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My Ántonia and Willa Cather's Reciprocal Regionalism and W.T. Benda's Illustrations

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MY ÁNTONIA AND WILLA CATHER’S RECIPROCAL REGIONALISM
AND W.T. BENDA’S ILLUSTRATIONS

A Thesis Presented

by

Sean Michael Abrams

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores regionalism as a fictional genre and Willa Cather’s experimentations and innovations in her 1918 novel My Ántonia. In it I argue that Cather employs what I will be calling reciprocal regionalism, which expands upon the regionalist relationship between the land and the characters in the story. In My Ántonia and later novels of Cather’s, reciprocal regionalism functions in how characters survive, prosper, or perish in the region; the relationship needs to be fluid and adaptable.

Using regionalist criticism and close textual analysis of Willa Cather’s novels, essays, and letters, I argue that Cather believes in an inherent essentialist relationship between the artist and the muse, the character, and the region. When the relationship falters and fails, the art and the character dies. Furthermore, Cather’s commissioning of illustrations for the novel by W.T. Benda illustrate that the relationship between material and personal experience is foremost in truthful representation.

This thesis aims to fill a gap in Cather criticism that has so far neglected in studying Cather’s fourth novel My Ántonia as a regionalist text, while also exploring how Cather served as an intermediary and experimenter in a rather traditional female written form by questioning its place in the literary canon and revising it as a modernist author.
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Author

Sean M. Abrams
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CHAPTER 1: PUTTING CATHER’S REGIONALISM IN CONTEXT

Regionalism is strongest when it captures the essence of the “real.” In her essay “Willa Cather, Daughter of the Frontier,” published in the New York Herald Tribune in 1933, Dorothy Canfield Fisher hypothesized that “the one real subject of all [Cather’s] books is the effect new country—our new country—has on people transplanted to it from the old traditions of a stable complex civilisation [sic]” (O Pioneers Critical Edition, 170). Cather was a participant in the “sprawling” country; she lived in and wrote about a number of American regions. She was continually transplanting herself across the country. Regionalism in my terms and I want to argue, in Cather’s terms, is the intense focus on a specific place and its people and the relationship between the two. This introduction will serve to ask how regionalism was discussed and is being discussed, in order to better understand Willa Cather’s regionalism, especially in her 1918 novel My Ántonia.

In 1932, Mary Austin published an essay setting out to define what is and what is not American literary regionalism. Mary Austin, a Southwestern writer, wrote about the discipline and traits of American literary regionalism. One of the defining traits of regionalism, as Austin claimed, was that the land or the region needed to play as important a role in the overall narrative as the characters themselves do. Another important characteristic of literary regionalism is that regional texts need to be “of the region” rather than merely about it (Austin 106). Austin believed that “inexperienced readers” were subject to misunderstand this, meaning that the difference between “of” and “about” is a slight difference, but an important difference. A novel “about” a region
is equal to a summary of a place, whereas a novel “of” the region is developed out of the people and soil of the region. The novel, according to Austin’s claim, needs to have an essence of and relationship to the region, rather than having an author only write about the region without a particular connection to it. It is an important distinction because Austin would later take issue with this in regard to Cather’s writing—something I will address in a later chapter. But Austin’s early definition of regionalism is one that does remain at the core of regionalist writing. Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s definitions and reviews of regional writing when she writes about Cather echoes the idea that the place is as much a character as any of the novel’s characters. The role of region as character, and the relationship the characters, the artist, and the reader need to have to the region is what Cather wrote into her novels. I will be calling this idea reciprocal regionalism—a shared experience or give and take between the region and the characters with whom it is interacting with, while also employing a sense of personal fluidity and movement. Prior to exploring this claim, it is necessary to explore what regionalism is and how it has been discussed and used to read Cather’s writing.

In the first chapter of *Writing out of Place*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse write, “Regionalist texts call into question numerous cultural assumptions about literary history, poetics, thematics, genres, and reading strategies that their authors would probably recognize…[and] anticipated” (2). American literary regionalism engages with questions of “epistemology, of race and class, and of queer theory” (Fetterley and Pryse 2). Cather scholar Guy Reynolds notes in an essay on Cather’s regionalism that Cather was exclusively engaged with the complexity of regionalism. Similar to recent criticism in trying to define and locate American Regionalism, Cather herself searched for her own
regionalism, leading to Reynolds’s comment that Cather’s regionalism is in need of a much more nuanced definition. Part of the goal of this thesis is to offer a new reading of Cather’s regionalism that is apparent in her 1918 novel *My Ántonia* in addition to other novels.

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature* identifies regionalism as a genre that is explicitly engaged with cultural and sociological understandings of places and people:

[A] Term applied to literature which emphasizes a special geographical setting and concentrates upon the history, manners, and folkways of the area as these help to shape the lives or behavior of the characters. It generally differs from “local color” in that it lays less stress upon quaint oddities of dialect, mannerism, and costume and more on basic philosophical or sociological distinctions which the writer often views as though he were a cultural anthropologist. (“Regionalism”)

This definition of regionalism rings true and is constant through a lot of the definitions of American regionalism. That regionalism differs from local color in that it puts more stress on the “basic philosophical or sociological distinctions” putting the reading in a position of “cultural anthropologist” is appropriate, especially in regard to Cather’s novels and Cather’s position as a writer.

Tom Lutz’s recognition of different movements of regionalism: regionalism, which includes provincial representations, and New Regionalism, which is more concerned with identifying the regional with the global, further complicate and expand the style of regionalism. The movements of regionalism that Lutz notes adds to the ambiguity of the genre; As Lutz writes in *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value*, “the study of regionalism [is a] minor subfield of the very traditional field of American Studies,” regionalism and the scholarship and written works that
consider regionalism are a widespread field. What is considered a regionalist text and how it has been defined has changed and developed and grown more complicated. Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy write in *American Local Color Writing, 1880-1920*, “There was never a single local color or regionalist tradition, as suggested by today’s debate about which term best names the tradition. Instead, the genre includes a wide range of writers and texts, spanning not only different parts of the United States but also many cultures and ethnicities, genres and forms, goals and ideologies” (vii). One of the difficulties in defining regionalism and local color is the way the texts were categorized when they first were published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Writing out of Place*, Judith Fetterley writes, “historians have minimized, ignored, and disparaged these writers, either relegating them to the category of ‘local color’ or describing them as a subset of realism by the phrase ‘regional realists’” (4). The goal of criticism in the 1970s (during the rise of political and ideological theories) of regionalism was to separate it from that subgenre and to make it a mode of writing by itself. I think this is part of what was going on in the “new regionalism” of the early twentieth century, when authors, like Cather, started innovating upon the tradition of earlier or old regionalism, which was always read as part and parcel of realism, something that wasn’t quite taken as seriously in the literary world; regional representations were read as cheap and of a “minor” literature—a literature that was not high art, like modernity; this is something Cather would fight against in her writings.

Regional authors would often be identified as regionalist writers and criticism of these novels would often place the text in the line of literary regionalism. The norm would usually place female authors in the vein of literary regionalism. Authors like Mary
Austin and Sarah Orne Jewett were often considered and maybe even pigeonholed as regional authors. The discussion and criticism of regionalism often identified the work as a weaker form of storytelling and not narratively complex, which aligns with the provincial interpretations of regionalism that New Regionalism later writes against. In addition, in “Revisiting Regionalism in Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs” Stephanie Foote writes, “Traditional critiques of regional writing have tended to feminize and diminish this ‘minor’ genre, appreciating its aesthetic dimensions while noting its childish, although perhaps charming, inability to fully come to terms with its contemporary conditions of mature capitalism, urban unrest, and expanding immigration and imperialism” (37). This reading of regionalism was something that authors would struggle against, in that the “romantic localism” as some critics have named it (Lutz 186), seemed to be “missing perspectives” and had “a lack of courage in facing all the facts of life, and therefore, a kind of cultural-political cowardice” (Lutz 186).

However, regionalism did a lot in terms of questioning social and cultural ideologies. Ammons and Rohy write that regionalism has certain way of approaching “certain contradictions in American ideology: conflicts between the general and the particular, the normative and the peculiar, the local and the national” (xxiv). There is a sense that it needs to be general enough—we can look to the unnamed narrator of The Country of the Pointed Firs, who is from the city, or to Jim Burden in My Ántonia; their experiences extend beyond the boundaries of the region, allowing them to have a broad, general, national perspective, while still attached to the particularities of the region. These characters play an important role in doing what Ammons and Rohy argue what regionalist literature does: “Regionalist literature offers a part of the United States as
token of the nation, hinting at the relation between state and nation articulated in the rhetoric of states’ rights during the Civil War and Reconstruction” (xxv). It was regionalist writing that helped portray and depict the contradictions of independence and the multitude of American nations and regions.

The exploration of the relationship between local and national practices became part of regionalism’s purpose to represent stories truthfully and completely. Lutz states, “Literary regionalists and the majority of their critics and reviewers were attuned not to ‘infantile delight’ but to social thought in these texts, and what they assumed that was important about representing local customs was their relation to other locales” (14). Regionalism wants to represent truthfully a local region in a nation of many American regions.

Moreover, regionalist authors wanted to represent how the numerous locales function in relation to not only each other and the nation, but also to time and how they create an American identity and text. By writing about a specific place and locale, an American way of life is captured. Cather herself wrote to this extent in her preface to a collection of stories by Sarah Orne Jewett. Cather writes, “The ‘Pointed Fir’ sketches are living things caught in the open, with light and freedom and air-spaces about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself” (6). Part of Cather’s appreciation for Jewett’s work is that it is a regional work, one that Cather would emulate; but it is also not a stale narrative in that it writes just about one place. In writing about the local, it allows for the “light and freedom” in a narrative because an author can sink into the region and represent something whole and complete. And what is whole and complete can transcend time—and what is “melted into the land
and the life of the land” can be picked up and discovered years later. Cather writes, “I have tried to gather in this volume the very best of Miss Jewett’s beautiful work; the stories which, read by an eager student fifty years from now, will give him the characteristic flavor, the spirit, the cadence, of an American writer of the first order—and of a New England which will then be a thing of the past” (8). In it Cather calls for a nostalgic reading of Jewett, which in itself invites the contradictions because of the change over the years. Cather herself anticipates a change and a number of reactions to the New England of Jewett’s time, probably some of which have already taken place as Cather writes, but she is expecting and hoping the readers will put themselves in relation to the difference, and read themselves and their world against the region and time of which Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* is depicting. Cather asks the readers, present and future, to place themselves in relation to the region.

