows of the brutal suppressions by which a lesbian love did not in Willa Cather's time and culture freely become visible as itself" (69). Sedgwick's reasoning here relies on a specious narrative of inevitable, eventual, temporal progression and revelation: while it may have been impossible for "lesbian love" in Cather's "time and culture" to "freely become visible as itself," it would not remain impossible. In other words, the progress of history yields freedom and visibility—the freedom of visibility. In this reading, history is capable of freeing Cather from the cages of her own closet, and the lesbian is a desideratum that lies waiting, reading to be exposed as such and without change. While Sedgwick's approach expects that lesbian sexuality is available for archival recovery and articulation, Butler treats the lesbian as a mutable byproduct of that very expectation.

rendering the challenge legible and naming it as lesbian sexuality or as Cather, I focus instead on the Introduction's presentment of the legibility of anonymity, the unknowing that inheres in its unnamable narrator.

Where Butler sees subversive sexed and gendered potential in the introductory narrator, Marilee Lindemann sees instead a dispiriting dispossession of Cather's own story, a figurative annihilation of female voice and authority. Lindemann names the introductory narrator "Cather" (the quotation marks signaling the difference between Cather the author and "Cather" the author-persona)[8] and reads her departure from the narrative as a disempowering self-censorship: "Unwilling or unable to offer a glimpse of 'her' Ántonia, 'Cather' stands as a sign of Cather's deep skepticism about women's ability to compete in the contest to figure themselves in a culturally powerful way" (119). While Butler argues that the narrator's transfer of authority is a "false" one that allows "her" ultimately to possess the text that "she" only feigns giving over, Lindemann argues that "Cather's" transfer of the narrative signals Cather's capitulation to masculinist imperative. In arguing that *I* comprises a gap, I map out a theoretical middle ground, locating *I* between Butler's "all" and Lindemann's "nothing" when it comes to the question of its disrupting and subversive effect. While Butler argues that *I* ultimately "facilitates the claim to the text that she only appears to give away" (148) and Lindemann contends that "Cather" does nothing "to challenge the larger claim Jim makes to Ántonia" (119), I argue that *I* is more ambiguous—and contradictory—than either critic allows. *I*

[8] Lindemann notes that she follows Jean Schwind in differentiating between the real and the literary Cather with the use of quotation marks ("It Ain't My Prairie" 112). Schwind, however, inconsistently differentiates. For example: "At the opening of *My Ántonia*, 'Cather' happens to meet Jim Burden—an old friend who now works as a lawyer for 'one of the great Western railways'—on a train. [. . .] Cather and Jim continually return to a 'central figure' who summarizes the 'whole adventure of [their] childhood' in the West" (51). "Cather" should appear in quotation marks in both instances here to signal that it is the intratextual narrator/character to whom Schwind refers. The effect of Schwind's irregular punctuation is to collapse rather than to separate Cather and "Cather."

challenges Jim's claim to Ántonia, not by fully possessing Jim and his narrative (which is Butler's contention) or by claiming "her" own Ántonia (which is what Lindemann laments that "Cather" fails to do), but, rather, by highlighting the very impossibility of claiming or possessing Ántonia and the history that she figures, an impossibility epitomized by the equivocal *I*.

One way to maintain the play of ambiguity and contradiction of the Catherian text is not to name or to claim *I*. In "The Novel Démeublé," Cather encourages writers to present "their scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration" (*Not Under Forty* 48). Although Butler does not cite "The Novel Démeublé" in her argument, her contention that the Catherian lesbian is produced via indirect routes and as a profound "challenge to legibility" (145) is strikingly similar to Cather's famous aesthetic assertion that

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.
> (50)

