Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

The Antidote. By Karen Russell. New York: Vintage. 2025. Pp. 432 (Paperback). $19.99. ISBN 978-0-593-68836-6.

Author Karen Russell describes her 2025 book *The Antidote* as "a novel about holes in people's memories" (415) but also a story about "redress and repair" (417). Holes as in vacancies and loss—holes that are created, redressed, and repaired—lead us to the title of the book. *The Antidote* is the name of one of the main characters, a woman who officially does not exist because she is a prairie witch (no such thing, she is always told). Set in Nebraska before and during the Dust Bowl era, this book assigns the Antidote, herself a cypher, the dual role of creating and refilling holes in people's memories. She is a kind of human vault; she takes deposits (like a bank) of people's unwanted memories to cleanse them of the memory and houses them until a withdrawal is requested, a hole needs to be repaired. And since "[n]ames are memories" (80), she is also the keeper of many names that are being erased.

As with the depleted soil of the Plains, here is a world in which names are subject to evaporation, in an individual's memory and in history. The devastating dust storm that starts the novel, the Black Sunday of April 14, 1935, results in a loss of memory for the human vault herself; all the Antidote's deposits vanish. This novel shows that by passing along memories, hiding or burying them away along with truthful names, we all may go bankrupt: in fertile soil, healthy crops, money, and crucially decency.

The setting is Uz, Nebraska, a fabricated town, although we are told that the name comes from the story of Job in the Bible. The main farmer in the story is named Harp and is a kind of Job figure who has experienced many losses. Harp's crops, however, seem to be the only ones in Uz that are thriving; his fields bathed in a "nameless light" (388) at night, the plants themselves very green, maybe even emerald. The name Uz also resembles Oz, another name associated with the US western Plains, natural disasters, and displacement. (On top of those Oz connections, the story reveals a scarecrow, the need for courage, a twister, and of course a witch or two.).

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When *Uz* is pronounced (although we are never told how), the name might sound like "ooze", as in what spilled blood does on the ground. It also might resemble the pronouns "us" or even "you-ze", both possibilities suggesting a greater potential for plurality than for an individual.

The theme of community and continuity as a means to reparation is reinforced by the appearance in the story of a magic camera, a "quantum" (394) one, that takes pictures of what had been, and what might be, in a particular location; it connects the land across time with "time-bending photographs" (297). In one image: "[t]allgrass covers the prairie and there is no farm, no fencing" (294). In another, a farmer sees his own land except that "the barn and the wheat and the fence had vanished" (341) and the land instead is populated by the children of the native peoples.

Cleo Allfrey is the official Resettlement Administration Historical Section photographer wielding that camera, sent to document the reality of the dust bowl or at least a reality that will keep Americans on the side of Frankin Roosevelt's policies. At first, her prints keep being returned to her with holes punched in them, rejected by those developing the negatives in DC. These punches are sometimes right through people's faces, black and blank holes in a life. When she develops the photographs herself, she starts to see the (literal) possibilities of the locations.

Cleo wants her photographs to be truthful. She distains photographers who rearrange reality, dramatize scenes, when the result is not a truth. But potential is a kind of truth, too. Falsehoods are as bad as holes. In that vein, teenager Dell—Harp's niece—joins the Antidote in making counterfeits: filling the townspeople's losses with sweeter memories than those they deposited. Their intentions are good but wrong. And it is not that difficult for the pair to succeed, since people seem to see what they want to see. Cleo is sometimes mistaken for a man, and once she is called *Mister* Allfrey (188) because not only is she wearing a hat and trousers, but also no one could fathom a Black woman in 1935 traveling alone in Nebraska.

In her Author's Note, Russell writes that some characters in the novel share names with real historical figures. And real photographs are interspersed throughout the book, along with those hole punches. These people of the Dust Bowl are real too and "have their own names, families, and histories" (413), but Russell does not tell us, or she does not know, who they are; in the Photography Credits, the phrases "Untitled photo" and "possibly related to" (421) are repeated. So much namelessness.

Chapters are narrated in rotation by half a dozen main characters. The Antidote, in her first-person chapters, often addresses her story to a *You* (and sometimes *Son*), a child she bore in a home for unwed mothers at age sixteen, a child taken away from her and replaced with a death certificate that she was forced to sign, leaving a permanent hole in her life. As with prairie witches, this baby is not supposed to exist and may or may not have a "real" name. The Antidote herself is replete with names, many fabricated: she is called *Prairie Witch*, *Miss Witch*, and *Ant*. She is given the moniker *Anne Fayeweather* at the home, an imposed identity: "a costume that made me sound to myself like a wooden doll with blond braids" (99). We eventually learn that she was born *Antonia Teresa Rossi* in Sicily, called *Nedda* by her grandmother, *Toni* by her friends.