In Stephanie Foote’s study on Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, she introduces and includes a number of new readings of regionalism. In studying Jewett’s narrator and how she is involved with the region and the nation, Foote’s “larger aim is to argue, paradoxically, that regionalism does not actually have stable categories of stranger and native, nor does it simply have neat and predictable exchanges between what is foreign and what is native” (“I Feared to Find Myself a Foreigner” 39). In addition, the local region cannot be something that is passive and can only be received but rather; it needs to have agency, interacting with characters, with authors, and with readers. The regional text needs to function in a way that it calls about a reaction from the reader. Foote writes:
In Jewett, more perhaps than in other regional writers, we see amplified the traditionally valued concerns of regionalism. This amplification comes from the text’s overt and inescapable promotion of nostalgia, its persistent, though veiled, gestures toward an outer world that we may read as the embodiment of nineteenth-century history threatening to destroy the world of Dunnet Landing. (41)

From this passage we can conclude that part of what made a regionalist text regional is a sense of nostalgia. Stephanie Foote reiterates this when she writes that regionalism is “best remembered today for its nostalgic portraits of preindustrial rural communities and people” (Regional Fictions 3). Regionalism is a way of buffering these small country towns from the expanding industrial America, as if saving a space of American land for history and for readers. Dorothy Canfield Fisher once wrote, “Regionalism in literature is the answer to the problem of getting any literature at all out of so vast and sprawling a country as ours” (as cited in Austin 97). Regionalism’s goal is to re-member “portraits” of forgotten people and places.

In addition to offering narrative freedom and the chance to represent a faction of American identity, American literary regionalism was a genre that many writers may have been most familiar with. Tom Lutz writes:

Regionalism was the most popular literary mode during the second half of the nineteenth century when this ethos was under construction, and as such was at the center of debates about the meaning, value, and purpose of literary art; second, regional literature, because it was responding to the radical transformation of American society preceding and following the Civil War, and because it took as its prime subject the conflicting interests of specific populations during these changes. (Cosmopolitan Vistas 14)

Regionalism was created alongside naturalism and realism in the second half of the nineteenth century; it engaged with the same questions and issues that these other types were trying to answer. The regionalism of the second half of the nineteenth century was
reacting to a post Civil War America and remained socially conscious. It is the kind of writing that authors like Sarah Orne Jewett and others were writing. These novels were concerned with finding meaning in a split nation and creating a literary canon that reflected an honest depiction of American ideologies and identities. By the time Cather started writing her novels in the early twentieth century, as Lutz notes, the “revolt of the village” movement began, in which authors write against the small mindedness and oppression of provincial writing.

In its search to create an art that represented the multi-faceted America, representing a place’s speech and language was vital. Stephanie Foote in *Regional Fictions* begins by writing, “Regional fiction’s most recognizable formal characteristic was its use of dialect to render the speech of regional speakers” (3). Use of dialect falls by the wayside in later regionalisms, because authors become less inclined to exploit the difference. An easy way to access multiple regions and to represent it in art is to depict their way of speech. Foote recognizes that “the juxtaposition of local accents with the standard English of most narrators of regional fiction shows that while the subject of the texts was rural life, their readers were nonetheless urban inhabitants” (*Regional Fictions* 3). So the line between these two early definitions in that there is an exterior voice, the “standard English” of the narrator is the voice of the cultural anthropologist who is framing the narrative of the regional place. Additionally, dialect extends authority and authenticity to the text, while a “standard English” in the narrator can “authenticate and reinforce the dialect voice of…characters” (Fetterly & Pryse 186).

Dialect served as a marker for regionalism and as a point of departure for New Regionalists, which used the Standard English for all of its voices, offering a *higher* value
to the text. Tom Lutz explored the regionalism’s value in his book, *Cosmopolitan Vistas*. In it, he writes:

Later regionalisms…from the ‘revolt of the village’ fiction of the 1920s through the more recent New Regionalism—continue this interest in conflicting populations and their values, and continue to demonstrate cosmopolitan investments, quite explicitly reacting against what they analyze as the provincialism of earlier representations. (*Cosmopolitan Vistas* 14-15)

Once again regionalism is confronting the many populations, ideologies, and identities in American locales. But this “New Regionalism,” as Lutz names it, instead of reacting against a split nation, is reacting against and building upon the genre itself. Lutz writes “The best of these texts can be seen as congenial to all the regionalist movements—preservationist, reactionary, progressive—since they strip the village of its myths while decrying modern standardization and alienation, and celebrate the primitive while demonstrating the value of civilization” (106). This development created a lot of contradictions in the relationship between the region and the nation. Lutz concludes that one of the central themes in all the different movements of regionalism is “the relation of different groups to ongoing technological, economic, and social change, or, in other words, the relation of the region to the rest of the world” (15). Whereas nineteenth century readers and regionalists used regionalism as a way to present “people and places that seemed to have ‘escaped’ the dubious improvements of a stronger more integrated urban economy” (*Regional Fictions* 3). The movements of regionalism developed from escape to embrace.

Cather, however, seemed to value both the escape and the embrace of past and future regionalisms. In recounting a conversation she had with Jewett, Cather writes,
what I think is a poetic definition of the ideal regionalist text, one that Cather pursued in her career. She writes, “Miss Jewett wrote of the people who grew out of the soil and the life of the country near her heart, not about exceptional individuals at war with their environment” (9). This echoes Austin in saying that regionalism is of the country, not about it, that one of the central goals of regional writing is to depict the difference of American identities, and that when a writer focuses so clearly on the immediate and the natural, the writer is bound to achieve that. Cather continues at length:

Born within the scent of the sea but not within sight of it, in a beautiful old house full of strange and lovely things brought home from all over the globe by seafaring ancestors, [Jewett] spent much of her girlhood driving about the country with her doctor father on his professional rounds among the farms. She early learned to love her country for what it was. What is quite as important, she saw it as it was. She happened to have the right nature, the right temperament, to see it so—and to understand by intuition the deeper meaning of all she saw. (10)

Cather reads into Jewett’s novel that Jewett is of the region, and in turn her work is too. In this brief passage about Jewett, Cather is taking Austin’s claim a step further by arguing that not only does the text or the work need to be of the place, but so does the author. The author needs to have a reciprocal relationship with the region. Jewett is of the New England country and in turn has the “right nature” and “right temperament” to write about the New England country. Although Cather was not born in Nebraska, she became “of” Nebraska. She embraced it as her home, and the land embraced her; “That shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion that I have never been able to shake” (Woodress 36). She even says that her and the land “had it out”; the reciprocity of the land and the person is essential in Cather’s artwork. What is interesting in Cather’s preface to Country of the Pointed Firs is she writes that Jewett is “within the scent of the
sea, but not within sight of it” (10). Yes, this might be biographical information about where Jewett was actually born and lived, that she could smell the salty air of the Atlantic Ocean, but could not see it. But it also seems to suggest that a distance is needed in order to write honestly about a place, yet the author still needs to be of a place. That the “scent” is a familiarity of the place, that the local is known, but it is not necessarily scene, that the writer is not blinded by an over exposure to the place. Part of an author’s success is knowing when to give and when to take from the region, when distance is needed and when presence is vital, which is part of what Cather is reading and writing with in her novels.
CHAPTER 2: FINDING CATHER’S REGION

Many of Cather’s characters take on the form of authors and artists—that is, they are the proto-author of the book, instead of Cather herself; Cather is particularly interested in how an artist can relate to and create from the land. Cather’s regionalism is about the reciprocal relationship between character and region, art and artist. In *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age*, Philip Joseph writes, “Cather is preoccupied with the authenticity of artistic endeavor, its capacity to generate and to draw on that which is irreducible in the artist’s life” (106). The artistic endeavor, that is, the artist’s drive, is completely involved with the experience from which the artist’s life has come, which inherently includes place and space. Joseph continues, “what is authentic or irreducible in the artist is not the presence of a shared [my stress] geographical or genealogical source, but of inner experience that transcends both of them…Cather traces art to a state of intense imagination and affect, one that liberates the experiencing subject from any particular extrinsic origin or end” (106). The liberation of an “extrinsic origin or end” is liberation of a “geographical or genealogical source,” but for Cather, the place and origin, which is the region, is intrinsic; when it is not, the character is stuck. I put a stress on Joseph’s use of the word “shared” because Cather is not interested in “shared geographical or genealogical source[s],” she is instead interested in the personal. Cather uses her art as liberation—and as current criticism on regionalism says, regionalism was a way for the urban reader to escape and be liberated, as a way of being brought to somewhere new.
To understand Cather’s regionalism, it is valuable to look at the reviews of her second novel, *O Pioneers*. Cather refers to it as her second first novel; it followed her first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, which is often read and interpreted as her attempt at the *great* novel in the vein of Henry James and her contemporary Edith Wharton. *O Pioneers* is what put Cather on the map and even cemented her as an author of the Midwest and the prairies. An early review of Cather’s second novel that appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript* read “A new heroine and a new country appear in *O Pioneers*” (*O Pioneers Critical Edition* 357). Gardner W. Wood’s review of the novel in *McClure’s Magazine* exclaims, “The West seems inexhaustible. Here is a totally new kind of story come out of the prairies…There have been plenty of realistic studies of the West, but this book is not a study—it is the West in action, a great romantic novel, written with striking brilliancy and power, in which one sees emerge a new country and a new people” (*O Pioneers Critical Edition* 359). Frederick Taber Cooper compared her to John Fox Jr., a regionalist author of Kentucky, when he reviewed the novel, writing “*O Pioneers* by Willa Sibert Cather, is quite as local in theme and in characters as any volume that Mr. Fox ever wrote” (*O Pioneers Critical Edition* 360). Celia Harris’s extensive review is ripe with language that praises not only the regional effect of this novel, but also the American in it. At one point Harris writes, “*[O Pioneers]* is so deeply unaffectedly American in style and inspiration that it may disappoint some of Miss Cather’s readers by its very simplicity. It stirred me like a trumpet call” (*O Pioneers Critical Edition* 362). Harris continues:

The book produces an extraordinary effect of reality. It is at once homely and beautiful and strange. Its characters seem in true relation not only with their own prairie soil and sky but with those older home soils from which
they originally came. There are many people in the book, and they are all drawn with comprehending tenderness. Miss Cather has striped her style of cleverness, and has found a new warm simplicity of phrase. (362).

