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American Women Writers, Visual Vocabularies,
and the Lives of Literary Regionalism

by

Katherine Mary Bloomquist

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Dissertation Abstract

American Women Writers, Visual Vocabularies, and the Lives of Literary Regionalism

by

Katherine Mary Bloomquist

Doctor of Philosophy in English and American Literature

Washington University in St. Louis, 2012

Professor Vivian Pollak, Chairperson

This dissertation reads American literary regionalism through its visual vocabularies—such as sketches, photographs and portraits. Though critics often deemed this genre inferior or unfinished, using visual vocabularies of the “sketch” or “local color,” later books of regionalism simply brim with visual vocabularies, when characters are seeking the lives of others or filling in the blanks of their own. The writers in my dissertation—Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, and Ann Petry—ground literary regionalism in the politics of writing places, but draw also from the arts of life writing circulating in the late nineteenth-century literary marketplace: through slave narratives, suffragist autobiographies, and travel narratives.

The first chapter features Sarah Orne Jewett’s little-known 1893 essay “Human Documents” in a rereading of her best-known fiction, arguing that the essay’s language of photographs and portraits recasts the lives of “A White Heron” and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. While many readers are familiar with Willa Cather’s singular phrase “the thing not named,” we have not acknowledged, as my second chapter does, how Cather’s language of things appears so frequently at the end of her fiction and relies upon visual vocabularies to challenge the gendered limitations of her characters’ lives. My third

chapter focuses upon Ann Petry's unnamed heroine of her Wheeling fiction cycle, who writes daily accounts of her life—working with a variety of written and visual media—as she learns about her family's precarious racial position in Wheeling.

My concluding chapter places these many unnamed women writer-characters in conversation with representations of nineteenth-century poetesses. I argue that regionalism offers us an archive of writers framing debates about authorship with these writer-characters; even a brief mention of a poetess often leads to more careful consideration of the daily lives of women writers—in their early careers, daily practices, and deaths. The books of literary regionalism draw both from local impressions and self-expressions: illustrating the lives of others through visual vocabularies, sketching the daily realities and practices of current writers. These unfinished lives provide the finish to their books.

Introduction: Of Maps and Memoirs

In the summer of 1906, Sarah Orne Jewett visits her childhood home, South Berwick, Maine. She remembers reveling in its pleasing “*uninterruptedness*” when she stayed there a decade ago, but this time something feels different.¹ As she prepares to leave for Boston, she comments in a letter: “I feel like a dissected map with a few pieces gone, the rest of me seems to be put together right!” (218) Unlike the more coherent and nostalgic geographies for which her Maine fiction is known, Jewett expresses her selfhood in pieces: dissected, exposed. But Jewett is not simply commenting on her exhaustion after time in South Berwick, since she relates this fragmented, mapped self to another change she experiences, when she reads “the life of Miss Catharine Sedgwick” with a friend (218). Jewett admits how mistaken she was about this book’s quality: “I did not know how good it was. I fancied it had been written in the dull time of ‘Memoirs,’ but I was quite wrong; it was just as well to wait and grow a good deal older before I went back to it” (218-219). As she compares her current self to that map, she realizes that her expectations for the older genres of life writing, like the Memoir, have also changed. She begins to piece together her dissected map only after she remembers a passage from Sedgwick’s life: “there is a page, too, about the advantages of country life that made me ‘fire up’ about Berwick as I used in my best days!” (219) Before reading a diverting memoir, Jewett is a dissected map; after her reading, she reflects upon authorship with renewed enthusiasm. In Jewett’s letter, it takes a map to break her regionalist writing in pieces and a memoir to put it back together, anticipating the influential legacies of life writing in nineteenth-century regionalism for later twentieth-century women writers.

Reading a memoir—which surpasses her expectations—influences how Jewett articulates the older, more familiar map of her regionalist fiction, since she distinguishes her current attitude from her earlier “best days.” Reaching its peak in popularity between 1865 and 1914—in both magazines and novels—American literary regionalism has been both praised and admonished for its attention to smaller locations on maps and lives that we would not expect to read in memoirs, it is time to acknowledge just how invested this genre has been in granting women writers a place for interrogating and assembling women’s lives: not just in featuring women characters more prominently and consistently, but in plotting the lengthier processes through which other characters gather, report on and sometimes even silence the lives of women. When Elizabeth Hampsten studies the life writing of Midwest women, she acknowledges that, to her surprise, writing easily classified as regional does not read regionally: “These women’s writings do not do that; their ‘place’ is not where we had expected to find them. In much of this writing, for all its particularity, it is hard to tell (if the postmark is missing) where the writers are, for they do not bother to tell us in words we are used to.”² Regionalism does not always behave regionally; often, other things are taking place. As Cecelia Tichi has put it, “They were regionalists—but not solely in the ways critics have conventionally thought. The geography of America formed an important part of their work, but essentially they charted the regions of women’s lives, regions both without and within the self.”³

Even in Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), which has long epitomized literary regionalism, readers do not receive an exhaustive map of Dunnet Landing but are more likely to encounter characters who seek the lives of others from

their stories and who are committed to detailing these lives often designated as “other,” overlooked and underestimated. This dissertation argues that an overlooked legacy of nineteenth-century regionalism is its increasing interest in the politics and processes of representing women’s lives through visual vocabularies; these writers illustrate their prose with the coordinates of both maps to be dissected and memoirs to be discussed. We, like Jewett, sense that not all the pieces fit together if we read regionalism only for its maps, but can discover how and why these pieces are not in place if we pay closer attention to the tendencies to include life narratives, like memoirs, in regionalism.