Other prairie witches fill the holes of their non-existences with fanciful names. Cherry Le Foy goes by *Madame Quicksand* (41). The Antidote "was jealous of Cherry's chosen name, too. Madame Quicksand sounded like the star of a high-end burlesque show to me [. . .] All the good names had been taken" (55). When Antonia spots snake oil being advertised as "'The Antidote to All that Ails You!'" (55), she has her stage name. Performance names are important to a prairie witch: "I would not hand my real name over to a stranger so cavalierly. That can be a fatal mistake in this line of work", she cautions Dell (87).

Harp is our source of history about Uz. We find out that his name derives from a prairie witch his mother visits before his birth; she is given the witch's son's favorite toy, a small harp. When Harp withdraws his father Tomasz's memories from that prairie witch many years later, he learns that his father, a Polish settler, could not at first hear significant differences in names. They were all an "Anglo mishmash" (269). Tomasz taught himself, however, to "hear how a word like Omaha was different from a word like Sherman or Lincoln" (269). And he taught himself the Pawnee place names. He tried to respect the land by hearing and using authentic names: "*Reservation* [sic] was certainly a Yankee word" (269).

Dell is Asphodel Oletsky, who moved in with her uncle Harp after her mother, Lada, was murdered. Asphodel is a "fancy name" (235): "a famous flower. It comes from a Greek myth [. . .] It's also a common weed" (236). Dell is both extraordinary and ordinary. Before counterfeiting with the Antidote, Dell was also vaulting memories; her conduit, though, was the town party line, a veritable field of a different kind of dirt on the townspeople. She could name names.

Expanding the characters who narrate chapters is the Scarecrow, whose narratives get progressively longer as he struggles to regain memory and names. At first: "All names escaping me. Firstname, skyflung. Lastname, abandoned" (53). Later: "Names return to me like gifts" (80). Throughout the book, the Scarecrow continues wrestling with the memory of names. Finally, they return to him: "Names are spells. Names conjure skies and animals [. . .] I have begun to practice a new power. Inventing shapes out of the shapes I can recall with the high whistle of a name. Remaking names into nameless creations, flowing scenes" (183).

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The biggest hole created by the settlers in this book is the myth (the lie) of *terra nullius*, Latin for "nobody's land" (405): the story told to, and by, all who came to Uz and displaced the indigenous tribes—the myth that no one lived on this land before the White settlers arrived, that the land was up for grabs, one big hole
to be filled.

The Pawnee are now practically invisible. They were shunted into reservations and their children were sent to "school[s] where they teach us to forget who we are. We speak their language, but we have not forgotten" (269); "The real education [. . .] was in forgetting", creating yet more holes in the next generation (277). Harp's father Tomasz knows he is complicit in not speaking the truth, by staying silent, and then by telling his own lie. He starts a rumor that the local tribes are hostile to the settlers to keep other settlers away: "I told a lie, and I watched it spread", oozing like blood, since his rumor leads to murder (286).

Names and memory are also (and ultimately) about what kind of a legacy will be left for future generations. Right now, for Harp there are too many losses: mothers without children and vice versa. Children need to be reconnected to their land and their people. They need to feel at home. There are so many stories throughout the book of displaced children saying: "I was stolen from my people" (210) and "Take me home" (280). The false memories planted by the Antidote and Dell, however sweet they may be, are counterfeits; the people "don't remember who they are anymore" and are "spellbound amnesiacs" (304). Warns Harp: "There are cavities in Uz's story that needed to be filled in, before a more permanent collapse occurred" (334).

An essential loss is reversed when the Antidote finally recognizes her long-lost son in the Scarecrow in Harp's magic fields, the figure of a man with sewn lips who, nonetheless, is remembering. By touching him, she immediately accesses his full (yet short) life: his adoption after being taken from her, his boyhood and adulthood, and then his recent death in his 20s. She learns that his adopted name was Benjamin, called Squeakie until puberty. All the Antidote could give him was the label Baby Rossi (204): "I never got a chance to name You" (400). But they are reunited in the end. And late in the story, another gap is filled: Cleo's quantum camera reveals the image of a young Lada to daughter Dell, repairing (in a way) that loss.

More connections need to be made. Harp sees that the town is devoid of "anchoring roots" (362), that they are living on "soil without roots" (358) because they failed to respect the natives' use of the land. He knows that he needs to state the unpopular truth that the Pawnee people were here originally, that he and his fellow settlers are liars and thieves. This land they took was never *terra nullius*. Names in—and of—the land need to be proclaimed and restored. The legacy to the future generations should be "[t]hat destiny is open" (299), not "manifest" (311).

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