What is this "inexplicable presence" of which Cather speaks if not "a challenge to legibility"? Although she engages with the revised Introduction—in which *I* remains ungendered—Butler genders this ungendered *I* with her use of the pronoun "she," reinforcing her suggestion that Cather "is perhaps the anonymous one who dictates what Jim narrates" (148). Butler assigns the introductory, disrupting anonymity a specific authorial agency, attributing great force to its precarious possession; thus, she effectively mutes the qualifying "almost" of her assertion that *I* is "an almost illegible anonymity" (145) by reading and rendering its anonymity legible as ("perhaps" Cather's) lesbian sexuality. But what if we did not name the "thing not named" Cather or Cather's sexuality, whether empowered or disempowered? While lesbian sexuality is certainly one translation of the "the thing not named," it is not the only

translation.[9] That unnamed "thing" is an open and ambiguous signifier without a fixed signified. Indeed, the desire specifically and singularly to name the Catherian "thing not named" runs counter to the very theory that begets it—a theory that posits that the unnamed presence is constituted in and by its very inexplicability. As an "inexplicable presence" the ear discerns without hearing, perhaps the unnamed thing represents a paradigmatic untranslatability—paradoxically rendering untranslatability a possible translation of the "thing not named." Thus, while I concur with Schwind that the Introduction is "[o]f critical importance to a proper understanding of *My Ántonia*" (51), the contradictory readings enabled by *My Ántonia*'s Introduction(s) and of its text proper betray "proper understanding" as such, for it remains unclear precisely what comprises the propriety of understanding. A "proper understanding" of the Introduction as well as Jim's narrative resists both propriety and the proprietary. The Introduction is a "scene [of] suggestion" (Cather, *Not Under Forty* 48) and *I* remains an unnamed "thing"—a name démeublé—whose very "inexplicab[ility]" renders it a "presence" that remains provocatively resistant to articulation, reification, or denomination.

Given her assertion of the introductory narrator's disruptive reappearance, as well as her persistent attention to Catherian crossings, doublings, and repetitions, it is surprising that Butler

[9]Sharon O'Brien was the first critic to name "the thing not named" Cather's lesbianism; O'Brien's "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" (1984) and her subsequent biography *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987) are pioneering and abidingly important works. However, more recent criticism typically argues against O'Brien's consolidation thesis—her theory that Cather's "emerging voice" finally, triumphantly emerged after she switched from masculine to feminine identification, thereby resolving early gender ambiguities and ambivalences and, by *O Pioneers!* (1913), solidifying her lesbian identity. Jonathan Goldberg argues that while "the love that dare not speak its name" is certainly "one translation" of Cather's unnamed "thing," "[t]he lack of specificity in Cather's phrasing provokes multiple possibilities that cannot be reduced to each other" (1). See the opening chapter, "Other Names," of Goldberg's *Willa Cather and Others*, in which Cather's "thing not named" is the "basso ostinato that sounds throughout" (1) Goldberg's astute mappings of sundry Catherian signature-effects.

analyzes only the revised 1926 version of the Introduction that opens the Houghlin Mifflin edition of *My Ántonia* that she cites; she ignores its concluding appendix, "Willa Cather's Original Introduction to the 1918 Edition." The absence of *I* from Jim's narrative is thus doubly marked (or, remarked) here, since the two different versions of the Introduction bookend Jim Burden's narrative. The loss of *I* reappears as textual excess in the appendix, which is both a repetition and a different beginning. This return to the "Original" offers possibilities for further interpretive departures.

In the original Introduction we learn that the unidentified, unnamed narrator of the Introduction is a woman and that she, too, intended to write down her reminiscences of Ántonia; however, that text never materialized—"My own story was never written" (244), she says. Paradoxically, she offers this assertion of absence—in the passive voice, no less—in writing, thereby writing a version of her "own story." "I" desires to know Ántonia as only, apparently, a boy could: "I told him that how he knew her and felt her was exactly what I most wanted to know about Ántonia. He had had opportunities I, as a little girl who watched her come and go, had not" (244). "I" tells a story of absence and of seeing otherwise at—or even as—the very origin of Jim's history, articulating the difference her gender makes in yielding a different way of knowing Ántonia. At the same time, however, "I" seems to erase the very difference she asserts as she repeatedly conflates her perspective, her memory, with the romantic Jim's, suggesting that Ántonia means the same for her as for Jim. In this version of the Introduction, "I" simultaneously asserts and denies her different perspective. While the revised Introduction excises the difference gender makes in generating different "opportunities" for "watch[ing]" Ántonia, its type is completely italicized; this conspicuous visual demarcation between the narratives silently, but forcefully, denotes a different perspective. Fittingly, the italicized Introduction emphasizes Cather's inaugural strategy of indirection, leaning both towards and away from the narrative that textually follows it but that chronologically precedes it, literally embodying

its indelibly different "angle of vision"—its other slant.[10]