My project maps a generational model for these lives of literary regionalism by focusing on three writers who occupy different relationships to the regional tradition, in their roles as both readers and writers of it. First is a canonical regionalist, Sarah Orne Jewett, followed by two of her readers and later twentieth-century writers: Willa Cather, who seems to have surpassed the regionalist definition, especially once her Nebraska novels reached a national audience, and Ann Petry, a self-declared outsider among regionalist writers, whose short fiction details the costs of racial inclusion and exclusion in regionalism. While frame stories, narrative gaps, temporal delays, deferrals and interruptions do make good regionalist fiction for each of these writers, I argue that these devices also are informed by and contribute to the art of life writing emerging at the same time.⁴ What sustains interest in the regionalist genre from the nineteenth into the twentieth century is not simply an investment in conveying “insider” knowledge of a particular region; with this writing comes an ongoing commitment to representing overlooked life narratives.⁵

While critical accounts of literary regionalism have typically focused upon writers publishing between 1865 and 1914, its influence is not limited to this time period. This dissertation is concerned less with regionalism's origins and more with its destinations in the twentieth century, tracing the legacies of writers whose intellectual engagement with the tradition draws upon and reworks its visual vocabularies, beginning with portraits and turning also towards media. These writers portray regionalism not as a single literary movement, but as a web of movements, along paths, roads and railroads tracking the travels of characters and stories among regions. An unnamed voice in Jewett's "A White Heron" addresses both readers and nine-year-old Sylvia. Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) offers a veritable guidebook for assembling life narratives—in collaborative goals, picture books, photography collections and oral narratives. The unnamed narrator of Petry's Wheeling stories rehearses life narratives through a combination of both visual vocabularies and technologies. By gathering together the expressions of life narratives so frequently circulating, we can discern that the movements of life narratives—among, within and beyond regions—actually hold these disparate writings together, evidencing their widespread influence.

Furthermore, Jewett, Cather and Petry share much more than we might expect. They published at least one widely-known novel—Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Cather's *My Ántonia*, and Petry's *The Street* (1946)—and a number of other novels and collections of short stories; but their engagement with life writing in their regionalist writing provides three more reasons for reading across their work.⁶ First, these writers are especially skilled at mapping movements among regions and life narratives, displacing a definition of regionalism that relies only upon a national paradigm. In *The*

Country of the Pointed Firs, Jewett's Dunnet Landing (based on her hometown of South Berwick) foregrounds a relationship between an unnamed visiting narrator-writer and Mrs. Todd, the local herbalist who is especially attentive to the oceanic influences upon her Dunnet Landing: well-versed in both the lore of local sailors who set out for the Atlantic, such as Captain Littlepage, and in the herbalist skills she learns from the Caribbean influences of Mrs. Tolland in "The Foreigner."⁷ Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* features Jim Burden's multiple return visits from the East Coast to Black Hawk, Nebraska, where he finds Antonia's parlor papered with photographs from her Bohemian home and housing a box of photographs collected from a life in Nebraska.⁸ Ann Petry turns to her childhood home of Old Saybrook, Connecticut, as inspiration for her fictional Wheeling, New York, which she imagines to be near Buffalo, known for its summer tourism and for attracting visitors to the Layen family drugstore. Their collective engagement with regionalism certainly contributes to recent transnational approaches suggesting that Jewett, Cather and Petry are most invested in portraying the migration towards and away from the fictional towns they portray.

Because these writers frequently convey the movement around and within regions, my approach responds to more recent critical reading practices of regionalism: namely, reading across regions, rather than only within them (see especially Figure 1). Critical accounts of regionalism have traditionally been more likely to organize discussions around "The Literature of New England" or "Southern Fiction," while more recent accounts have sought relationships between different regions, considering how New England regionalism portrays the South or how regional distinctions become blurry: less stereotypical and more contested than we might expect. These reading practices also

reflect the experiences of initial nineteenth-century readers of regionalism, when they turn to the outpouring of these stories in literary magazines and journals, both popular and elite.

Even a quick glance at the table of contents of one magazine can convey the complexity of reading the stories or sketches, as they were commonly called. Other stories and essays surrounding Jewett's final *Country* installment in the September 1896 *Atlantic* include Frederick Turner's "The Problem of the West," Booker T. Washington's "The Awakenings of the Negro," Mary Hartwell Catherwood's "The Spirit of an Illinois Town," Lillie B. Chace Wyman's "Girls in a Factory Valley," and Kate Chopin's "Athénaïse."⁹ Our methods for studying these short stories have contextualized them, according to their region, removing them from this original context where readers encounter New England, the West, and the South in rapid succession, rather than separately. This format is certainly the norm for Chopin's reader in "Athénaïse," who comments on her impressions of reading a literary magazine, reading across different regions and, especially, noticing the surrounding pictures: "A New England story had puzzled her, it was true, and a Creole tale had offended her, but the pictures had pleased her greatly."¹⁰ While critics of regionalism have traditionally valued varying perspectives on a single place, its initial readers experience the genre as a gathering of different regions in contact with one another, complete with illustrations and advertisements surrounding their reading experiences.¹¹