Harris later concludes the article by writing that “The book breathes of Nebraska” (363). It is clear that from these early reviews of Cather’s first great novel that critics were aware of Cather’s deep respect for place and how it can interact and even influence the character. Moreover, the critics of the time clearly recognized that this was something new, not only for Cather as a writer, but for Americans as readers, because the West and the frontier fascinated readers, and Nebraska was something different. The rhetoric of the reviews of her book as something new align it with regionalism, in that it offers a portrait of a place that is different for the urban reader. The stress on the exoticness and newness of the place markets the book itself as something that is regional, and out of the ordinary for the readers in Boston, New York, and other big cities on the east coast. After Cather is established as a regionalist author, she begins to innovate.

*O Pioneers* was read as Cather’s breakthrough of original writing—something new and original that came out of a place that was new and unique for the common reader. What is also worth noting in these reviews, however, is that they were not speaking down to the text, or categorizing it as merely a regionalist text, but that it was doing something special—that the style was newly American itself. I want to keep these early reviews of Cather as an author in mind as we go one because what it shows the contemporary critic is that she was on the cusp of something new, if not the leading charge of it. Coming out of an age when books about a specific place may have been dismissed as merely a regional text—which comes with the connotation that it is not that good—Cather was able to appropriate the genre and adapt it into something that can also
be great. Moreover it speaks to Mary Austin’s belief that “The first of the indispensable conditions [of regionalism] is that the region must enter constructively into the story, as another character, as the instigator of plot” (“Regionalism in American Fiction” 105), because like earlier regionalist authors, Cather was able to excel at this. Although Austin later goes on to argue that Cather fails at this in her other novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, it is clear from these early reviews that Cather succeeds in creating the land and region as a character of *O Pioneers*. For Cather it was not enough to write about a place and its people, but she had to depict the relationship between the two. The relationship could sometimes succeed, but in some cases it could perish. Cather’s regionalism was not nostalgic in this since or the “romantic localism,” because if a character and a region did not agree, the land or the character would die.

Kelsey Squire extends the argument that the region plays a necessary role in how the plot moves on. She writes, “Places, regions, and the land form the anchor of Cather’s regionalism, and while Cather clearly appreciated the representation of regions in works by other writers, she resists classifying herself within the ‘limited’ scope of regional writing” (“‘Jazz Age’ Places” 47-48). Cather in interviews following the publication of *My Ántonia* resisted readings that praised it as a good book because it was “of the soil” (Squire 48). I would like to quote at length how Squire goes on to define what type of regionalism Cather is using, because Cather has a complex understanding of regionalism; as Squire writes, it is:

> Not as a fiction about rural places or with vernacular speech, but as a “way of seeing” placed—what I would like to call it a “regional consciousness.” This regional way of seeing emphasizes the interconnections between places and communities as a larger spatial network. In this view of regionalism, to borrow Cather’s phrasing, “the country has nothing to do
with it, the city has nothing to do with it,” not because place itself is irrelevant but because both country and city can be represented within a region. (48-49)

It is the initial reaction of scholars and critics of literature to associate and only think of Cather as a Nebraskan writer, as an author tied down to the Nebraskan prairies. But Cather had a “regional consciousness” of a number of places, giving her access to other regional thought. Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s *New York Herald Tribune*, however, comes to a different conclusion. “Miss Cather’s work is all about an experience,” Fisher writes, “which no one but an American can have had…she is the first to write in the true folk language of her country, which naturally is not understood by outsiders; that she is deeply and mystically our own” (*O Pioneers* Critical Edition, 175). Fisher’s lexicon matches that of regionalist critics, yet her rhetoric is quite different. It is the difference, argue other regionalist critics and writers, that draws the audience in to experience and feel as if they were a part of the mystical, rather than the mystical author coming to them in a way that they—the reader—do not understand.

Although Kelsey Squire defines regionalism in her essay, there has been little explicit scholarship on Cather’s regionalism—especially on her texts that may be considered obviously regionalist. In her essay, “‘Jazz Age’ Places: Modern Regionalism in Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*,” Squire aims to identify Cather as a modern regionalist, a term she claims “encompasses both rural and urban places” (45). Squire is answering the call from Cather scholar Guy Reynolds: he concludes his essay titled “The Politics of Cather’s Regionalism: Margins, Centers and the Nebraskan Commonwealth” by saying “this, finally, is the lesson that Cather teaches us about regional thinking: that we need ever more supple, inflected, nuanced definitions in order to understand the
complexities of the inter-connections between writing and place” (18). Squire’s essay and Reynolds’s work are two exclusive pieces of scholarship that deal directly with Willa Cather as a regionalist author. The goal of the remainder of this chapter is to synthesize some of the few other readings of Cather’s regionalism in order to better elucidate a more nuanced definition of her regionalism before reading her novel *My Ántonia* as a regionalist text.

The struggle with writing about regionalism and Willa Cather is that Cather appeared to reject the very idea of being regionalist. Fetterly and Pryse move to interpret one of Cather’s later short stories, “Old Mrs. Harris,” as Cather’s contemplation and rejection of regionalism. They argue that regionalism serves as a comfort for the old Mrs. Harris, and the memory of her old town (i.e. regionalism) is what comforts her in a new and modern place (i.e. modernism). Two other characters in the story resist being placed as a woman in a regionalist story. Fetterly and Pryse conduct an interesting, nuanced reading in that they look at the three different female characters, the ages of these characters, and the places from which these characters have come and where they want to go in order to read the regionalism in this story. They argue that there is not one regionalism and there are different approaches to the place and the people. The type of work that Fetterly and Pryse are reading into “Old Mrs. Harris” had developed its roots much earlier in Cather’s novel *My Ántonia*, in that there are a number of narratives within the story and a number of characters with different reactions to the place, like Ántonia, Jim, and Mr. Shimerda in *My Ántonia*, and the three generations of the family in “Old Mrs. Harris.” What is more, Fetterly and Pryse show the reader that regionalism and her old town offered Mrs. Harris a comfort but also a remembrance of status and authority.
Read in the sense of Cather’s regional anxiety, regionalism offers Cather as a writer comfort and authority. Although Cather’s life and writing are rooted in different regions, she seems to fear that the rooted nature of her stories would stifle her authority and creativity.

In Cather’s fiction she alluded to her criticisms and concerns with the regionalist tradition, and her anxiety of being included in it. According to Fetterly and Pryse, it is Cather’s critical view of regionalism in “Old Mrs. Harris” that signifies her break from it. I will quote at length their reasoning:

By reducing regionalism to comfort and making it the place which Grandma turns when all else has failed, Cather underscores the limitations of regionalism for a modernizing culture committed to separating from its past. While the image of Grandma clutching her sweater for comfort is poignant, it is not compelling. Through her portrait of old Mrs. Harris, Cather encourages her own reader to separate from regionalism. (*Writing out of Place* 58)

By portraying a reliance on regionalism in the face of other female character’s motives in “Old Mrs. Harris” Cather is illustrating the need to move on and break from regionalism and perhaps even the attachment to the place.

Cather was an aware writer and critic of the current criticism and political nature of her profession. Scholars have noted how engaged she was with the current literary conversation of her time. Marilee Lindemann has noted that during the “culture wars of the 1920s [Cather was] engaged with, in, and against the American literary history that was being invented all around her at this crucial moment in her career” (as cited in *Writing Out of Place* 56). Cather was concerned with her in relationship to the tradition of American regionalism. She did not want to be confined to the history and genre of regionalism—as a genre that was deemed inferior and a woman’s literature (*Writing Out
of Place 56). Cather begins to infuse her fiction with her anxiety and political awareness of literary history, and begins to bend the genre as an act of defiance and genius in that she explicitly writes in the effect (success or failure, life or death) of the region on the person and vice versa, developing an immediate intimacy. Writing out of Place cites Lindemann as “reaveal[ing] a Cather aware of and concerned about the effect upon her work and reputation of various forces operating in the construction of American literature in the 1920s” (56). But in fact she was conscious of this effect early, and in her great 1918 novel My Ántonia, she was already writing in a way that commented on the history of regionalism and female authorship, but also moved her towards a more radical style of writing.

The connection between the human and the region is common in criticism on Cather’s work and in particular her regionalist work. Cather, in “Old Mrs. Harris” as Fetterly and Pryse noted, is confronting the notion of how much value to place on the people of regionalism. Tom Lutz picks up on in an earlier novel of Cather’s, O Pioneers. Lutz focuses on the opening scene and its description of the Nebraskan town of Hanover. He writes, “The opening suggests one of the framing dichotomies that will structure the novel’s literary oscillations: the human and the nonhuman. The land, from what we might call a proto-ecological perspective, suggests a set of values distinct from the values of civilization and related to the prehistoric, animal existence of human beings rather than to their contemporary social existence” (Cosmopolitan Vistas 107-08). What is valuable is necessary to an understanding of Cather’s regionalism. Cather writes into her work the weighted value of the human characters and of the region—creating a reciprocal relationship of value between the two. I think that this is important coming off of Fetterly
and Pryse’s discussion of “Old Mrs. Harris” because there is a debate of value—how does the world and place in which the characters find themselves value them and conversely how do the characters or the people of the place value the place or the region?

Cather was invested in the large in the multitudes, noting authors such as Henry James, Frank Norris, and Walt Whitman (Cosmopolitan Vistas 115-16). Yet what is most important to her, as Lutz points out in reading her essay on Walt Whitman, is the distinction of people. One of her major critiques of Whitman as a poet is that he was not able to distinguish between the vast number of people in America and where they came from. This is why he lacked as a poet and as a literary icon, according to Cather. “Literature is not the same as dictionary writing, she argues; its survey of difference is motivated by ‘conscience’ and ‘responsibility,’ and this is where, despite his energy and spirit, Whitman is insufficiently poetic, insufficiently literary” (Lutz, 116). I want to stress why I bring this to the forefront in a chapter on locating Cather’s regionalism. It is because Cather was adept at finding the local not only in the place, but also in the people, but even more so, she was able to understand the fluidity of the local and the relationship the local and the people have. She was able to identify and portray the relationship between the two, but she was also able to identify it in the writings of other authors, and was able to critique it if it were not up to “authentic” standards. Cather was skilled in her ability to portray the place through, as Janis Stout calls them in her book Picturing a Different West, word pictures. But what is perhaps even more impressive is Cather’s ability to depict her characters reactions to and interactions with the place.