There is nothing—nothing named—that prohibits "I" from writing, yet she "had to confess" to Jim that her story "had not got beyond a few straggling notes" (244). Moreover, "I" presents Jim's manuscript, "substantially as he brought it to [her]" (244); that evocative "substantially" hints at the possibility that "I" edited Jim's text, although we have no access to what she might have added, omitted, or altered. Jim tells "I": "'I didn't arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people Ántonia's name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn't any form. It hasn't any title, either'" (244). Given Jim's assertion that he "didn't arrange or rearrange" his manuscript, we are left with the enticing suggestion that "I" does the arranging, that she demarcates and nominates the Books. A number of undecidable questions haunt that possibility: how does "I" make her mark as Jim's editor? Can one or should one attribute to her the single footnote in Jim's manuscript, the one that appears on the opening page to specify the correct pronunciation of Ántonia's foreign name? The 1918 edition of *My Ántonia* includes illustrations signed by W.T. Benda: are they meant to be read as part of Jim's fictional manuscript and of his choosing? Or are they editorial commentary for which "I" is responsible? Or are they extra-extratextual apparatus included by Cather rather than by "I" or Jim?

If the questions above are finally unanswerable, so, too, is the question of who exactly is responsible for the revisions to the Introduction. In appending the revised Introduction to his edition of *My Ántonia*, Joseph R. Urgo notes that "Cather made drastic cuts to the original Introduction leaving, we might assume, what she considered in 1926 to be its most significant components" (245). Urgo is certainly not alone in attributing the cuts solely to Cather; however, to treat the revisions as Cather's only is to neglect the pivotal role played by Ferris Greenslet, Cather's editor at Houghton Mifflin. Their correspondence makes clear that the idea for the revision was Greenslet's, and that it was initially motivated by economic and not aesthetic considerations. In a letter to Cather dated 26 January 1926, Greenslet suggested

[10]In a letter addressed to one Mr. Miller, Cather provocatively suggests that a narrator "doesn't really matter anyway, but is only an angle of vision" (Jewell et al., Letter 0750).

> some change in the Introduction and opening machinery of MY ANTONIA . . . with a view to its reissue as a definitive new edition. . . . With its established position as one of the classic American novels and, in the opinion of a large number of your readers, perhaps the best of your books, I think that a very great increase—both in the immediate and in the continuing sales—would result from such a step.
>
> (qtd. in Mignon 494)

Cather agreed to Greenslet's plan for the new edition, and Greenslet wrote Cather (8 April 2006) with specific advice for the revisions:

> I wonder whether it wouldn't be feasible to omit all of the paragraph that begins on page X with the words "When Jim" and almost all of the paragraph on the following page which begins "As for Jim". As for the first paragraph mentioned, I think your own statement "I do not like the wife" sufficiently does for that lady, while Jim's character and temperament—his persistent romanticism—are sufficiently exhibited in what follows. Three strokes of the blue pencil, in short, would—at least so it seems to me—do all that is really necessary. Won't you think it over?
>
> (qtd. in Mignon 495)

Cather made the "strokes" that Greenslet suggested and a few more of her own. Today, there are various editions of *My Ántonia* on the market, each with a different editor who makes different choices about which version of the Introduction to use as the Introduction, about whether to include the other version as an appendix, and about whether or not to include the Benda illustrations, hence adding more layers to the already multiple layers of authorship and authority in *My Ántonia*.[11] Given the sundry

[11]For example, the Houghton Mifflin edition of *My Ántonia* (1995) that I cite uses the revised, 1926 Introduction, reprints the original 1918 Introduction as an appendix, and does not include the original Benda illustrations anywhere. Conversely, the Penguin edition (1994) uses the

variations between editions, it is not hard to see the difference an editor makes. "I" is one name for that difference; the italicized *I* is another, and one is invited to think of the way in which the italics of the revised Introduction graphically represent the crossing out of text, the strokes of the blue editing pencil, the absent presence of the other Introduction—that haunting *sous rature*.