The reading practices of regionalism's original audiences mirror the prevailing critical trend to gather—rather than to separate—writers from many regions into individual studies. In the past two decades, a multi-regional approach has grown more

popular and pervasive in key regionalist monographs, linking writers beyond a single, stereotypical region: Jean Carol Griffith's *The Color of Democracy in Women's Regional Writing* reads Edith Wharton's and Ellen Glasgow's New York, Glasgow's and Cather's South, Cather's and Wharton's West; Stephanie Foote's *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* features Sarah Orne Jewett's Maine, Hamlin Garland's Midwest, Harold Frederic's New York, Gertrude Atherton's California, George Washington Cable's South, and Jacob Riis's urban settings; Donna Campbell's *Resisting Regionalism* also considers Jewett with writers from an assortment of regions, including Mary Wilkins Freeman, Frederic, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Wharton; Kate McCullough's *Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women's Fiction, 1885-1914* places Jewett's *Country*, Pauline E. Hopkins's Boston, Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's West, Kate Chopin's South, and Sui Sin Far's California together.¹² There is also less interest in seeking the origins of regionalism in the earlier nineteenth century than in detailing its more transitory legacies in the twentieth century. Intent upon recovering women's regional writing, this approach has gathered together writers across America, with productive results—showing these writers' shared interests in, as McCullough puts it, “the figure of ‘woman’ as a site for the recasting of both regions and the nation as a whole” (5). While these recent studies have permitted us to draw comparisons across regions, as initial magazine readers once did, the drawbacks of such an approach need to be addressed. Do we risk homogenizing and minimizing differences of race, class, gender and sexuality in a particular region once we start reading across regions, instead of within them?¹³

This increasing investment in reading across regions has paralleled, I believe, the shift to transnational methodologies in the wider field of American literary studies. Regional approaches—often more flexible than national boundaries—can offer alternative ways of understanding, reconsidering and constituting national identities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴ As the editors of *Between Woman and Nation* have asserted, transnational studies portray how “notions such as country, homeland, region, locality and ethnicity and their construction through racialization, sexualization, and genderization of female corporeality become crucial sites of inquiry and investigation.”¹⁵ Because region appears precisely at the center of this list, it clearly has a role to play in current discussions of transnational identities: since the divisions of nations into regions are profoundly affected, when we rework—and move beyond—nationalist paradigms.¹⁶ Furthermore, in *Virtual Americas*, Paul Giles turns to a regionalist example as a comparison with today’s transnational paradigms:

In the twenty-first century, neither Britain nor the United States is in a position to lock out the impulses of globalization, any more than Sarah Orne Jewett’s rural Maine could lock out the dynamics of industrial capitalism at the end of the nineteenth; nevertheless, their situation as imagined communities crucially involves a capacity for interference and alterity, for pulling these larger systemic loops out of shape.¹⁷

For Giles, reading regionally is all too often diminished to that of a mere microcosm for the nation itself, as “smaller variants of the nation space, such as a region or a city” (7). Regions, and the fictions they inspire, must be seen less as miniature nations and more as contentious and conscientious contributors to discourses of place and the coordinates of

social identities. Accordingly, my readings of regionalism prioritize these patterns of “interregional exchange,” as Edward Watts has termed it, as contact among people, objects, and ideas.¹⁸ But what exactly does this shift permit us to examine? What can we see differently without relying upon an account of one region alone?

These transnational readings of regionalism have productively turned to languages of motion, migration and circulation, rather than fixed descriptions of a particular place, such as Hsuan L. Hsu’s emphasis on how “regional transformation always occurs in relation to larger-scale phenomena such as migrant flows, transportational networks, and international commerce.”¹⁹ Just as readers of magazine regionalism move quickly from one region to another, our reading practices can pay closer attention to the many documents, materials and objects evidencing movements among regions. Yet, the precise kind of movement we are discussing needs a sharper definition—are we simply talking about characters who travel?²⁰ Mentions of another place? Objects that originate elsewhere, but influence the lives of inhabitants in a particular region? Inspired by transnational approaches, recent critics have been invested in reading the flows across regions, yet the processes of containing, framing and circulating women’s life narratives throughout nineteenth and twentieth-century regionalism in visual vocabularies can offer more precision to these accounts of transnational flow, since visual vocabularies are embodied in specific documents and technologies to convey particular lives. As an alternative to national paradigms, American literary regionalism deserves our attention, in its settings that do not rely only upon solitary, isolated coordinates of nostalgia, but emerge out of contact and migration among life narratives.

Despite the genre's undeniable investment in nostalgia, my dissertation reads regionalism as a migratory practice in American literary history due to its representations of the materials and practices of collecting life narratives: to be read, written and circulated.²¹ My focus is upon a particular flow in regionalist fiction, one that is unreliable and even flawed at times—that of life narratives, constituting the exchange and recollection of regional, national and transnational histories. A flow of life narratives does not slice up national literature into coherent segments, with a requisite set of stereotypes for each one. Instead, this migratory model of regionalism is interested in how regions define one another and how movement, rather than stagnation or nostalgia alone, informs the energy driving regionalist stories and novels.²² It is here, I think, that these writers invest the most in representations of otherness: by portraying characters gathering materials for representing lives other than their own, by translating (indeed, plotting) these life narratives through various technologies for communication—and, in doing so, becoming aware of their limitations and capacities.

By the early twentieth century, when Jewett is writing about maps and memoirs in her letter, regionalist writers are comfortable relating these migratory moves across regions with the practices of seeking and circulating the lives of other characters. Mary Austin's "The Walking Woman," the concluding sketch in her 1909 collection *Lost Borders*, features such a walking woman wandering about a Western desert, leaving only partial pieces of her story behind. Once the narrator finally meets the Walking Woman "the genius of talk flows," when she speaks.²³ Austin features a fully-developed plot of her first-person narrator seeking out a woman's life narrative, a move which draws from a long legacy of women writers who foreground women's lives in their contributions to

literary regionalism, almost like compasses for discerning the deserts (as in Austin's story). Austin mentions particular places like Temblor, Tulares, Carrisal, Adobe Station, Eighteen-Mile House, only to coordinate them with this mysterious woman's movement across the desert: "She came and went, oftenest, in a kind of muse of travel which the untrammelled space begets, or at rare intervals flooding wondrously with talk, never of herself, but of things she had known and seen" (255). Though the only meeting between the narrator and the Walking Woman is short, it exemplifies how flowing life narratives can drive the plots of regionalism, emphasizing how an unnamed narrator seeks out versions of the Walking Woman through the desert paths she has taken, seeking out (and finally hearing) this woman's life narrative, when she has never disclosed it before.