To return to Guy Reynolds’s call for a more nuanced definition of Cather’s regionalism, I think we need to take into account the multitude of the meanings of
Cather’s regionalism and the ways in which it can liberate others, while also liberating itself. And this liberation is so important in the early twentieth century when modernism is becoming the norm in the literary world. But as Kelsey Squire notes in her conclusion to “Modern Regionalism,” it may not be that liberation is enough, but rather the sense of knowing where to be whether it is in the right place or the wrong place—this is, Squire argues, how Cather creates her modern regionalism, by not returning or going to the best place, but going to the right place.

The final chapters of this thesis will aim to read and analyze Cather’s 1918 novel *My Ántonia* and how it approaches, defines, and redefines Cather’s notion of regionalism. In addition to reading the place and the characters, I will also attend to the illustrations of the novel, done by Polish-American artist W.T. Benda, and how they “provide and important subtext that illuminated Jim Burden’s words” (Schwind 53) and enhance Cather’s ability to write the regionalist text the way she wants, which is to remain authentic to the genre and the history, while still being able to redefine her position and role in it.
CHAPTER 3: *MY ÁNTONIA’S REGIONALISM*

As a moment of brief reflection, I want to disclose why I was originally drawn to and interested in this subject for a thesis. In early discussions of this project, it was recommended to me to look into regionalist and local color criticism in regard to Willa Cather’s 1918 novel, *My Ántonia*. Looking into this novel as a regionalist text excited me and I was interested in seeing what other scholars had to say on the matter. So as any good student would do, I went straight to the MLA International Bibliography database to see what I could find about Cather’s novel and American literary regionalism. To my surprise after a number of searches using a different search terms and keywords, I could not find a single article that concerned itself with *My Ántonia* and regionalism. A few of her other texts, like *The Professor’s House*, *O Pioneers*, and “Old Mrs. Harris,” have been discussed as regionalist texts. Other articles have disputed that her novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, does not fit the bill as a regionalist text. But there was nothing to be found about *My Ántonia* as a regionalist text. The more I read into regionalism and local color criticism, the more it seems like there is a lot of interesting potential in reading *My Ántonia* in that vein. The more scholars and academics I have talked to have also been shocked when I tell them that looking at this novel and regionalism has led to a dead end. From this I can only assume that people think that it is obviously a regionalist novel, and there does not need to be any scholarship on it because it is so obvious. But this is why I find doing the preliminary work in reading *My Ántonia* as a regionalist text so important. So I want to first address in the opening pages of this chapter—which will be speculative scholarship—why there has been no previous scholarship on what is arguably one of Willa Cather’s greatest novels, *My Ántonia*. 

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Perhaps the reason there is no scholarship on *My Ántonia* as a regionalist novel is because it goes without being said that it is a regionalist text. My response to this rather simplistic argument is to ask the question, if it is truly a regionalist novel, how is it one? There is obviously a queer reading in a novel like *The Professor’s House* (Tom Outland and Professor St. Godfrey), but there is still scholarship about it. So yes, it may obviously be a regionalist text, but it is necessary to document how it may be one.

Part of the reason why it may so obviously be read as a regionalist novel is that it is explicitly in conversation with and of a place in the Nebraskan prairies. The novel is as much about the region of Black Hawk (Red Cloud, Nebraska) as it is about Ántonia Shimerda. Perhaps this is because this novel closely mimics Cather’s own relationship and coming to the land of the Nebraskan plains. In the historical essay of the scholarly edition of *My Ántonia*, written by biographer James Woodress, it states that “*My Ántonia* had the longest foreground of any novel Willa Cather wrote… *My Ántonia*, Cather’s fourth novel, had its genesis in the author’s first experience of the Nebraska prairie at the age of nine” (369). One of the reason’s Cather was so drawn to the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett was because Jewett was of the land and so familiar with the Maine country. Jewett’s stories were so recognizably regionalist because of this fact. Maybe this is why so many readers and scholars have read Cather’s novel(s) as inherently regionalist because of Cather’s relationship to Jewett as an author, friend, and mentor, and because of Cather’s own deep relationship to the land herself and the way she wrote about it. Woodress quotes an interview Cather gave that recounts her early memories of arriving in Red Cloud:
We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather’s homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch of grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality. (*My Ántonia* Scholarly Edition, 370-71).

The newness and vastness of the land changed Cather at such a young age—her personality was erased, and she was now a blank slate, the region could create her as much as she could create the region. With the likeness of the novel to her early memories and life on the prairie, it is easy to subscribe this novel to the regionalist literary genre.

Of course, however, another reason that there may be no scholarship on Cather’s 1918 novel as a regionalist novel is that it might not be one. Yes, it is about a specific place, but maybe it is too broad, too vast, and not enough about the prairie, but rather a romance. Other similar novels by Cather—that is, novels that have a strong plot and narrative, but also take place in a specific geographic location that influence and take part in the plot and narrative—have been dismissed as being not regionalist. Mary Austin argues that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (which takes place in the Southwest) is not a regionalist novel. She writes, “The first of the indispensable conditions is that the region must enter constructively into the story, as another characters, as the instigator of the plot” (105). The role of the region as character is vital to Austin. She continues to write that “Willa Cather does this most appealingly in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.” However, just because she writes the region well, it does not make the novel a regionalist text. Austin recalls:

> I am often asked if [*Death Comes for the Archbishop*] is not what I mean by a “regional” book of the Southwest. Not in the least. The hero is a
missionary arriving here at an age when the major patterns of his life are already set; a Frenchman by birth, a Catholic by conviction and practice, a priest by vocation, there is little that New Mexico can do for him besides providing him an interesting backdrop against which to play out his missionary part. (105)

I believe that Austin’s argument is directly involved with My Ántonia, because there is a lot of coming and going into the prairie: Jim Burden, the Shimerdas, Peter and Pawel, and Jim Burden’s family move into Black Hawk. But the ones who survive are the ones who are willing and able to be shaped by the prairie land; the ones who do not survive, or do not make it, are the ones who have already have been shaped. This is what I call reciprocal regionalism: a fluid relationship between the region and the character, where there is an influence of one upon the other. This makes the novel difficult because in a sense Jim Burden enters the prairie three times and the question then becomes when is the point at which “the major patterns of his life are already set”: this is one of the nuances in the novel that become harder to read.

Furthermore, I think that when read in the context of current regionalist criticism of Willa Cather’s works the novel may not superficially fit into the mode of literary regionalism. Quite clearly one of the main criteria for being a regionalist text is to depict a place as it was and as its people were. Cather uses little dialect in My Ántonia, the rare European accent is an exception. There are also a number of places that share the novel. Looking into Cather’s own words about Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs, when she writes, “These stories…have much to do with fisher-folk and seaside villages; with juniper pastures and lonely farms, neat gray country houses and delightful, well seasoned old men and women. That, when one thinks of it in a flash, is New England” (9), she clearly values that when she reads this novel, she knows the exact place it is about. For
Cather the power of a regionalist text is being able to read something and primarily be brought to the place. But some may question My Ántonia’s ability to do that. Not by taking away anything from it at a narrative level, making it a weaker novel, but by placing the power of the novel on the relationships and on the people, which takes place in a number of different “regions”: the prairie, Black Hawk, Lincoln, the motherland, and the cities. My Ántonia explores a number of specific regions and places in the Nebraskan life, while also extending beyond the prairie’s borders and exploring where these people came from in quite good detail. I think this is important for a reading of Cather’s regionalism, because in understanding her use of space and place, her idea and definition of regionalism can become better.

These anti-regionalist arguments or implied assumptions, however, fall short and do not provide good reasoning for the text not being a regionalist one. Because although the text may fall short in some of the traditional senses of a regionalist novel, it does so without removing itself from the regional and the place of the people it considers as its material. Ann Romines contemplates the novel’s power to continue to fascinate readers of all ages and times, and why readers keep returning to it. Romines writes, “So much is in it—and so much isn’t. It keeps generating questions” (Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations, 152). Romines is writing of the novel’s ability to continue to surprise its reader, and much of those surprises arise from the movement and the place of the novel. Romines continues:

What does it mean to move—from a Bohemian town with flowering trees and gardens where musicians gather for a “beautiful talk” or from a Virginia country house with generations of family portraits and family recipes and rituals—to land “as bare
as a piece of sheet iron” where the sod only recently had been broken? (152)

The novel raises these very important issues and is steeped in a conversation with what it means to go to a new place and experience a new place, and become part of that place, and whether that place will accept the character or the character will except it, is what Cather’s regionalism is trying to achieve. What Cather does that is so impressive is she stresses this in her regionalism, the struggle of going to a new place and interacting with it.

The contemporary reviews and criticism of this novel are clearly thinking of it as a regionalist text too. In a 1918 *New York Times Book Review*, the author writes of *My Ántonia*, “There is a carefully detailed picture of daily existence on a Nebraskan farm, and indeed the whole book is a carefully detailed picture rather than a story” (*My Ántonia Critical Edition*, 331). What on the surface seems like a sincere review and compliment of Cather’s ability to write of a place with such clarity and strong description also has a sense of strong criticism, in that the novel is not so much a novel, but just a picture. Perhaps all the novel achieves is showing the reader a picture of the Nebraskan prairie without giving the reader a story to go along with it. The entirety of the review seems to support the latter reading in that it is a relatively simplistic reading, maybe even summary, of the novel without getting into the complexity of the narrative. But the fact that it was noticed as a “carefully detailed picture of daily existence” speaks to the novel’s ability to bring a reader into a place—which is the idea of regionalist texts, at least according to the idea Cather presented in the preface to the collected stories of Sarah Orne Jewett.
Contemporary critics of Cather noted something similar in her, as Cather noticed when she wrote the preface to Jewett’s collected stories. In a review in *The Nation* titled “Two Portraits” it states, “[Cather’s] style has distinction, not manner; and it is the style of an artist whose imagination is at home in her own land, among her own people, which happens to be a democratic and a plain people.” The review continues to argue that Cather “has a strong feeling about this—that we cannot get away from our sources” (*My Ántonia* Critical Edition, 335). It seems that what critics noticed about Cather’s writing is her own connection to the land—and current Cather scholars continue to be in awe in regard to her descriptions of the prairies, the desert, and any other place which she writes about. But what seems to have happened is that critics have appropriated her connection to the land to her style of writing, which has branded her as a “Nebraskan” writer and I think in turn a “regionalist writer.” So while early critics have noticed and recognized her great ability to represent a region and her connection to the region, scholars have continued to follow those early claims. Which makes me wonder if these early readings, without explicitly naming her a regionalist author, but praising her ability to represent the region, have put her in this situation—where readers read her for the place and critics read her for her narrative complexity, but there is never a conversation on how the two interact together. This is why there is no scholarship on *My Ántonia* as a regionalist text, because looking back to the early reviews that’s all it was read for. But I think that critics and readers need to return to this novel and these early reviews because what Cather is doing is quite special. Cather aligns the struggles in her novel, the struggle for the character and the region to develop a relationship, with the struggle of of her own relationship as an artist to the region; Cather needs to reconcile with the region and the
memories that come with it in order to write about it. Additionally, her regionalism is much more than the “picture” of the experiences of the Nebraskan prairie; she complicates that with memory, with narrative function, with moving from place to place, with the different persons presented and their respective relationships to the land in which they live.