"I" is a figure of vacillation, of the mobile, of the in between; "I" begins her narrative by locating herself on a moving train, "crossing the plains of Iowa" (241). "I" does not indicate in which direction she is traveling or whether she is leaving or returning home. And where is home? While she writes that she and Jim "both live in New York" (241), she also states that her traveling companion is "James Quayle[12] Burden—Jim Burden, as we still call him in the West" (241), intimating that the West is "still" home. Home seems simultaneously both and neither, and "I" emerges as an imminently "between" character. "I" appears almost

original Introduction, reprints the revised Introduction (in italics) as an appendix, and includes the Benda illustrations. In the more recent Broadview edition (2003), editor Joseph R. Urgo notes that the text is a reproduction of "the University of Nebraska Press scholarly edition (1994), bearing the imprint from the Modern Language Association Committee on Scholarly Editions as an Approved Edition" (39). The Approved Edition is a reproduction of Houghton Mifflin's original 1918 edition, with its Introduction and illustrations, and does not include the revised Introduction anywhere in its textual apparatus. Urgo, however, includes the revised Introduction as an appendix in the Broadview edition, although he neglects to italicize it.

[12]Jim's middle name is omitted in the revised Introduction. Here, Jim's surname bears the burden of the contradictory connotations of his given names. James is derived from the Old Testament Jacob, a name "borne by perhaps the most important of all the patriarchs in The Book of Genesis" (Hanks and Hodges 169); as he was the cunning usurper of his older brother, Esau, the name is also synonymous with "supplanter" (Hanks and Hodges 170). James also recalls the name of Jim's boyhood hero, the famous outlaw Jesse James. Quayle (a homonym of "quail"), on the other hand, connotes weakness and submission. Its verb form means "to fail, break down, come to nothing"; "to give way, yield" (*OED* 2a); to "become faint or feeble" (2b); to be daunted through "fear" (5). The noun—a type of bird—is also U.S. slang dating back to the 1800s meaning "a girl" or "young woman" (*OED* 6). The burden of contradiction is quite literally spelled out in Jim's given names.

hyperbolically, impossibly multiple—inside Cather's text and outside but contiguous with Jim's, possibly its mediating editor, Eastern and Western, with two Introductions, two homes, a gender that comes and goes, and a name that we never know, it is impossible finally to fix "I."[13] Ironically, it is in her own supplementary endnote that Lindemann virtually dismisses *My Ántonia*'s supplementary material (the Introductions and the illustrations) as ineffectual in helping us to read Jim's narrative: she sees "the textual supplements as too unstable and problematic" (134, n. 8) to be enabling as a way into the narrative proper. However, the very instability, indeterminacy, and ambiguity of the supplements render them apt interlocutory lenses for reading Jim's equally unstable, indeterminate, and ambiguous narrative.

"I" does not simply vex the discourses—ontological, epistemological, and historical—that would identify, place, and/or dismiss her; the very mobile and diffuse character of "I" defies such a definitive reading. "I" simultaneously resists and reifies such discourses. In Cather's original Introduction, "I" reveals more than her gender and more than her failed promise to write her own history of Ántonia: she tells us much more about Jim's wife, Genevieve (whose name is excised from the revised Introduction), a woman whom "I" does "not like" (242). Genevieve is a figure as absent from Jim's text as "I," though she is nominally married to him—nominally because the name seems to be the only thing that binds them. If Jim is a masculine figure whose narrative authority paradoxically depends upon "I" (and I agree with Butler that he is), Jim is also a narrative figure whose masculine authority—his professional status, for example—depends upon a similarly obscure "lady": Genevieve Whitney. Strikingly, "I," who has no name, tells Genevieve's story by, in effect, telling the story of her name. Before marrying into Genevieve's "distinguished" (242) family, Jim was an "unknown man from the West" (242), an "obscure young lawyer, struggling to make his way" (242). Genevieve Whitney makes Jim's way, in a sense, and, in an inversion of conventional gender roles, rescues him from obscurity; Jim's "career was suddenly advanced

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[13]Of course, grammatically, "I" is indeterminate; it does not mark gender, for example. The pronoun "I" is inherently uncanny, and thus the perfect (non) name for the slippery narrator.

by a brilliant marriage" (242). Although it is Genevieve and not Jim who changes her name when they marry, Jim's career benefits from the very surname that Genevieve gives up in becoming Jim's wife. While the marriage may be a "brilliant" one for Jim professionally, it is decidedly lacking personally. Jim seems to be one of those causes to which Genevieve lends her (father's) name; after she marries Jim, she lends her married name to various causes because, as Jonathan Goldberg memorably puts it, her marriage is a "lost cause" (*Willa Cather* 24) .