Because the Walking Woman's life requires a number of accounts, including hers and others, I turn to a term both flexible for and adaptive to many formats of conveying lives. In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Reading Life Narratives*, the term *life narrative* encompasses a wide array of practices for seeking the life of an elusive figure like the Walking Woman, as "a general term for acts of self-representation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital."²⁴ Regionalist writers transform their storytelling characters into producers and consumers of such life narratives, by carefully embedding them into the very plots and practices that their characters take up—like the narrator's assembly of the Walking Woman's life from secondhand accounts and then the Walking Woman's own account. Because life narratives thrive across many media sources, the term is especially adaptable to the visual vocabularies of regionalism.

Because Jewett, Cather and Petry not only published fiction with a great deal of movement across regions, but also engaged with some form of life writing during their careers, though not in the full-length Autobiography or Memoir genre, their common engagement provides a second reason for considering the lives of their literary regionalism together. Their life writing resembles the ongoing and constantly changing processes of collecting life narratives that Austin's narrator experiences. Jewett's autobiographical sketch "Looking Back on Girlhood" covers her childhood, and she also publishes a collection of essays *Country By-ways*, where she explicitly wonders about the role of "another bit of autobiography" in her writing.²⁵ During her time at *McClure's*, Cather works both as a ghost-writer for S. S. McClure's autobiography and a contributing writer to Mary Baker Eddy's biography. Dismayed by the lack of biographies available to her daughter, Petry publishes accounts of Harriet Tubman and Tituba of Salem, weaving biography with historical fiction; she also published a brief autobiographical essay later in her life. Whether for themselves or in representing others, these are three writers who attain the most fame for their novels but are prolific in other genres, from reviews and essays to short stories and sketches—especially willing to experiment in the conventions and limitations of life writing in these other genres.²⁶

Regionalism's readers and writers have always paid attention to such lives of women, since the phrase "women's lives" has appeared in or influenced nearly all the recent studies of women's regionalism, reminding us not to take for granted that the lives featured in women's regionalism had often gone overlooked in earlier traditions of American literary history. Women's lives provide a central, anchoring term, even when critics are most skeptical of the regionalist project itself. Consider, for instance, Richard

Brodhead's call for turning away from feminist recoveries of women's regionalist traditions in exchange for "a nineteenth-century leisure-class culture 'struggling to find expression'": "Critics in this mode have argued that in the nineteenth century, regionalism had a since-forgotten status as a women's literary work space, was not a lesser suburb of the literary domain but a separate precinct in which women used a woman-transmitted form to express a vision specific to women's lives."²⁷ Or consider how Amy Kaplan's "Nation, Region, Empire"—an essay seeking to examine regionalism "through exclusion as much as inclusion"—emphasizes the harsher New England realities facing women in Freeman's fiction: "Women protest their confining conditions and assert their independence, often paradoxically by denying desire and transforming their denial into creative power."²⁸ Both Brodhead's and Kaplan's critiques of regionalism—whether of feminist recovery projects or its exclusionary logic—acknowledge the importance of women's lives to the project, but neither account considers in closer detail what exactly constitutes the portrayal of women's lives in these accounts, where we find both tension and consensus, when characters seek out different sources.

Most recently, Jennifer Fleissner situates regionalism in relation to obsessional domesticity, which possesses the "potential to grant seriousness to women's lives"; Fetterley and Pryse also refer to "women's lives," as they frame the introduction to *Writing Out of Place* explicitly around Tichi's reading of regionalism and women's lives.²⁹ While regionalism is often dismissed as a conservative mindset and for its reliance upon limiting conventions—like formulaic plots, attitudes of nostalgia in light of rapidly developing technologies, and even its racist representations of dialect—this

dissertation suggests that one of its key innovations, its commitment to assembling and telling women's lives, is less an initial, consensus-building assumption, as in these critical accounts, and more of a contested term and ongoing process. Even Fetterley and Pryse's project, which includes chapters on regionalism's role in a wide array of fields—American Studies, feminist standpoint theory, theories of race and class, queer theory and affective theories of empathy—does not consider how practices of life writing both reflect and contribute to the lives of women featured so prominently in regionalism. Smith and Watson's term *life narrative* offers more precision to the many accounts of women's lives in regionalism by emphasizing the constructability and fragility of many life narratives surrounding the life of even one woman. Attention to women's lives means more than focusing upon women characters; instead, regionalist writers portray women's lives as struggle and collaboration by conveying the process of seeking out multiple life narratives and sharing them with others.

Frequently, in critical discussions, the language of storytellers and storytelling has stood in for describing passages in regionalism where characters are seeking or narrating lives other than one's own. In Cather's *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden recalls the captivating presence of Ántonia, when she tells stories: "Her voice had a peculiarly engaging quality; it was deep, a little husky, and one always heard the breath vibrating behind it. Everything she said seemed to come right out of her heart."³⁰ While critics have long noted the influence of these storytellers within regionalist fiction, we have not recognized how this preponderance of storytellers simultaneously signals writers' growing interests in the processes through which lives can be gathered and circulated fictionally. By shifting our focus from individual storyteller characters to a group of writers intrigued by

the possibilities of representing attempts at life writing fictionally, we can better historicize these storytellers at a time when increasing numbers of women were writing and publishing accounts of their lives with astonishing variety.