While some contemporary critics of Cather admire her for your picturesque descriptions, others are inclined to notice her for her practice of “higher realism” (Bookman Review 337) and label her as “a genuine realist” (N.P. Dawson 339) when they read My Ántonia. When Fetterley and Pryse were re-defining regionalism in Writing out of Place, one of the major ideas they were working against was regionalism as merely a sub-genre of realism and that regionalism should be a genre itself and read or studied alongside realism. The early reviews of My Ántonia show scholars that the two are closely related—and that Cather was potentially aware of how close the two genres are. Cather is consciously walking the line between the two genres in her novel and that it marks a transition period in her career, just as some characters walk the line of regional and non-regional in her novel.

The remainder of this chapter will aim to map out how Cather is engaged with the regionalist tradition, while also employing some techniques that are different. The way Cather presents the prairie and the people is surely to be categorized as regionalist, but I think the vastness and amount of places and people she illustrates, as well as how she goes about developing the plot and narrative, contradict the rigidity of regionalism. My hope is at the end of this chapter I will have uncovered a more nuanced definition of Cather’s regionalism as illustrated in her 1918 novel My Ántonia, which speak to the
reasons why she may have been critical of regionalism and decided to “revise” regionalism significantly.

“Regionalism in American Fiction” opens by mapping out the history of regionally specific art. Austin writes, “Art, considered as the expression of any people as a whole, is the response they make in various mediums to the impact that the totality of their experience makes upon them, and there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment” (97). In regard to the people of that regional environment, Austin writes, “Musical experts say that they can trace a racial influence in composition many generations back, and what is a race but a pattern of response common to a group of people who have lived together under a given environment long enough to take a recognizable pattern?” (97). Austin’s suggestion of what regionalism may look like in other medias—her example here being music—is one which should be taken into account for Cather’s novel. If read in respect to Austin’s musical claim, what is My Ántonia but a “response common to a group of people” towards Ántonia Shimerda? In the introduction, an unnamed narrator (presumably we can associate this narrator most closely with Cather herself as a figure) meets with the then central narrator of the text, Jim Burden, on a train. The unnamed narrator says:

During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept turning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. (My Ántonia Scholarly Edition, xi-xii).

What this novel clearly sets out to explain in the beginning is that Ántonia as a character is sympathetic with the land—Ántonia and the prairie are one and the same. When
characters think of Ántonia, they think of the land, and when characters think of the prairie they think of this “Bohemian girl.” This establishes a relationship between the two central figures of this text: the prairie and Ántonia. What the unnamed narrator is doing in the beginning of this text is linking the two and in turn linking a number of relationships and events that happen throughout the course of the novel. The two centers of Cather’s work (Ántonia and the region) are inherently connected. Furthermore, one of the main effects of regionalism is to bring someone into a human experience of a place. Instead of bringing a character into a place, Cather brings them into a character that is the embodiment of the place.

Austin later names *My Ántonia* as one of the regionalist texts that embody a “fiction which has come up through the land shaped by the author’s own adjustments to it” (101). And it is because of Austin’s later criteria that *My Ántonia* fits into the regionalist vein in that the prairie does enter constructively into the narrative—which the reader gets right in the beginning of the introduction. But Cather is also responsible for making adjustments to the region—establishing a reciprocal relationship with her muse: the prairie. I think that is one of the main purposes of the introduction of this novel; it gives a concrete context of the importance of the place and the person, almost as if the reader is part of the conversation discussing what is so important about the two. She (the unnamed narrator) writes “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” (Scholarly Edition, xi-x). The reader is immediately taking part in this exploration. The reader is in on the secret. Comparing these towns to a “kind of freemasonry” provides it an air of secrecy and intrigue. Readers, especially urban readers in early twentieth-century
America wanted, or at least Cather predicated they would want, to know about it. Cather is intentionally building up the foreignness of the Nebraskan prairies for her readers. As Stephanie Foote notes in her book, *Regional Fictions*, “while the subject of the texts was rural life, their readers were nonetheless urban inhabitants.” And perhaps much like the “kind of freemasonry” Jim and the narrator believe life on the prairie to be, “Regional fiction’s appeal was its presentation of people and places that seemed to have ‘escaped’ the dubious improvements of a stronger and more integrated urban economy” (Foote, 3).

In *My Ántonia* Cather was attempting to present a whole and complete picture of the “people and place” of Nebraska. In a letter to Irene Miner Weisz, written in October of 1918, Cather writes about this intention and the reception the novel got:

> This review will answer your question as to whether strangers get the little things in a book like this. Apparently, this man got every least little thing. A stranger, if he has an eye trained for literary values, is apt to get the whole picture more as a whole than anyone who knew the people from whom the characters were sketched, and who must be more or less preoccupied with the question of where the characters are like the model, and where they are wholly unlike. The further you stand away from a picture of this kind, the more you get the painter’s intention. (*Collected Letters* 260)

So once again Cather is expressing her concern or rather her intention to have others outside the prairie region understand the people and the life. Cather’s stress on “as a whole” is important, for later in *My Ántonia*, she equates happiness to being dissolved into something “complete and great.”

The word “picture” is a vital one in Cather’s definition of regionalism because of her poetic imagination and descriptions. In her letters and in reviews of her novels, they are often described as pictures. But it also implies something stagnant that does not move. In another letter to her brother Roscoe, Cather cites how the critics have received her
novel (the editors of the *Collected Letters* have had trouble locating the sources of these quotes), and she quotes a review in the nation: “A man in the Nation writes that ‘*[My Ántonia]* exists in an atmosphere of its own—an atmosphere of pure beauty.’ Nonsense, it’s the atmosphere of my grandmother’s kitchen, and nothing else” (*Collected Letters* 261). This I think speaks volumes to Cather’s own thinking about the source and effect of her novels (like *O Pioneers*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*) because it explains her own sense of simplicity in her writing. Whereas the outside reader will read *My Ántonia* as a grand picture of the human condition on the Midwestern prairie, when Cather thinks about the picture of her own writing, it is her personal memories; it is the picture of her grandmother’s kitchen, or of Annie Pavelka (the prototype for Antonia Shimerda).

It is the personal region that Cather starts to innovate, for this is where she begins to develop the reciprocal, individual relationship to the region. She sets her novel in the personal, but includes it in a larger global narrative. That is one of the roles of Cather’s introduction to the novel. The introduction serves as a framing narrative—which establishes the tale about to be told as factual and true: the unnamed narrator of this frame claims “My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim’s manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me” (xiii). This type of framing is not all that unusual—recounting the tale of someone else, word for word as they have said it (like Twain’s short story “A True Story Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It”). This type of framing gives the narrative a sort of credibility and agency to say anything and be able to get away with it; that is, the source and truthfulness of the narrative cannot be questioned.
Furthermore, Fetterly and Pyrse write about Mary Wilkins Freeman’s use of the frame—I think the same can be said for Cather:

While such scene setting can be a common feature of novels, it is unusual to find it in regionalist fiction...It is, however, so pronounced a feature of Freeman’s fiction that we read it as her way of calling attention to regionalism itself, of marking the distance the reader must travel in order to enter the scene with respect. (180)

Cather’s beginning frame narrative calls attention to the fact that these characters have gone and come a long way and enter the region with respect and memories of Ántonia and the region as one.

The framing narrative begins in recollection, but it is not in the place of that the remainder of the narrative will be about, or from the person who will be telling the tale. A number of things happen in the introduction—the two characters: the unnamed narrator and Jim Burden are on a train traveling together through the “plains of Iowa.” “The dust and heat, the burning wind” that they saw from “the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over everything” led to memories of “many things.” (ix). What is interesting about that is that the narrative begins in a different place, but brings them to another—resembling the movement and connecting of the train on which they travel. The plains and prairies of the Midwest are quite vast—and the similarity that the unnamed narrator describes the scene from the train speaks to that. Furthermore, Jim Burden, perhaps the main protagonist (the other being Ántonia) is called James Quale Burden, a more formal name that comes with it a “citified” personage. There is a split between the country self and the city self, which is read in the name. There is simplicity in rural prairie. Jim Burden is employed as “legal counsel for one of the great Western railways.” Furthermore, the narrator says of Jim, “He loves with
a personal passion the great country though which his railway runs and branches.” (x-xi).

It is as if Jim Burden has a stake throughout the frontier, the west. But it is this exploration of the other—of the space outside the Nebraskan prairie that is explored in the introduction that brings the reader into the setting of the prairie—calling more attention to its importance on these city folks—how years of memories are still fresh in their heads—but they are called forward by a return to the place. The prairie requires a physical presence, it seems to suggest. As the two agree, to know the prairies, one would have to have grown up and lived there. As Jim and the narrator have said that the land is equated with Ántonia, when Jim says of his writing of the story that “I 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,” so to is the representation of the region—it is through first hand experience—of which Cather was all too familiar. I think this then speaks volumes to the way in which the novel is titled:

[Jim] went into the next room, sat down at my desk and wrote on the pinkish face of the portfolio the word “Ántonia.” He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it “My Ántonia.” That seemed to satisfy him. (xiii)

Similar to how the story is Jim’s, the region must also belong to Jim; the regional is personal. I think this is one of Cather’s more significant moments in writing, that the region and the prairie cannot have a universal depiction for the other—but rather it is a physical and personal presence that must be felt individually.