Genevieve's maiden name, the patronym "Whitney," is also used as a proper feminine name.[14] Ironically, "I" does not like this woman doubly named in the feminine because she is not feminine. "I" describes Genevieve as a "restless" and "headstrong" woman "who liked to astonish her friends" and who has a penchant for the "unexpected" (242). Even her marrying, which could be read as the ultimate act of social conformity on her part, is astonishing and unexpected; Genevieve marries Jim on the rebound after being "brutally jilted" (242) by one of her own, her cousin Rutland Whitney. Jim is an improper object choice—and it certainly

[14]The surname precedes the proper name, and was originally derived from "any of various places in England named with the Middle English *atten whiten ey* 'by the white island'" (Hanks and Hodges 338). The proper name is the English version of the French Geneviève, which "is the name of the patron saint of Paris, a 5th-century Gallo Roman nun who encouraged the people of Paris in the face of the occupation of the town by the Franks and threatened attacks of the Huns. Her name seems to have been composed of Celtic elements meaning 'people, tribe' and 'woman'" (Hanks and Hodges 130). It is fitting that Genevieve, who seems thoroughly uninterested in her heterosexual marriage, carries a name that connotes resistance as well as all-female communities or tribes. Genevieve's birth initials, GW, along with her status as an artist and a patron of arts, might link her to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder and namesake of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art; Whitney was a well-known sculptor and art collector prior to founding the museum in 1931. She created the Whitney Studio Club (1918-1928) and the Whitney Studio Galleries (1928-1930), important "antecedents of the Museum" (Biddle 72), which promoted unrecognized and avant-garde artists. It is worth noting that Cather moved to New York in 1906 and wrote *My Ántonia* there.

appears that Genevieve picks Jim and not the other way around. Given Genevieve's name, which is a synecdoche for her social standing; "I" tells us that Genevieve marries this outsider, an unknown, unaccomplished, Westerner, "out of bravado" (242). Genevieve thus renders a conventional act decidedly unconventional, and she appears to avoid all wifely burdens except for the name. Although Jim's "quiet tastes irritate her" (242) and her life is decidedly divorced from the man to whom she is bound in marriage—she has "her own fortune and lives her own life" (242)—, she, for reasons inexplicable to "I," "wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden" (242). Oddly, "I" stresses that Genevieve is her "own" woman only and immediately to erase Genevieve's "own" names. In her description of Genevieve, "I" names her first as "[Jim's] wife" and last as "Mrs. James Burden" (242); "I" thus rhetorically constrains Genevieve, designating Genevieve's status as Jim's wife before and after the story of the agency, independence, and self-possession that Genevieve maintains despite her changing patronymic names.

"I" finds Genevieve perplexingly contradictory and does not like her because she seems, as opposed to Jim, insincere, inauthentic, and unreal. In her description of Genevieve's activities and interests, "I" most forcefully associates Genevieve with political and artistic movements:

> Later, when I knew her, she was always doing something unexpected. She gave one of her town houses for a Suffrage headquarters, produced one of her own plays at the Princess Theater, was arrested for picketing during a garment-makers' strike, etc.
> (242)

Genevieve is a patron of the arts, an artist in her own right, a producer, and a political activist who breaks the law for which her attorney husband stands. Ironically, however, "I" objects to Genevieve because she seems unmovable: "I" is "never able to believe that she has much feeling for the causes to which she lends her name and her fleeting interest. She is handsome, energetic, executive, but to me she seems unimpressionable and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm" (242). The "fleeting"

and "unimpressionable" Genevieve moves too much and is moved too little, and neither is properly feminine; she exhibits, in fact, qualities that one might expect of her "executive" husband but which he lacks. If "I" is a figure for contradictory Catherian aesthetics, so, too, is Genevieve, with whom "I" has much in common, and for the very reasons that "I" objects to her: her unexpected bravado, her unconventional and unfeminine self-possession. The "etc." that concludes the description of Genevieve suggests that there is more to her story, an unspecified but specifically marked excess that, in a way, puts Genevieve and "I" in the same place—outside of the narrative proper, on the periphery of Jim's history, and acting as its (improper) supplement.