Surprisingly, this variety of women's autobiographies includes few prominent women writers at the height of regionalist fiction in the late nineteenth century. While women were portraying their lives in unprecedented numbers in genres such as slave narratives, suffragist autobiographies, and travel narratives and were keeping diaries and circulating letters, especially during westward migration, women writers were less likely to write or publish autobiographies.³¹ Instead, they were foregrounding the processes of narrating lives in regionalist fiction; new possibilities then emerge for examining how these writers voice untold stories, and define regionalism as a genre for exchanging life narratives.

When women writers do publish autobiographies, the writing tends to be focused only on childhood, as in Jewett's "Looking Back on Girlhood," which ends, ominously enough, when she receives publication notices at a local post office.³² Regionalism provides a location for writers to portray the places they know and interrogate the lives of others that they do not. This legacy has not been considered, especially since the next generation of women writers—like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Wharton, Glasgow, and Gertrude Stein—do publish their autobiographies. As an outlet for thinking about matters of voice and silence, memory and storytelling—without a full-length *Autobiography* or *Memoir*, like those that Jewett recalls as dull in her 1906 letter—literary regionalism conveys the topographies of America, as both maps and memoirs.³³

While autobiographical and biographical readings of individual regionalist writers have abounded, this dissertation differs from such approaches, since I focus upon regionalist writers who choose plots of collecting, telling and narrating of lives of others *within* their fiction.³⁴ By portraying the processes of life writing—in conversations, letters, a number of sources—these writers conduct some of the most fascinating experiments in the voices, materials and practices of life writing. An absence of a formal autobiography does not mean that these writers were altogether resistant to life writing, since their fiction frequently relies upon plots of life writing to inspire more innovative investigations of a particular region. Though Wai Chee Dimock has read the regional environment as “relational in quite a stifling sense...a web, a history of entanglement, a space-time continuum alternately registered as friction and kinship, endearment and encroachment,” it often features an array of characters intrigued by, resistant to, and collaborative in their practices of life writing, exchange and storytelling, who seek less stifling relationships.³⁵ Reading across regionalism through its life narratives preserves the specificity of cultural differences and challenges us to understand the genre as a location for writers to portray life narratives as constructed, circulated and contested. Because critical conversations about regionalism are being had across regions, as well as within them, comparing the formations and possibilities of life narratives offers an especially productive method for considering how writers approach regionalism as a genre for thinking through life writing, without turning only to their own lives as an example.

In order to frame life narratives collectively in regionalist fiction, Jewett, Cather and Petry all draw from visual vocabularies, an especially intriguing move and a third

reason for comparing their fiction, since regionalism's critics have often chosen visual vocabularies to cast the genre as inferior and "sketchy," compared to fuller, more finished short stories, novels, and poetry. Deciding to publish collections of regionalist sketches, as Nancy Glazener has argued, places earlier regionalists outside of esteemed literary traditions: "The very idea that a work of regionalism functioned as part of an ensemble, rather than representing a self-sufficient literary effort, also undermined the regionalist writer's status, even when it was accepted as a realist undertaking."³⁶ Yet, Kristie Hamilton's study of sketches suggests that conversations in antebellum America expect more from these sketches because: "what unfolds in the study of the literary sketch is a specialized cultural vocabulary—the language, the values, and the web of associations that grew up around this genre and that made it an arena of not only literary but cultural production and contestation."³⁷ By emphasizing visual vocabularies of pictures and photographs *within* regionalism, these writers articulate a more productive purpose for the language of sketches and portraits, which their critics often use to describe and diminish their work.

Evaluations of regionalism as inferior, discussed especially in mid-twentieth century criticism, frequently rely upon visual vocabularies to make their case: Warner Berthoff details the early "miniature competence of her [Jewett's] sketches" compared to her later excellence and Jay Martin discusses Jewett's *Country* as "tentative sketches—never completed stories."³⁸ In prefaces to their sketch collections, regionalist writers respond to evaluations diminishing regionalism within a fictional tradition by turning to visual vocabularies to discuss life narratives as a much-needed influence upon regionalism. Though sketches and portraits are the most common critical language used

to classify and critique regionalism, these prefaces feature visual vocabularies to relate regionalism more carefully to the varieties of life narratives that Smith and Watson detail. After all, the pictures—alongside the regionalist fiction—most captivate Chopin’s reader, who peruses the New England and the South of her magazine, both verbally and visually.

Though regionalist stories were often first published in magazines, there was an increasing number of regionalist story collections published in the nineteenth century: an especially notable development, since the prefaces to the collections offer writers an opportunity to reflect upon the sketches and stories as a group, indeed, to consider them as an ensemble. While prefaces do not provide manifestos or guidelines for working with life writing in regionalism, they rely upon visual vocabularies to pose questions about defining regionalist authorship. By correlating the circulation of life narratives with a growing demand to depict American scenes, if not *the* American scene, these visual vocabularies encourage attention to regionalism as a craft of both self-expressions and local impressions.³⁹

Caroline Kirkland’s preface to her 1839 *A New Home, Who’ll Follow?* accentuates the unfinished nature of what readers are about to encounter—“these straggling and cloudy crayon-sketches of life and manner in the remoter parts of Michigan”—and shows that she too is not quite sure how her work will be classified: “a veritable history; an unimpeachable transcript of reality; a rough picture, in detached parts, but pentagraphed from the life; a sort of ‘Emigrant’s Guide.’”⁴⁰ Grace King’s “The Balcony”—prefacing her *Balcony Stories* (1892)—foregrounds the same vocabulary of “women’s lives” that later critics do, as she considers the “experiences, reminiscences,

episodes, picked up as only women know how to pick them up from other women's lives."⁴¹ This exchange of life narratives sustains and strengthens the relationships among women gathering along balconies and engaging with one another: "Each woman has a different way of picking up and relating her stories, as each one selects different pieces, and has a personal way of playing them on the piano" (1). By appreciating the differences among these versions of women's lives, King details an archive—like that of assembled sketches, photographs or a pianist's melody—that these women create. For both Kirkland and King, visual vocabularies provide a metaphor for portraying—and then surpassing—the cultural inferiority of her work in order to accentuate how they are representing lives with greater care than others have dared.