Moreover, Cather employs time as a sort of regionalist tactic in her introduction. The reader is introduced to the narrative and the story, not only in the voice of an unknown character, but also in the present day. This removes, Jim and the reader even
further from the story of Ántonia and the Nebraskan prairie. I find this interesting because it helps succeed in bringing the other—not only of space, but also of time, to a new place—to a particular region. And what this does is reiterate that a region and regionalism is set in a place and in a time, speaking more to the temporality of regionalist works. It is as if Cather is trying to reach what she herself writes of Jewett’s stories:

I like to think with what pleasure, with what a sense of rich discovery, the young student of American literature in far distant years to come will take up this book and say, “A masterpiece!” as proudly as if he himself had made it. It will be a message to the future, a message in a universal language…the one message that even the scythe of Time spares. (11)

Ántonia’s story is spared from the scythe of Time—not only are Jim Burden and the unnamed narrator thinking of her story and the story of the prairies, but the reader too, because of this recollection, will have this story. But it is because the story is set in a given period that it is saved. With just a portrait of a place—without any reference to time, it will be forgotten because time is equally as important in rooting a story. This is what separates a narrative from a picture.

Early in the novel, we are able to appreciate and maybe speculate why Jim becomes the railway legal counsel. While on the train heading out to Nebraska at the age of ten, Jim is fascinated by the conductor of the train. “He seemed to us an experienced and worldly man who had been almost everywhere; in his conversation he threw out lightly the names of distant States and cities” (4). The worldliness of the novel is already explicit in the text at an early stage. Whereas a traditional regionalist text may only focus on one part of a country, Cather establishes a sense of travel and excitement of the other; “[The conductor] wore the rings and pins and badges of different fraternal orders to which he belonged” (4). The “rings and pins” of “fraternal orders,” remind the reader of
the introduction when the narrator and Jim equated the prairies to being like “freemasonry.” Belonging to a number of different places and regions is an exclusive club; Cather was trying to portray that in her writing of these scenes.

In the opening scenes on the train, a relationship between immigrants is established. The family from “across the water” (4) was on the train with a young Jim Burden, establishing a relationship between people coming to a place and experiencing it together for the first time. Nothing was distinguishable—differences, that is. “The only thing very noticeable” says Jim “about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska” (5). The trope of emptiness and stillness was common for representations of the frontier, of the prairies—but it was this emptiness and stillness that allowed Cather to write and create her region and explore others.

The emptiness and stillness is what first Jim Burden was first exposed to in the country—a reading of the Nebraskan prairies that would mimic Cather’s first reaction.

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land…I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. (7)

Cather does something here that in a sense subverts the magic of the thinking of the frontier. As Simonson writes in Beyond the Frontier, “In the American consciousness the West symbolized hope” (1). Cather’s, or Jim’s, western world was empty and hopeless, for on that first night in the country of the Nebraskan prairies, he “felt erased, blotted out.” And on that night he “did not say [his] prayers…here, [he] felt, what would be would be” (My Ántonia 8).
Because of the emptiness and Jim feeling “erased,” he was allowed to grow in the region, to be shaped and created by it. This is reciprocal regionalism; it is the characters being shaped by the region. In looking at an early description of Jim’s grandmother, the reader can get a sense of how the land and place can shape, emotionally and physically the character:

She was a spare, tall woman, a little stooped, and she was apt to carry her head thrust forward in an attitude of attention, as if she were looking at something, or listening to something, far away. As [Jim] grew older, [he] came to believe that it was only because she was so often thinking of things that were far away. (10)

The “things that were far away” could be in regard to time, but it could also be in regard to place and space. In the prairies, where there are no mountains, and a lot of flat geographic features, people that have grown up and lived in the area are more equipped to survive. She has developed a reciprocity with the region, granting her the ability to survive. Jim’s grandmother is built to look out over the plains. But what exactly is she looking to? In reference to his grandfather, Jim notes that his “eyes were not at all like those of an old man; they were bright blue, and had a fresh, frosty sparkle” (11-12) The reader knows that Jim Burden grew up and into these distinct features that his grandparents too had. In the introduction to the novel, the unnamed narrator remarks on Jim Burden’s “fresh color and sandy hair and quick-changing blue eyes” and says they “are those of a young man” (xi). Jim Burden’s grandfather’s “hair and beard were red” as a young man and “he had a delicate skin, easily roughened by sun and wind” (12). Cather’s characters seemed to react to the environment that they are in and part of what the reaction did was keep their eyes always looking and young. What that says about
Cather’s regionalism is perhaps that it is always moving and always changing, and to see is to experience and remain fresh and young.

The movement of the prairie is what kept the eyes moving and the characters young and fresh. Jim remarks:

As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running. (14-15)

Cather’s use of constant movement in these early sections of the novel is significant in its relationship to her understanding of place and region. Between the “running” of the prairie grass, to which Jim equates to the likes of a river, to the railway which he arrives on and in a sense later devotes his life to, Cather’s place is always running—it is a fluid idea. Cather alludes to a region or a place that is not a constant state and regionalism fails in presenting it as such. Relationships with place change, and the place itself changes with it. This is why Jim Burden and his grandparents eyes are fresh and changing, because so is the place in which they live. Again, Jim says, “Perhaps the glide of the long railway travel was still with me, for more than anything else I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind” (15).

As the landscape changes, so does the person. Cather is versed in representing that nuanced relationship to the reader. When Jim Burden enters the garden for the first time he has an epiphany:

I sat down in the middle of the garden...There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers....I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay
under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. Whet it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (17-18)

What may be one of the most beautiful passages in Cather’s writing is also necessary to understanding Cather’s sense of space. Cather is putting emphasis on the “complete and great.” The region is only a part of that. But that one must “dissolve” into the “complete and great” suggests a sort of willingness and bond with the region; one has to accept the region and the region has to accept too.

This sense of atonement is particularly interesting when one considers the climate of which Cather wrote My Ántonia. In an introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Cather scholar John J. Murphy writes, “It is as well a story of personal survival written during upheavals in the Great War paralleling those in the author herself” (vii). Not only was Cather trying to portray a sense of completeness and greatness in the novel for others, but she herself was trying to be dissolved back into the greatness she once knew. It was during this time that Cather lost the love of her life, Isabelle McClung. What is more, “Not only had Cather lost an intimacy, but the McClung house in Pittsburgh, her workplace off and on for years, was put up for sale” writes Murphy. Cather herself in her professional career was uprooted from her place—a feeling similar to Jim Burden’s as he went out west to Nebraska after the death of his parents. And what Cather does during her time of limbo is return to places of familiarity—places where she feels home and safe

In the spring of 1916 Cather fled New York for a vacation in the Southwest, a tonic personally and creatively for her since 1912. Then she delayed her return to New York for a three-month stay with her family in Red Cloud, the Nebraska prairie town where she grew up, visiting the
Bohemian farming country and renewing the friendship with an immigrant hired girl she had known during adolescence, Anna Sadilek Pavelka. (Murphy vii)

I mention this for a few reasons. Cather returns to the place where she grew up, enacting Jim Burden’s return. Moreover, the return creates and impression that she imprints in the novel through Jim Burden—it is in the time of limbo and change, of uncertainty that romantic descriptions of the prairie and town make most since; impressionist representations are fleeting, but what is held on to is most beautiful. And these impressions mark a kind of blending and modernism—a vibrant presentation, rather than a stale portrait of a place. John J. Murphy concludes his introduction by writing, “Distance delineated her success, as her contemporary reviewers recognized, and their insight is as perceptive as any we have had since” (xxiii). I think this style of romantic impressionism strays from the traditions of regionalism because one can write about the place but be writing of it in memory.

Sarah Orne Jewett once advised Cather, “Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world so well before one can know the parish” (The World and The Parish). I think Cather takes this to heart when she writes about her region—for she brings with it an understanding of worldly perceptions and so too do Cather’s characters in My Ántonia. As Ammons and Rohy state in American Local Color Writing, “Regionalist literature offers a part of the United States as token of the nation” (xxv). That is that the regionalist representation is only a facet of the whole nation—and to understand one, the author must understand the other in order to present a place truthfully. This tactic of understanding the region and the nation is vital to truthful representation and is also seen as a “substitution of the part for
the whole—named, in rhetoric, *synecdoche.*” Ammons and Rohy continue, “The synechdochial relation implies a certain assimilation; like local color itself, it involves not only the recognition of difference but also the incorporation of the other, not only the celebration of regional difference but also the promotion of a nationalist fantasy” (xxvi).

I think we get this sense of synecdoche in *My Ántonia* in the opening scene. The frame of the narrative opens in present time, on a train with two people from New York. The two are characters of a nation—but then the narrative shifts inward and becomes a novel of the particular—but what Cather does that is interesting is to zoom back outward beyond the Nation to include many nations: Norway, Russia, Bohemia, and America.

Parts of the description of the country that Cather/Jim are interested in sharing are the multiple European and varying religious groups that were peppered throughout the region. The immigrants equally shaped the land itself as the land shaped them. Jim writes, “Fuchs told me that the sunflowers were introduced into that country by the Mormons; that at the time of the persecution when they left Missouri and struck out into the wilderness to find a place where they could worship God in their own way” (27-28). There were also German neighbors to the south of the Burdens, and Russians; Peter and Pawel were farmhands for the Burdens and a Norwegian congregation. Ammons and Rohy cite Edward Alsworth Ross, a professor of sociology, who wrote for *Century Magazine* in 1913 and was quite critical of immigrants in the American midland.

Ross’s representation of undesirable new Americans reflected a clear set of racial and ethnic stereotypes, which are at times reproduced and at other times challenged in the stories in this volume. Swarthly of complexion, not from the North, and not Protestant, the people he despised were said to be dirty, licentious, lawless, stupid, brutal, and undisciplined. (*American Local Color Writing* xv)
Cather seems to stray away from “undesirable” stereotypes, instead employing a more romantic or traditional stereotype of different people.

The distance had not dampened Jim Burden’s sense of home either. On travelling to the post office one afternoon, Jim writes:

All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn The new country lay open before me: there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands trusting the pony to get me home again. (27)

There was a comfort and knowledge of the prairies that never left Jim, or for that matter never left Cather. Although things have changed in the country, “there were no fences in those days,” implying that there is now; the impression of the openness and agency of self is what remains in Jim years later.

*My Ántonia* continually supplies fresh impressions of the land. It needs to be always new to always keep interest. An instance of this is when the country becomes something new—is blotted out and erased, to use Jim’s language—and can recreate itself.