As one of the few critics to spend time analyzing Genevieve, Jonathan Goldberg describes the narrator's account of Genevieve as "a paroxysm of misogyny" and "male identification with Jim" on Cather's part:

> In this initial "Introduction," Cather aggressively and in her own name adopts a point of view that could be called male; yet the misogyny is not directed at all women, but at one who seems to violate the proprieties of marriage. If this is Cather calling out the law, it rings utterly false since she herself was no one's wife, even if her insubordination did not take the form of advocating the vote for women or the rights of workers.
> (24)

We can eschew this question of the "ring" (or lack thereof) of authenticity or verity if we treat "I" as a character rather than as Cather. Goldberg argues that the Introduction is "in [Cather's] own name"; however, "I" emphatically is not Cather's name, but Cather's unnamed and contradictory character. Unlike the brief, untitled, fully italicized afterword to Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *My Ántonia*'s Introduction is not signed "WILLA CATHER" (*Sapphira* 295). In the Introduction, "I" is a character among characters; in *Sapphira*'s afterword, by contrast, Cather situates herself outside the fiction, whose conclusion she announces with "The End" (295), and writes self-reflexively as the author who names her fictional characters. Here, Cather marks the (albeit always nebulous) borderline between her life and her work,

disavowing the simply autobiographical while using the topography of her past:[15]

> *In this story I have called several of the characters by Frederick County surnames, but in no case have I used the name of a person whom I ever knew or saw. My father and mother, when they came home from Winchester or Capon Springs, often talked about acquaintances who they had met.*"
> (295)

This pronouncement is explicitly authorial in a way that *My Ántonia*'s Introduction is not, addressing as it does Cather's attention to the play of names and naming in the writing of her fiction: "*The names of those unknown persons sometimes had a lively fascination for me, merely* as *names*" (295).

I share Cather's fascination with—and delight in—naming. In naming this paper, in part, "Onomastic Absence," I use the adjective in the most obvious sense of being "connected to names or naming" (*OED* 1); however, I also wish to animate an older, legal, definition of "onomastic" that signifies a mode of authentication in the voice of another. An onomastic signature appears "on a legal document in the handwriting of another person" (*OED* 2). I argue, then, that *My Ántonia*'s Introduction functions figuratively as an onomastic signature, written as it is by someone other than the author of the document to which it is appended. This onomastic other is known not by a specific signature or name, but only as other to the narrating voice that it introduces. Here, however, the signatory does not simply authenticate that accompanying document and validate Jim's testimony, which Jim tellingly bears in a "legal portfolio" (244). Rather, the unnamed other tells the audience that Jim's document is the product of his "naturally romantic and ardent disposition" (242)—it is the story of a boy who never grew up: "Though he is

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[15]Autobiography, the proper name, and the signature attached to either/both of them, are never simple. Derrida calls the borderline between "life" and "work" a *dynamis* because of "its force, its power, as well as its virtual and mobile potency" ("Otobiographies" 5); the "life of an author" is not simply or easily "identifiable behind the name" (5).

over forty now, he meets new people and new enterprises with the impulsiveness by which his boyhood friends remember him. He never seems to me to grow older" (243). In identifying with Jim, "I" aligns herself with the romantic, sentimental dreamer, and we would thus do well to suspect her judgment of the apparently "mediocre" (243) artists that Genevieve supports.[16] "I" both validates and undermines the narrative she introduces. In a way, then, the narrator divests Jim's narrative of as much as she invests it with authority.

As a character not named, "I" has much to say about naming. Not only does she offer an account of Genevieve Whitney's names, their changes, and their social agency, she also tells the story of the naming of Jim's manuscript. When Jim comes to her apartment to give "I" the manuscript, it "'hasn't any title'" (244):

> He went into the next room, sat down at my desk and on the pinkish face of the portfolio the word, "Ántonia." He frowned at this moment, then prefixed another word, making it "My Ántonia." That seemed to satisfy him. (244)

The prefix "My" is an afterthought on Jim's part, an addition to Jim's title that "seemed to satisfy him." The possessive prefix can be read as Jim's disturbingly proprietary "claim to the proper name" (Butler 148). However, there is an equally plausible and quite opposite way to read that "My." Ántonia's name "recalls"

[16]Remarkably, "I" mocks Genevieve's support of others—and others' ideas—while admiring Jim's. She writes that Genevieve "finds it worthwhile to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability" (242). Perhaps Genevieve, a prototypical New Woman, supports new and avant-garde art in the vein of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (see note 14). In the very next paragraph, "I" admires Jim's faith in and support of others: "He is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil. If a young man with an idea can get Jim Burden's attention, can manage to accompany him when he goes off into the wilds hunting for lost parks or exploring new canyons, then the money which means action is usually forthcoming. Jim is still able to lose himself in those big Western dreams" (242-243).