When Kirkland and King discuss the lives of women exchanged through visual vocabularies, their prefaces sound a lot like Lucy Larcom's preface to her autobiography *A New-England Girlhood* (1889): "A complete autobiography would indeed be a picture of the outer and inner universe photographed upon one little life's consciousness."⁴² Such a picture relies upon technologies of photography to separate the "complete" aspects of an autobiography; a complete autobiographical picture is other-reliant, rather than only self-reliant, as Larcom realizes: "Even an autobiographer has to say 'we' much oftener than 'I'" (6). Just as Larcom acknowledges the "we" written in and around autobiography, regionalist writers of her time agree. When they portray the processes of finding the "we" behind the "I," the outer and inner mind in life narratives, they are responding to the layers of selfhood, like the photography technologies that Larcom selects to theorize autobiography.

Whether in portraits, sketches, or photography, these visual vocabularies persist in twentieth-century regionalism, suggesting that it is one of the most accessible and adaptable legacies for writers conveying life narratives from a regional perspective. In its networks of exchange—like those of King’s balcony—women’s regionalism can be re-read for its expressions of life narratives, for its insistence that they disrupt seemingly smooth topographies, putting into relief the differences, tensions and silences for listeners and tellers. By responding to a tradition of sketches and portraits—used both to limit the influence of regionalism and to preface the lives of characters in collections—later regionalist fiction seeks both maps and memoirs in the lives of others, which might otherwise go unrecognized.

Since Jewett, Cather and Petry include an array of pictures, portraits, and photographs throughout their fiction, they develop, rather than dismiss, visual vocabularies to write portraits of lives as well as portraits of places. Their engagement with these vocabularies has implications not only for how we read regionalism, but also for how we historicize these vocabularies within each of their careers. My first chapter recovers and situates Jewett’s 1893 essay about looking at portraits, (both of others and of oneself) “Human Documents,” within her career—complicating our understanding of how her characters age in her best-known fiction, “A White Heron” and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.⁴³ 1893, her year of writing prefaces, reveals “Human Documents” as a key transition in her thinking about writing lives regionally. In my second chapter, I argue that Cather’s reference to “the thing not named,” as a principle for writing, relies upon the many other references to uncertain “things” that Cather uses to end her fiction. By considering the “things” that shape the endings of “Paul’s Case,” *My Ántonia*, “Old

Mrs. Harris,” and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, I revise readings of “the thing not named” as a one-time breakthrough mention in Cather’s writing of 1922 and replace them with the “things” that Cather turns to as a language for interrogating the gendered problems of life writing and self-representation. Like Jewett, Cather turns to the language of pictures and photography to convey uncertainties about the things she does name.

Petry’s relationship to New England is far more tenuous than Cather’s to Nebraska and Jewett’s to Maine, since her cycle of Wheeling stories—the focus of my third chapter—portrays the life of an unnamed African American narrator, who is consistently racialized in a predominantly white town. Petry turns to the language of picture-postcards to define her approach to regionalism, as a relationship between the pristine picture postcard and the lives that are cropped out of its frame. By detailing Petry’s abiding interest in and critical distance from regionalism, I argue that her Wheeling narrator furthers Petry’s interests in representing reading and writing—which begin with Lutie Johnson of *The Street*. Attention to this narrator places Petry’s Wheeling stories fiction in clearer conversation with black feminist theories of the early 1970s, since this narrator crafts life narratives—out of newspaper clippings, telephone messages, and imagined radio broadcasts—that conceal and reveal her family’s struggles to preserve their privacy.

Because Jewett, Cather, and Petry feature unnamed women writers as characters in their regionalist fiction, my concluding chapter turns back to writer characters classified as “regionalists,” “local colorists,” and “poetesses” in late nineteenth-century regionalism, in order to assemble an archive of discussions and debates about authorship taking place in regionalism. I argue that regionalist writers are acutely aware of these

often limiting labels for writers and offer new ways to think through the daily practices and experiences of authorship by locating individual fictional writers among other writers. By bringing together writers, rather than isolating them from one another, we can read regionalism as a genre where the conversations among poets and novelists, local colorists and poetesses can be had. Since human documents, photographs and picture-postcards convey the lives spoken, viewed, and written in Jewett's, Cather's, and Petry's regionalism, these writers share a commitment to conveying conversations, tensions and collective efforts among writers, as the sources of these practices.

Regionalism defines the materials for creating life narratives collaboratively and discusses authorship collectively, as a cultural project of portraying life writing in process, rather than as a single, finished product. At a moment when more women than ever were putting their lives in print, regionalism records an array of approaches into a written tableau, archiving the visual vocabularies that present lives to be seen, as well as read. Acknowledging the we behind the I, as Larcom encourages, means reading these portrayals of authorship taking place among others, since one person's life must be told through many life narratives. While we can turn to autobiographies and biographies to study nineteenth-century lives, regionalism features the invaluable processes and discussions surrounding writers who seek to convey such lives: the conversations they have, the silences they encounter and strive to represent. By considering regionalism less as a fixed label—either a writer is or is not—and more as an adaptive engagement with portraits of both lives and places, we can evaluate regionalism as a changing genre for writers, a landscape of visual vocabularies. Though critics first turned to the language of sketches to name nineteenth-century regionalism, twentieth-century regional writers

develop this genre so that these later novels are brimming with collected photographs, portraits and media that surround a more collective “I” crafted out of many sources for relating that life. Regionalists may not be publishing their own autobiographies, but their fiction records an archive of possibilities: the collective processes of collecting life narratives, in uttering “we” to surround an “I.”