The portrait of the first snowfall that Cather writes of is something of great import because it depicts the challenge and the struggle of the region. Simonson writes that the frontier, the emptiness of the west, can be a friend and a foe. The region and prairie can be relentless to anyone. “The first snowfall came early in December,” writes Jim.

I remember how the world looked from our sitting room window as I dressed behind the stove that morning: the low sky was like a sheet of metal; the blond cornfields had faded out into ghostliness at last; the little pond frozen under its stiff willow bushes. Big white flakes were whirling over everything and disappearing in the red grass. (60)

The day of the first snowfall gives the impression of past selves fading, similar to how Jim felt erased upon arriving in Nebraska. “The blond cornfields had faded”; the “wine
stained” grass of before are no more and there is something new. The whiteness of this scene creates a blank slate, the region of autumn lies underneath the “big white flakes.” This is a new scene to adapt to. I think one of Cather’s objectives in this novel is to continue to reintroduce a place as something new to the person—and asking the question, how often can one be new to a place? How often can we find home or return home—a question perhaps near and dear to her heart. So what Cather is doing in this passage is a reintroducing person to the place—erasing the world, as it is previously known. “The sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie was almost blinding. As Ántonia said, the whole world was changed by the snow; we kept looking in vain for familiar landmarks” (61). This newness is what kept the eyes and posture of Jim Burden and his family fresh and young and always looking. The life of the prairie was in constant movement—impressions would flitter by in a moment.

Cather uses the changing of the land as a way to shape her characters. We see it in *O Pioneers, The Song of the Lark, Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *The Professor’s House*. I think it is one of her innovations or explorations in her regionalist agenda. The ones who are young can change with the place and become a part of it, one with it. The older ones are the ones who are the true artists, the ones who can adapt and change. The others are not willing to survive. We see this, unfortunately, in the character of Mr. Shimerda. Whereas the eyes of Jim Burden and his grandfather are young and fresh and bright blue, and always changing, Mr. Shimerda’s are not like that. “His eyes were melancholy, and were set back deep under his brow. His face was ruggedly formed, but it looked like ashes – like something from which all the warmth and light had died out” (24). Different to Jim and his grandfather—their bright blue eyes and fresh warm skin—
following the move from Bohemia to Nebraska, a move Jim learns was not Mr. Shimerda’s decision, he cannot brave the prairie life—he cannot accept what the Nebraskan life will do. And while others are reintroduced to and develop a new reciprocity with the prairie during winter, Mr. Shimerda will lose “all the warmth and light” he has left.

The warmth was what Mr. Shimerda was holding on to and when he lost it, he lost what kept him alive. “Jake and Otto joined us [the Burden’s and Mr. Shimerda] from the basement and we sat about the stove, enjoying the deepening gray of the winter afternoon and the atmosphere of comfort and security in my grandfather’s house” (83). This is something that Mr. Shimerda lost when he moved to Nebraska. Ántonia says “My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music anymore. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance” (86). But he has lost that comfort and opportunity. The feeling of comfort and security “seemed to take possession of Mr. Shimerda.”

I suppose in the crowded clutter of their cave, the old man had come to believe that peace and order had vanished from the earth, or existed only in the old world he had left so far behind. He sat still and passive, his head resting against the back of the wooden rocking-chair...His face had a look of weariness and pleasure, like that of sick people when they feel relief from pain. (83)

What is interesting is that Jim assumes that the reason for Mr. Shimerda’s concern is the clutter of the cave: the bungalow where the Shimerdas live. Jim posits that it is the Mr. Shimerda being stifled—which doesn’t make sense in a region as wide open as Nebraska. The plains are wide and flowing—especially given the new description of winter—the white spreading across the field. But it is the newness that he cannot adapt to. He is not
comforted as he was in his homeland. This speaks to Cather’s idea of regionalism because not all people can survive in a new place. This is a feeling Cather herself gets when she visits the Southwest, a place that has almost been like a second home to her.

Mr. Shimerda’s inability to adapt to the place of the Nebraskan plains is part of Cather’s regionalism. Ántonia and Jim are able to survive and succeed in the prairie because they arrived at a young age and were able to adapt and grow up into the prairie life. In Beyond the Frontier, Harold Simonson cites literary historian Percy Boynton when discussing Cather’s novel. Simonson writes:

But in the case of both Alexandra Bergson [O Pioneers] and Ántonia Shimerda, the indomitable heroines in these novels, Willa Cather idealized the immigrant. As a Nebraskan transplanted from Virginia, she knew her people mainly through sympathetic observation. When sympathy and observation came into conflict, sympathy triumphed. This meant, according to Boynton, that Willa Cather was unwilling to resign her characters to their fate, and equally unwilling, therefore, to record the frontier’s conquest of the pioneers. (88-89)

I have to disagree with Simonson’s and Boynton’s reading of Cather’s sympathy and idealization of the immigrants in her novels, because of Mr. Shimerda’s death. Mr. Shimerda was resigned to an unfortunate end. The frontier had beaten him. Moreover, with characters like Peter and Pawel (the Russians) and the Norwegians, who refuse to bury Mr. Shimerda, Cather is very much aware of and perhaps even critical of the immigrants in the Nebraskan prairie. In the death of Mr. Shimerda, the reader is exposed to the stifling emptiness of the Nebraskan prairies, and the toll it can take on its inhabitants. But what can kill some characters is what other characters thrive on—but it is the arrival at a young age that allows one to adapt to it.
In a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, she writes about a feeling similar to that of Mr. Shimerda, while actually later referencing her short story “The Bohemian Girl,” which serves as a launching pad for what would become *My Ántonia*.

But “Bigness” is the subject of my story. The West always paralyzes me a little. When I am away from it I remember only the tang on the tongue. But when I come back [I] always feel a little of the fright I felt when I was a child. I always feel afraid of losing something, and I don’t in the least know what it is. It’s real enough to make a tightness in my chest even now, and when I was little it was even stronger. (*Collected Letters* 150).

Cather purposefully creates the bigness and vastness of the story. In the wideness you can lose something—this is why when Jim Burden first entered the Nebraskan west, he felt as if he were blotted out and erased. The wideness itself can be stifling. So what is Cather doing in creating this character that cannot handle it and eventually commits suicide? It is the lack of reciprocity with the region; if someone cannot commit and give him or herself to the place, then they cannot survive.

What readers find in a number of Cather’s novels are characters that commit to places—or cannot commit to a place. This idea gets complicated when she starts writing her later novels like *The Professor’s House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; one could even say that we see this in *One of Ours* in a way that is more inverted. For Cather’s regionalism is not necessarily trying to bring the place to the other, but rather to bring the other to the place—moreover, that other cannot be a general other, but it must be a specific individual where some may last and some may perish.

The reader gets an illustration of an intense relationship with place and person in book three of *My Ántonia*. In book three at the university, Jim once again is new to a place. He meets Gaston Cleric, a professor at the university, who introduces him to
Virgil. Upon reading the Georgics he comes across the phrase, “Optima dies…prima fugit” translating to “the best days are the first to flee” (256) This is the epigraph to the novel—the best days, the impressions of youth and freedom are the first to flee. This echoes the movement and fleetness of the region as well; the images are always fleeing and changing. Jim Burden reads further:

I turned back to the beginning of the third book, which we read in class that morning. “Primus ego partiam mecum...deducam Musas”; “for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country.” Cleric had explained to us that “patria” here meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse...not to the capital...but to his own little “country”; to his fathers fields, “sloping down to the river and to the old beech trees with broken tops.” (256)

This is Cather’s goal. She wants to bring the fleeting moments of a region and bring them into art. There needs to be a connection between the fluid country and the artist in order to capture it. Much like the characters in My Ántonia need to have an understanding with the region in order to survive. But to unpack this quote, it means that art is coming to the country, an artist must bring out inspiration and the beauty. But out of that inspiration comes a larger understanding of the beauty and uniqueness of the country. Nebraska, before Cather’s writing, was not a place particularly invested in representing itself to others in any media of art. Cather’s great achievement is just that, bringing the Muse into the prairie—her work itself became the muse and inspiration others would use and aspire to and read in the years to come.

The muse of the Nebraskan prairies was sparked in Cather at an early age, and remained in her and fascinated her for all of her years. In September of 1923, Cather published what could be considered her political manifesto on the state of Nebraska. The
article, “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle” was published in The Nation. In it, she opens with describing the geographic features of the “great plain which stretches west of the Missouri River” (My Ántonia Critical Edition 321). “From east to west” Cather writes, “this plain measures something over five hundred miles; in appearance it resembles the wheat lands of Russia, it is watered by slow-flowing, muddy rivers, which run full in the spring” (321). Furthermore, “In this newest part of the New World autumn is the season of beauty and sentiment, as spring is in the Old World” (322). Cather is finding relationships in the New World in the Old World—comparing it to Russia, and finding the beauty in the seasons—which if we think of Mr. Shimerda we can assume that he took his life because he new the beauty of Spring in the Old World was not to be seen.

I want to quote Cather’s entire conclusion to her article in The Nation because I think it gives good language to Cather’s understanding of what her own regionalism is and how she approaches writing about the Nebraskan region and bringing the Muse not only into Nebraska, but also into the other regions she so often represents in her writing.

The wave of generous idealism, of noble seriousness, which swept over the State of Nebraska in 1917 and 1918, demonstrated how fluid and flexible is any living, growing, expanding society. If such ‘conversions’ do not last, they at least show what men and women are capable of. Surely the materialism and showy extravagance of this hour are a passing phase! They will mean no more in a half a century from now than will the ‘hard times’ of twenty-five years ago—which are already forgotten. The population is as clean and full of vigor as the soil; there are no old grudges, no heritages of disease or hate. The belief that snug success and easy money are the real aims of human life has settled down over our prairies, but it has not yet hardened into molds and crusts. The people are warm, mercurial, impressionable, restless, over-fond of novelty and change. These are not the qualities which make the dull chapters of history. (328)
I find it interesting that Cather herself notes the importance of “idealism” and “noble seriousness” of the state during the Great War, the years during which she published her novel. Perhaps the novel had a role in sweeping over the state with those sentiments. Furthermore, what is necessary to understand about Cather’s regionalism is that it is itself “fluid and flexible.” As stated early in this chapter, I have referred to it as impressionist—that it is always changing, because like the society of the region—it is always “living, growing, expanding.” The beauty of Cather’s writing is that it is able to capture that in a text, but the text itself is flexible to move with the growth of peoples. This is what she saw in Sarah Orne Jewett, and what she herself would strive to achieve.