(244) to Jim so many other names and stories, including and primarily, of course, his own: he tells "I" before he writes that he "'should have to do it in a direct way, and say a great deal about myself. It's through myself that I knew and felt her, and I've had no practice in any other form of presentation'" (244). Jim's "form," then, is as much—or more—autobiography as biography; perhaps Jim's "My," then, is less a claim to Ántonia as it is an admission of such a claim's impossibility.[17] The seeming satisfaction that Jim attains from his titular possessive prefix suggests that, in fact, Ántonia cannot be his. "I"—which is the dominant sound in "My"—tells us the story of the way in which the Ántonia of Jim's manuscript is his figuration of her (and of himself), his subjective account, and not a definitive or even necessarily proprietary reading. "I," whose circumscribed opportunities meant that she saw Ántonia differently, also has "her" Ántonia, her version of the past. The contradictory possibilities for reading Jim's title unfix any singular reading of Jim's prefixing. "My" can also be read as a term of endearment or affection, and Jim's title as an allusion to Ántonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, "who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, 'My Án-tonia!'" (81). Like "I," "My" is not reducible to one meaning or reading: it may be a rhetorical gesture of—and claim to—possession; it might also be an effective sign of the necessarily partial (in both senses of the word) nature of Jim's account; in either case, it signifies a grasping or a writing to(wards) that will never catch its object.

Each version of the Introduction offers a different account of Jim's writing process. In the original, Jim wonders why "I" has never written about Ántonia and does not seem to consider doing so himself until "I" proposes this "agreement" (243) to him: "I

[17]On autobiography (telling the story of self to self) as always also biographical (the self is also always other) and biography (other writing) as always necessarily autobiographical, see Derrida's "Otobiographies" and its accompanying texts in *The Ear of the Other*. Cather had some experience with the complexities of "self" writing, with the possessive "My," and also of inhabiting an "other" I/eye, from outset of her career: she ghostwrote S. S. McClure's *My Autobiography*, which was serialized in *McClure's* magazine (1913-1914). *My Autobiography* is a ventriloquized text; it is McClure's proper name that—improperly, as it were—appears as the authorial signature.

would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her" (243).[18] Jim becomes excited (as evidenced by his reiterative, exclamatory "Maybe I will, maybe I will!" [243]) and determined: "I could see that my suggestion took hold of him" (243). Rather than possessing Ántonia, Jim is possessed by (the idea of writing about) Ántonia. In contrast, in the revised version of the Introduction, Jim tells *I* that he has been writing about Ántonia from "*time to time*" to "*amuse himself*" on his "*long trips across the country*" (2). Jim promises to share his account "*if it were ever finished*" (2); despite that conditional "*if*" in the original Introduction, in both cases he completes his manuscript in a matter of mere months; there is a sense of urgency attached to the prospect of an audience, and Jim braves a winter storm triumphantly to deliver the work he completes only the night before. Jim is equally anxious to see an other—the other's—"Ántonia": "Now, what about yours?" (244) he asks expectantly. In acknowledging at least two—"mine" and "yours"—Jim acknowledges history's multiplicity. Jim tells "I" that he does not want his story to "'influence'" (244) hers; in other words, he desires the other's words, which will necessarily comprise a different translation of the past. Jim's asking to hear the other's story, his call for the other's address, is precisely why I disagree with Lindemann's characterizing their pact as a battle of the sexes that "Cather" loses. What she calls a competitive "contest" ("It Ain't My Prairie" 119) is actually instigated by a collaborative "agreement" (243) in the original Introduction.[19] Moreover, "I" claims that their combined effort "might" generate a "picture" (243) of Ántonia. This "might" also undermines the "My" of Jim's title; even if multiple authors attempt to produce a "picture" of Ántonia, it "might" well be impossible. The integral role that "I" plays in editing and disseminating the manuscript

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[18]Schwind asserts the importance of the pictorial in the original Introduction and suggests that the narrator is not necessarily a failed author but, arguably, a successful illustrator. "I would set down on paper" does not mean that "I" agrees to write, as there are other ways of marking paper (52).