By granting American literary regionalism a more influential role in our research and teaching, we can challenge both ourselves and our students to consider more closely how life narratives inform our perceptions of regionalism—from singular sites to migratory mappings. In paying attention to the moments when regional voices change—when women exchange stories on a balcony or wander across a desert in search of a Walking Woman—we can read regionalism responsibly and responsively by understanding that life narratives flow throughout the topographies of regionalism, as much as stereotypical traits and locations do. Because it takes Jewett’s human documents, Cather’s box of *Antonia*’s photography, and Petry’s newspapers and picture-postcards to “fire up” the life narratives of regionalism, as Jewett writes in her letter, we can both dissect regionalism as a map and discuss it like a memoir. When Jewett offers Cather advice as a beginning writer, she reminds her that “We must be ourselves, but we must be our best selves” (*Letters* 249-250). Jewett, Cather, and Petry indeed write as themselves, but I have found that they also write their best selves in the lives of others for us to read.

¹ Sarah Orne Jewett, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 218. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

² Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 29.

³ Cecelia Tichi, "Women Writers and the New Woman," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliott, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 598.

⁴ In Sidonie Smith's "Turning the Century on the Subject" chapter in *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, she discusses "the tremendous elasticity of autobiographical forms" available to life-writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "There seems an endless variety to personal writings, autobiographical novels, personal essays, journals, diaries, collections of letters, travel literature, oral histories, ethnographies, testimonials and prison narratives. Autobiographical subjects are everywhere. And the cacophony of autobiographical voices invigorates autobiographical narrative," (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 62. Regional fiction, I think, can be included with the many genres in Smith's list, since it provides a location for framing life writing as a plot device, reflecting and contributing to the growing visibility of women's lives in such a variety of genres. Smith's more recent 2011 MLA address focuses upon "narrating lives," a call for readers and writers to take seriously the ever-changing, capacious field of life writing: "Narrating lives becomes an occasion for assembling and claiming identities, securing and releasing social relations, and negotiating affective attachments," Sidonie Smith, "Presidential Address 2011: Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries," *PMLA* 126.3 (May 2011): 565. *Profession* 2011 also includes essays on "Lives and Archives" from the Presidential Forum, ed. Rosemary G. Feal, 5-122.

⁵ Susan Cross and Hazel Markus discuss the self-awareness that comes when adults reflect upon "possible selves" as a way of creating future stories in "Possible Selves Across the Life Span," *Human Development* 34 (1991): 230-255.

⁶ Besides these three novels, they have a short story apiece published in a popular collection of fiction: Cather's "A Wagner Matinée" and Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet" in *Women and Fiction: Short Stories by and about Women*, ed. Susan Cahill (New York: New American Library, 1975), 27-35, 132-142; Jewett's "The Courting of Sister Wisby" in *Women and Fiction 2: Short Stories by and about Women*, ed. Susan Cahill (New York: New American Library, 1978), 1-16. They also share medical aspirations or interests: as a child, Jewett rides around Maine with her father, a traveling doctor; Cather begins college with medical aspirations, and Petry earns a Ph. G in pharmacy.

⁷ For a sharp reading of the influence of "The Foreigner" upon *Country*, see Patrick Gleason's "Sarah Orne Jewett's 'The Foreigner' and the Transamerican Routes of New England Regionalism," *Legacy* 28.1 (2011): 24-46.

⁸ Cather's earliest stories, especially those included in *The Troll Garden* (1905), rely upon the affective compasses of eastward and westward movements across America and transatlantically, rpt in *Willa Cather: Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1992).

⁹ "Table of Contents," *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol.78. Issue 467 (Sept 1896).

¹⁰ Kate Chopin, "Athénaïse," *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol.78. Issue 467 (Sept 1896): 404-414.

¹¹ Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy capture this tension well when they discuss the arrangement of their edited regionalist anthology: “While this volume is organized geographically, with writers from each region—the South, Midwest, Northeast, and West—grouped together in order to illustrate how different authors have widely varied takes on the same region, this is not the only possible organization. As we have suggested, there are also themes that traverse regionalist writing as a whole, shaping the meaning of local color,” “Introduction,” *American Local Color Writing: 1880-1920*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), xxvii.

¹² Jean Carol Griffith, *The Color of Democracy in Women’s Regional Writing* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009); Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Donna Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997); Kate McCullough, *Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women’s Fiction, 1885-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). These projects, and my own, are attentive to Margo Crawford’s description of intersectionality, in considering “the binaries that structure race, gender, class, sexuality, and regionalism,” “Preface: Erasing the Commas: RaceGenderClassSexualityRegion,” *American Literature* 77.1 (March 2005): 3.

¹³ Criticism of the Americas has been particularly invested in approaches to reading “across.” Laura J. Beard suggests that this sort of criticism is both necessary and possible in her readings of autobiographies: “While there is much that unites the authors I discuss, they are also very different authors, coming from different countries and cultures, writing out of different languages and locations in the Americas. In bringing their texts together here, I do not wish to erase important differences between these books and authors and the living webs of the people and traditions from which they arise” in *Acts of Narrative Resistance: Women’s Autobiographical Writings in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 7. Kirsten Silva Gruesz addresses the problem of reading many identities and considering communities—“Although I have sought to be equally rigorous in placing the subjects of this study within historically specific forms of affiliation, I have also tried to test out the possibility of a meaningful commonality of the idea of Latino expression, even before the term was invented”—in *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xi.

