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Review of *New Essays on My Antonia* Edited by Sharon O'Brien

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New Essays on My Ántonia. Edited by Sharon O'Brien. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Notes, selected bibliography. x + 140pp. \$49.95.

In her introductory essay, Sharon O'Brien correctly claims that *My Ántonia*'s critical history illustrates the indeterminacy of meaning, for even in this relatively short book one is struck by the variety of responses evoked by Willa Cather's novel. From the first essay, suggesting the "sweetness" of Cather's narrative, to the last, recording the violence of Jim Burden's hegemonic presence, this collection gives readers a fresh, if sometimes unconvincing, look at one of the most famous novels of the Great Plains.

Miles Orvell's essay "Time, Change, and the Burden of Revision in *My Ántonia*" gives us the first argument of many about literary influence, connecting the novel to the three works Cather labeled as American books with a "long, long life": *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Orvell makes several interesting connections between the works, particularly Jewett's, and ultimately concludes that Cather wanted to

propose a "sweeter, more optimistic" narrative.

The collection's most compelling essays—Elizabeth Ammons's "My *Ántonia* and African American Art" and Anne Goodwyn Jones's "Displacing Dixie: The Southern Subtext in *My Ántonia*"—illustrate the richness of influence that informed Cather's writing. Ammons's contention that Cather's book "is deeply indebted to and shaped by African American music," though she was "conflicted" by such a debt, will surprise many readers. But the essay intriguingly takes on the novel's troubling Blind d'Arnault passage, refusing to write it off as either simple racism or benign characterization. Instead, Ammons offers a complex vision of Cather's engagement with African American culture, suggesting that the very structure of *My Ántonia* is based (subconsciously) on ragtime.

Jones's essay, too, illustrates that one of the novel's largest silences can be a source of important analysis. Writing about the "ghostly" presence of Jim Burden's southern roots, Jones notes that his first nine years in Virginia, all but ignored in the book, subtly influence his perceptions. The essay ably suggests the deep and lasting effect of region on imagination.

The collection's final essay, Marilee Lindemann's "'It Ain't My Prairie': Gender, Power, and Narrative in *My Ántonia*," is its least satisfying. Though making an important point concerning Cather's "ambivalen[ce] about female artistic and cultural power," the piece tends toward extended harangue about the control Jim Burden wields as the story's narrator.

On the whole, *New Essays on My Ántonia* provides fresh avenues of Cather research, though all lines of thought are not equally rewarding.

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