[19] Goldberg also characterizes "I" and Jim's agreement as a competition: "the two enter into a contest to produce her story" (*Willa Cather* 23).

intensifies the collaborative relation established in their train meeting.

"Ántonia," as a figure of history, cannot be Jim's; possession is an impossible claim. History is necessarily shared—it is mutually constitutive and must therefore implicate other histories in order to "be." Cathy Caruth asserts that history "is never simply one's own" (*Unclaimed* 24), that "events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others" (18) and "can only take place through the listening of another" ("Trauma and Experience" 11). Thus, Jim Burden requires a listener for his history, a witness to its (im)possibility: "'Read it as soon as you can'" (244), he implores "I," his eye witness, or, as Derrida might name it, the ear of the other:

> [I]t is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keen-enough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place. Here one may derive the political import of this structure and of this signature in which the addressee signs with his/her ear, an organ for perceiving difference. [. . .] Every text answers to this structure. It is the structure of textuality in general. A text is signed only much later by the other. And this testamentary structure doesn't befall a text as if by accident, but constructs it. This is how a text always comes about.
>
> (qtd. in McDonald 51)

The coming about of Jim's "My Ántonia," the rhetoric of his manuscript delivery scene, renders it a rather queer signature or birth (no matter what their respective textual genders or sexes): Jim plays the role of the expectant and protective mother as he arrives at the narrator's apartment "with a bulging legal portfolio sheltered under his fur overcoat" (244). Moreover, "I" personifies the portfolio—it has a "pinkish face" and Jim touches it with "some pride" (244). Together, Jim and "I" bear a text that bears witness to

a history that they pass on and that survives without them.[20] If the power that inheres in Genevieve's family name facilitates Jim's career, then whatever power inheres in the unknown name of "I" facilitates the publication of his manuscript. As Jim's reader, "I" helps to produce Jim's manuscript; as Jim's editor and perhaps publisher, "I" is also responsible for the text's reproduction, for the fact of its afterlife. In a way, then, Jim and "I" are like Cather and her editor, Greenslet, but they are not completely analogous: "I" does not simply subtract or rearrange text, does not simply aid in bearing Jim's text. "I" is a narrator, a contributor, with a text of her own. As an "in-between" figure, "I" is not just an effect, the status of something (almost) produced, there and not there, but is also a process, a bearing, constituting the readable effect—the history, the text.

If the narrator is Jim's initial witness, I, as an extra-extratextual reader, bear witness to proliferating histories. Importantly, I bear witness not only to Jim but also to "I," that often overlooked or missed witness. I, as reader and witness, become like "I" (whose only "name" is a pronoun that I may substitute for my own), in a sense myself ("my" "self") erased, my attention drawn into the narrative while *presencing* the narrative voices. The aesthetics are technically traumatic, then, not in the sense of being assaultive or injurious, but as enabling an experience for myself in the forgetting or disappearance of myself *as* I slant into the narrative—in the departure that I take from myself, to paraphrase Caruth ("Trauma and Experience" 11). Just as "I" bears witness for Jim, when I read the Introduction(s), I bear witness to the "address of another, an address that remains enigmatic, yet demands a listening and a response" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 9). This article is my response, my case for the undecidable, enigmatic, and always other "I." While many Cather critics are anxious to name and to explicate the "thing not named" in her texts, including the unnamed "I" in *My Ántonia*, this obscure character is a reminder that Catherian presence is constituted by unnameability, inexplicability, and multiplicity.

[20] Derrida compares the afterlife of a text to that of a child: the text/child "is an other who starts talking and goes on talking by itself, without your help, who doesn't even answer to you except in your fantasy. [. . .] one knows that children don't belong to us but we console ourselves with the fantasy that they do" (qtd. in McDonald 157).

Cather's unnamed "I" is an apt metonym for Catherian aesthetics that depend on "my" role in manifesting them—as well as on crucial absences, on what is not explicitly said and heard, on that "overtone divined by [my] ear but not heard by it," requiring reading—or witnessing—strategies attentive to absence as present, to silence as articulate, and to not naming as a way of naming aslant.

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