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Todd Richardson
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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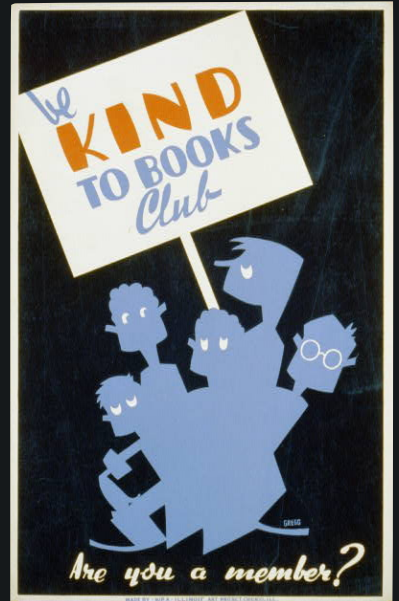
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FAN FICTION, MY ÁNTONIA AND CREATIVE CITIZENSHIP

by **Todd Richardson**



Before discussing the pedagogical potential of participatory approaches to Willa Cather's 1918 novel *My Ántonia*, I need to say something about the unique department I work in because the program's demographics played a crucial role in my initial decision to use fan fiction as a teaching tool. The Goodrich Scholarship Program provides full-tuition scholarships and a specialized curriculum to smart Nebraska students with financial need. When the program started in 1972, the students who qualified were more conventionally poor, but dramatic rises in tuition, which are certainly not unique to the University of Nebraska at Omaha, mean that more and more middle class students are qualifying for the scholarship. Nevertheless, 88% of our most recent cohort received Pell Grants, and three out of four are first generation students. The majority are non-white—Latino/Latina students make up almost half the cohort—and their ACT scores range from 31 to 14. In short, many of the students I work with are not part of the collegiate mainstream and need to be invited into college level material and thinking.

I was initially drawn to fan fiction for its folkloric appeal, as folklore is my supposed expertise. Broadly speaking, folklore consists of the non-hierarchical, non-institutional aspects of culture, those expressions and customs that change as they're shared, things like legends, rumors and recipes. Fan fiction's willingness to reinterpret and reinvent tradition make it a prime candidate for folksiest folklore of the young 21st century. My view of fan fiction expanded considerably, however, after encountering the work of Henry Jenkins, the most influential scholar currently working in fandom and fan studies. His book *Reading In a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby Dick in the English Classroom*, coauthored with Wyn Kelley, Katie Clinton, Jenna McWilliams, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley and Erin Reilly, convinced me that fan fiction could help welcome Goodrich students into intimidating academic conversations.¹ In this book, the authors discuss using fan fiction, along with a variety of other participatory strategies, as a way of making Melville's novel more approachable, emphasizing that fan fiction allows students to create their own entries into obscure and alienating texts.

1. Henry Jenkins, Wyn Kelley, Katharine Anne Clinton, Jenna McWilliams, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley and Erin Reilly *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby Dick in the English Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2013.



Inspired by Jenkins's example, I decided to adapt their strategies for *My Ántonia*, yet my motives were many and not all of them pure. I was looking for a way to justify including *My Ántonia* in Freshman Composition because I was dreading teaching Freshman Composition. It had been a few years, but departmental needs had trapped me in a comp-shaped corner, and I was hoping to make the class more interesting and, frankly, useful to me. I knew *My Ántonia's* then-impending centenary would play an outsized role in my life as I am a Nebraska-based, Cather-adjacent scholar—I actually prefer Cather fan, but “fan” isn't an acceptable designation in academia—and I was looking for ways to deepen my familiarity with the book. That being said, *My Ántonia* was an ideal choice for the sort of sustained engagement that Jenkins and company model in their approach to *Moby Dick*. Cather's novel is an endlessly challenging work, and the more time a person spends with it, the more meaningful it becomes. More significantly, *My Ántonia* is a text that the students I work with struggle to relate to, and the participatory tactics I wanted to explore would definitely be tested by 21st Century students of color looking to pry their way into a book about 19th century white people.²