And what she was writing about at this time was the materialism of the society; this was something she saw in Nebraska, and something she probably saw even more on the east coast: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* depicts that embrace of materialism (Kelsey Squire’s article earlier referenced deals with this very notion). *My Ántonia* is attempting to achieve is a return to “clean and full of vigor soil” of the Nebraskan plains. Finding the good in the people of Nebraska during a time of greed, but also in a time of war; Cather is advocating for sympathy, not for difference.

I think we can see this sense in Cather, especially given the choice of including illustrations for the novel. To my understanding it is the only novel of hers that she commissioned illustrations for. There were illustrations when the books were serialized, but to have illustrations specifically for a novel was new for Cather. And she wanted to have an illustrator who was familiar with the content and sympathetic with Cather’s goals in writing this novel, which was to develop a fluid, flexible, personal, and impressionistic portrait of the Nebraskan plains and people. And with Cather’s stress on the personal
interaction with the content—thinking about Austin’s claim that regionalism needs to be of the place, and Cather says that the writer needs to be of the place—Cather needed to have an illustrator who also fit the fill. So she chose Polish-American illustrator W.T. Benda to represent the immigrants of the Nebraskan prairie in his impressionistic and sympathetic style—something which Cather fought hard for.
CHAPTER 4: PICTORAL CONCLUSIONS

There has been some scholarship on the Benda illustrations, and a little bit on Benda himself. Interestingly enough, Benda is the nephew of Helena Modjeska, a Polish American actress whom Cather was quite fond of and included in a number of novels. Whether or not she knew of Benda’s relation to the actress is unknown, but an interesting biographical connection nonetheless.

In a letter to R.L. Scaife, the production editor of Houghton Mifflin in April 1917, prior to the publication of Cather’s fourth novel, My Ántonia, Cather writes, “With regard to the decoration of my book, I think [Wladyslaw T.] Benda might be able to do it. His half-tone illustrations are rather too mannered, but he used to do good head and tailpieces, and he knows the material” (Collected Letters 239). As a number of scholars have already noted, the “material” which Benda knew was an understanding of the region. In a later letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather wrote, “I selected Benda as a man who knew both Bohemia and the West; and because he has imagination” (Collected Letters 247). Because of Cather’s sense of regionalism, as she understood it, which was that the artist had to be of the place and have a connection to it and bring the muse into it, this is why Cather wanted someone who could truthfully present both the west and the immigrant population of Nebraska.

Cather had conceived of the illustrations prior to hiring Benda. So she was more than just a writer of the text, but also an art director for the novel. She fought publishers for Benda, because he knew how to do it, but once he was hired, she would tell him and coach him what to do. Cather wrote in the same November 1917 letter to Greenslet that
“[Benda] has already given me a great deal of time, making preliminary sketches and trying to get exactly what I want” (Collected Letters 247). In his book Artistic Liberties, Adam Sonstegard sets out to study the “rivalries between realism’s authors, illustrators, and readers” (3). He writes, “Artists…act as advance readers…Artists also function as coauthors, shaping the final appearance of the prose narrative for editors and readers” (3). One of the struggles with this dynamic is that the artists may sometimes misread the text in its original form, and in turn with their illustrations, they can reshape the text to their misreading, becoming the author. Cather did her best not to let this happen, because she played such a large role in the illustration process. Jean Schwind writes, “Cather’s letters reveal that she not only independently commissioned the Benda pictures but acted as artistic director of the project…Cather governed the process of illustrating My Ántonia quite autocratically” (53). Evelyn Funda writes that it was not so much autocratic as it was a “battle” (359).

There are a number of reasons why Cather might choose Benda; perhaps it was because of his ethnicity, or perhaps it was because of his work of which she was familiar, but nonetheless, as scholarship has noted, it is a relationship worth exploring because not only does it enhance the narrative, truly making the story of Ántonia call to mind pictures of the prairie, but it also gives an otherwise fluid regionalist novel concrete ties to where it grew up. And this was quite important—Funda notes a letter that Cather wrote to Greenslat: “In a letter of complaint to Greenslet…Cather express her displeasure about what she saw as Scaife’s interference and insisted that unless the illustrations were a meaningful supplement to the text, instead of a mere decoration, she wanted no illustrations at all” (360). So, maybe Cather wanted Benda as a secondary reader, a
secondary author of the text. Benda’s illustrations could not be something merely decorative, but had to be something that illuminated the text—and to read that in Cather’s own writing is important because it suggests that Cather knew she needed illustrations in order to fulfill the story of Ántonia. Cather believed that the artist to do that was Benda because as Funda writes, had a “sympathy for and understanding of western landscapes,” and “a special knowledge of Bohemian culture and a willingness to collect background material for the job, although Cather does not specify what background materials he had researched” (362).

The illustrations are a significant “supplement” to the story. In a letter to Ferris Greenslet discussing a new edition of My Ántonia, Cather urges Greenslet to keep the illustrations, because they are vital to the story: “Regarding the Benda illustrations: you would, of course, retain those. It is one of the few cases where I think the picture really help the story, and I would not be willing to leave them out” (Selected Letters 377). Based on Cather’s letters alone, having the Benda illustrations commissioned for the novel was absolutely necessary to Ántonia’s story. But there is noting ever explicitly said about what Cather wanted them to do to the story, or what she specifically thought they did to the story; so all criticism on that is purely speculative.

Much like the fluidity of the region, the Benda illustrations suggest a movement and fluidity among them, not only in their pictures, but also in their development. Jean Schwind writes, “The pictures of My Ántonia—progressing from the title page Pan, who plays his pipe within the shelter of an Arcadian bower, to the final portrait of Ántonia bent against the high winds of a prairie blizzard—vividly dramatize the evolution of the new, antipastoral art demanded by the stark Nebraska flatlands” (58). Schwind continues,
“A land not yet ‘a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made,’ the new world that Ántonia Shimerda and Jim Burden enter on the same train requires a radical revision of old-world conventions and cultural traditions” (58). Schwind is arguing that the illustrations act as a corrective, as an anti-romantic view of the prairies (59). Moreover, they present a visual representation of the reciprocal regionalism: the development of the relationship between person and place, like Mr. Shimerda’s stooping posture in Figure 1 and 2, and Ántonia’s opening posture in Figures 5 and 8.

Figure 1: The Shimerdas at the Train Station
In the opening illustrations of the novel, Benda gives us an image of Mr. Shimerda that coincides with his melancholy. In Figure 1, which occurs in the novel right after the Shimerdas and Jim arrive in Black Hawk, the reader can see Mr. Shimerda on the far left, he is a towering figure, a head above the rest, with his head bent slightly downward, a posture he will soon become synonymous with. In moving to the second illustration (Figure 2), the region has not accepted Mr. Shimerda, and he has rejected it. The half circle style of Benda’s illustration closes Mr. Shimerda in, pushing down on him towards the center. He is now a small figure in a large and vast landscape, bent at the waist and looking downward. Whereas the other illustrations do not have borders, the lines just extend out, the Mr. Shimerda illustrations are clearly enclosed; he is put up
against lines. The reading of the illustrations coincides with reciprocal regionalism, which is that the person and the place have to function together, and there is no sympathy between the region and the land—which eventually leads to Mr. Shimerda’s suicide.

The third and fourth illustrations, shown in Figures 3 and 4, show quite literally the reciprocal relationship between person and place that is apparent in Cather’s reciprocal regionalism. In Figure 3, the reader sees a Bohemian woman picking mushrooms and in Figure 4 a man bringing home a pine for Christmas. Schwind writes, “The harmonious cord between human life and nature in the old Bohemian world Mrs. Shimerda describes as she gives a bag of dried mushrooms to Jim’s grandmother: in the world of the mushroom gatherer, ‘things for eat’ can be collected like manna” (63). This is a clear illustration of the functioning of person in place, and place in person. Although Schwind argues that the fourth illustration, Figure 4, is a representation of brute force of something “wrested from the soil” (63), it still presents the reader with a personal interaction with the land, of making something out of nothing, i.e. a tree in a treeless prairie.

Figure 3: Gathering Mushrooms

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In looking at Mr. Shimerda’s illustrated reciprocity with the region, and the intermediary illustrations of place and person, the reader can compare these illustrations to the later ones that depict Ántonia’s relationship to the region. There is a clear development over the course of Benda’s illustrations of her which are seen in Figures 5, 6, and 8.
In Figure 5, the reader is offered an image of Ántonia plowing the field. She is in immediate relation to it. She is working the field and in turn it will benefit her. What Benda’s illustration does is that it also opens up the prairie to Ántonia; however, one does not overpower the other. She is not oppressed by the region, nor is she an overpowering figure. In Figure 6, Ántonia sprouts out of the region as if she is “of” it. Once again there is a equality between Ántonia and the rolling prairies. They embrace each other. It is in the final illustration of the novel (Figure 8) that Benda offers us a complete portrait of the Ántonia that has been “dissolved into something complete and great.” Ántonia stands alone with the region; she stands in a type of winter that killed her father, but different from him, she now is a part of it and has control of the story within that scene (i.e. the whip). Over the course of the illustrations and of the story, the reader sees Ántonia grow up into the land, establishing the reciprocity Willa Cather’s regionalism calls for.

Figure 6: Setting Sun
Figure 7: Lena Lingard

Figure 8: Ántonia in Winter
Many of Benda’s illustrations in *My Ántonia* showcase the wide and open spaces of the prairie, but furthermore, they illustrate the relationship of the characters with the land and in turn with the narrative, showing how the region functions with the characters in it. Benda illustrates the largeness of the sky as it confronts Mr. Shimerda and as it embraces Ántonia. Jean Schwind calls the illustrations “the silent supplement” to Cather’s novel. They are just that. And Cather is right in saying that they are necessary to the story of Ántonia. But even more, the illustrations are a supplement to Cather’s understanding and use of regionalism, in that the illustrations offer the reader a clear picture of the relationship one must have with the region in order to succeed and survive. It is not enough to be “of” a place for Cather: she may never have considered herself “of” anywhere. But it is a matter of an embrace from both ends, the person and the place—and that is quite clear in *My Ántonia*. And Cather ends her novel, with return to the embrace between place and person: “I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man’s experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can never be” (360).
WORKS CITED


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