Many of the assignments in the class were rather conventional—for instance, students analyzed the rhetoric of early 20th century newspaper editorials about immigration—so I'm going to focus on the more participatory assignments here, two in particular. In the first assignment following

the class's completion of the book, students composed missing scenes, events that were not represented in the novel but are nevertheless consistent with the events of the novel. Borrowing terminology from Jenkins and company, I encouraged students to explore *kernel*s, which are bits of information introduced in the novel that are not fully explored, *holes*, which are plot elements that are missing from the narrative but essential to the story, *contradictions*, which are suggestions of different possibilities, *potentials*, which are speculations on what happens after the novel's end, and *silences*, which are elements and voices excluded from the novel.³

Whatever missing scene students opted to compose, it had to fit within the world of the novel. As much as they may have wanted to, they could not overwrite anything in *My Ántonia*. For example, if someone was adamant that Jim Burden should have not gone to Harvard so he could stay in Lincoln to be with Lena Lingard, they were out-of-luck. Jim going to Harvard is, as they say, canon. For what it's worth,

canon within fandom is fascinating and contentious. The intellect spent in dissecting the minutiae of fictional universes is enough to make even the most obsessive literature scholar seem well balanced. The discussions can seem absurd—is Luke Skywalker left-handed, right-handed or ambidextrous?—before remembering that they closely resemble theological debates and that pop culture is religion to many. But that's not why canon is important here as I'm not trying to convert the students to Catherism. Canon, by



2. I understand there's a powerful argument about the racial otherness of 19th century Bohemian immigrants, but black and brown freshmen today definitely see the Shimerdas as white.

3. *ibid*, p 141-145.

which I mean the most genuine reading of text, is crucial to the unique value of participatory assignments as it imbeds critical thinking within an ostensibly creative endeavor. Students must critically analyze a text before determining what fits within it. As an example, the most popular “missing scene” proposed was a small-r romantic union of Jim and *Ántonia*, yet only a few followed through after a spirited class debate about whether such a union made sense within the world of the novel. Most came to the conclusion that *Ántonia* as Cather presents her didn’t really like Jim that way, but a couple of students were insistent that nothing in the novel precludes such a union and went ahead and wrote the scene.⁴

I emphasize the critical thinking element of the assignment because critical thinking is the cardinal virtue of a liberal arts education in general and composition courses in particular. In other words, it was what made this endeavor salable to writing program administrators. And of course I believe critical thinking is essential, as I am the product and purveyor of a liberal arts education. A professor who doesn’t revere critical thinking is akin to being an anti-Capitalist salesman; sure it’s possible, but so is a union between Jim and *Ántonia*. While critical thinking was not what most appealed to me about the approach—more on that in a moment—I was deeply grateful for the critical thinking aspect as it gave me something to evaluate. Creative thinking, after all, doesn’t fit easily into the A through F grading scale. An instructor may be able to bend it to fit writing workshops and studio

classes, but the students in those courses are converts. Nebulous expectations and instructions are a tougher sell for gen-pop students, most of whom expect “standards” and clear directions for success in a course, who recoil when I tell them the best paper is a paper I didn’t anticipate. But I fear this is becoming a jeremiad denouncing institutionalized hostility toward creative thinking, a lamentable tendency that exists throughout higher education. I will simply say that it is incredibly difficult to make students comfortable with thinking differently and taking chances when they have been trained to follow directions all their academic lives. Consequently, I was only too happy to festoon the syllabus with demonstrable critical thinking outcomes.

The resultant papers thrilled me. I read stories about Jim coming home for his grandfather’s funeral, Otto Fuchs becoming a father in a Colorado mining town, Wick Cutter’s criminal life prior to his arrival in Black Hawk, and a particularly thoughtful one about Ole Benson’s ongoing pursuits of Lena. All told, they were the most inventive and memorable papers I’ve ever read in a freshman composition course, stunning from the big ideas down to sentence level execution. That being said, one paper stood out as an especially strong argument in favor of the value of participatory assignments. The Blind d’Arnault sequence of *My Ántonia* is terrible. Its romanticized grotesquery can never be explained away, and while it provokes profound discussion among upper level students, freshman non-majors are leagues



21 4. The most remarkable version had *Antonia* running away to live a glamorous life in New York, leaving her husband Cuzak to take care of their many, many children, to hell with that Earth Mother imagery.

away from the sort of contextual knowledge and critical experience such discussions require. Sure, I can tell them what to think about it, but that's not teaching; that simply shames them into saying what I want to hear. Well, this particular paper made better use of the Blind d'Arnault episode than I ever have in any class discussion. As mentioned above, one of the "types" of inspiration for this assignment was "silences," and this student rewrote the scene from d'Arnault's unheard perspective. It was a brilliant paper as not only did the author have to rely exclusively on non-visual description—he's

Blind d'Arnault—she countered Cather's portrait of d'Arnault as an animalistic savant by sharing the pianist's inner monologue, revealing a savvy and sophisticated musician keenly aware of his audience's inability to see his humanity. More than any other "missing scene," this paper validated the idea behind the assignment.

The other assignment I want to discuss had students reimagine *My Ántonia* by re-situating the story. They proposed alternate settings, whether in time or place or both, and explained how these new settings preserved or accentuated the book's themes. One of the most original papers turned the Shimerdas into the Kims, a Korean family who moved to Los Angeles just prior to the riots in 1992, yet that was only one of many thought-provoking takes on the novel I could never have anticipated. Another student made Jim a Martian and the Shimerdas Earthlings moving to Mars to start a new life, and yet another transplanted the story to Hawkins, Indiana in 1983, which is the setting for the wildly successful show *Stranger Things*. By far the most popular new setting was 21st

Century Omaha, Nebraska, the authors working their own experiences into it by having the immigrant family match their place in time and space, along with their heritage. In these various papers, the Shimerdas became Thai, Ethiopian, Palestinian, Guatemalan or Mexican, in each instance the student connecting with the novel's themes in deeply personal ways. Even more than the first assignment, this one empowered the students to read the novel closely and then remake what they read so that it was relevant to them, not just taking meaning from Cather, but *making meaning with her*.

I am going to put this in explicitly political terms. These participatory assignments enact what President Franklin Roosevelt called creative citizenship. In an address to the University of Pennsylvania in 1940, just prior to U.S. involvement in World War II, Roosevelt said, "It is the function of education, the function of all of the great institutions of learning in the United States, to provide continuity for our national life- to transmit to youth the best of our culture that has

been tested in the fire of history." This, I believe, is what we do when we introduce our students to great literary works like *Moby Dick* and *My Ántonia*, works that have been tested by the fire of history. But Roosevelt continued, "It is equally the obligation of education to train the minds and the talents of our youth; to improve, through creative citizenship, our American institutions in accord with the requirements of the future. We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."⁵



5. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Address at University of Pennsylvania, September 20, 1940: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-university-pennsylvania

I believe encouraging students to rework *My Ántonia* so that it better resonates with 21st century audiences and concerns responds to Roosevelt's suggestion that educators prepare students to improve American institutions in accordance with the requirements of the future. It encourages students to soberly assess what has preceded them while empowering them to rework what they have inherited so that it remains vibrant and useful. I'm not so foolish to think that their essays really make an immediate difference in our national life, but I do think it provides practice for reworking other institutions, encourages students to view their country and culture as things they collaborate with, not just things they simply obey. Or such is my hope, and I need a little hope right now.

By way of conclusion, I will briefly assess the value of such participatory approaches on three levels, starting with the book level: it was good for the book. Esteem for the novel improved substantially by semester's end. One student in particular, who read and hated the novel in high school—I don't know that I've ever seen a student so visibly disturbed by a syllabus—became one of the novel's strongest defenders, and a number of students volunteered to lead discussion groups of *My Ántonia* when the novel was later selected as our university's common reader text.

It was, as well, a good experience for me. Teaching composition is never something I look forward to even though I've been doing it off and on for two decades now. It's not the freshmen that are a problem—I rather enjoy working with them because new ideas are so new to them—It's the grading that makes teaching composition such a chore. The papers are never-ending. Well, grading

these more participatory papers was not such a chore. The students continually surprised me with the way they entered the novel, and more often than not, they got me to see *My Ántonia* in new and engaging ways. I found myself grading papers more promptly and enthusiastically than I had in years.

Finally and most importantly, I think it was good for the students, but I can't say for certain. I've talked to many of the students about what we did, and some liked it and others did not. Were I a more diligent researcher, I would at this point provide data about the effectiveness of the fan fiction approach, but I have no such data, and, honestly, I don't think the course can be evaluated at this point. The true value can't be measured for another twenty years until one of the students, by then in her late thirties and established in a career, does or does not rethink and reinvent an idea that's presented to her as immutable and timeless, whether that idea is professional, personal or political. I hope that she does.



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