¹⁴ There has also been a recent trend in comparative regionalist work, which relates national and regional definitions, such as Doris Sommers’s introductory essay in her edited collection *The Places of History: Regionalism Revisited in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1-10; Josephine Donovan’s *European Local-Color Literature: National Tales, Dorfgeschichten, Romans Champêtres* (New York: Continuum, 2010); and K. D. M. Snell’s introductory essay “The Regional Novel: Themes for Interdisciplinary Research” in *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1990*, ed. K. D. M. Snell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-53.

¹⁵ “Introduction: Between Woman and Nation,” *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnationalisms and the State*, ed. Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, Minoo Moallem (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 14.

¹⁶ In “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis,” Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way quote from a National Security Education Act (NSEA) in which outdated regional formations need to be replaced: “‘a desire to move away from fixed regional identities given that globalization has made the ‘areas’ more porous, less bounded, less fixed,” *American Quarterly* 60.3 (September 2008): 626.

¹⁷ Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁸ Edward Watts reads regionalism as “underrepresented in the ongoing reformulation of American studies as a field of inquiry in the postmodern age,” arguing that it is “not only a means of correcting historical imbalances, but it is also a tool for the diagnosis and prevention of ongoing patterns of inappropriate cultural or imperial nationalism,” “The Midwest as a Colony: Transnational Regionalism,” *Regionalism and the Humanities*, ed. Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 178. I also appreciate Mark Storey’s argument concerning the “always ongoing mediation” between rural and urban definitions of America, but do not share his position that the term “regionalism” can be replaced with “rural,” since so many regionalist stories foreground mediation, rather than focusing strictly upon rural matters, “Country Matters: Rural Fiction, Urban Modernity, and the Problem of American Regionalism,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65.2 (2010): 195.

¹⁹ Hsuan L. Hsu, “Literature and Regional Production,” *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005): 37. In their sociological study of contemporary regional readers, Wendy Griswold and Nathan Wright also argue that “residential mobility, one of the dynamic processes that has been thought to erode regionalism, may actually be strengthening it,” “Cowbirds, Locals, and the Dynamic Endurance of Regionalism,” *American Journal of Sociology* 109.6 (May 2004): 1441.

²⁰ In reading “border regions,” discussed in a recent issue of *New Literary History* devoted to “The State of American Studies,” an overarching question is: “Are movement and flow really sufficient to undermine national identity formation?” Winfried Fluck, “A New Beginning? Transnationalisms,” *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 379.

²¹ Ryan Evelyn Gildersleeve and Aaron M. Kuntz discuss the relationship between social geographies and definitions of flow—“With mobility comes the notion of flow, or the movement of goods, capital, information and people across political and geographical boundaries. Flow, in turn, (re)defines space based on recurrent patterns of movement”—in “A Dialogue on Space and Method in Qualitative Research on Education,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 17.1 (2011): 20. In an essay about feminism and Early American literature, Ivy Schweitzer also relates flow and space, since “these early writers are embedded in a transnational and global flow of culture perhaps less emphasized in the early nineteenth century and certainly occluded in the later nineteenth century, where women writers were drawn into a US nationalist paradigm,” “My body / not to either state inclined,” *Early American Literature* 44.2 (2009): 409.

²² This more fluid model for regionalism informs recent work on critical regionalism in Gary Totten’s “Zitkala-Sa and the Problem of Regionalism: Nation, Narratives, and Critical Tradition,” *American Indian Quarterly* 29.1 & 2 (Winter & Spring 2005) and Douglas Reichert Powell’s *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007). This vision also influences the approaches gathered in two recent critical anthologies of regionalist criticism: *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) and *Regionalism and the Humanities*, ed. Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

²³ Mary Austin, “The Walking Woman,” *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, ed. Marjorie Pryse (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 258. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

²⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), 4.

²⁵ Jewett, “From a Mournful Villager,” *Country By-ways*. (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, [1881] 1969), 134.

²⁶ The only paragraph where I have found their names mentioned together is in Tillie Olsen's 1971 *Silences* essay "One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century," in a discussion of the demands of daily life facing women writers. Olsen traces the persistent problem of "distinguished but limited production" for writers like Petry back to Jewett's well-known letter to Cather, advising her to seek "time and quiet to perfect your work," (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1978), 57. But more can be said about their lives than these limitations, since they share a tendency for portraying the complexities of women's lives in the visual vocabularies throughout their fiction.

²⁷ Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters, Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 144, 143.

²⁸ Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire," *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott et. al., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 243, 255.

²⁹ Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 105. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 15, 13.

³⁰ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Vintage: New York, [1918] 1994), 133.

³¹ Though women writers were not publishing as many autobiographies, a remarkable "biographical imagination," influences their regionalist framing of biography and characters seeking out the lives of others. Scott Casper discusses this cultural imagination as evidence of readers eager to read the lives portrayed in both biographies and novels, in his *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 14.

³² Jewett, "Looking Back on Girlhood," *Sarah Orne Jewett: Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 760. For a discussion of women writers' focus on childhood in nineteenth-century autobiographies, see Rose Norman, "New England Girlhoods in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography," *Legacy* 8.2 (1991): 104-117.

³³ Though courses relating autobiography and life writing date back to the late 1970s, the term *autobiography* is still considered an overlooked term in regionalist criticism in 1997, since Sherrie Inness and Diana Royer call for writers to "reinvigorate regionalism by introducing new formats such as autobiography and new critical frames such as ecocriticism," Sherrie Inness and Diana Royer, eds, "Introduction," *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 11. See Leonore Hoffmann and Deborah Rosenfelt's *Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982) for descriptions of these programs developed in the 1970s, encouraging courses that engage with local archives.

³⁴ Ann Douglas Wood compares the lives of nineteenth-century regionalists with earlier women writers in a grid of shared life experiences in "The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America, 1865-1914," *Women's Studies* 1 (1972): 42-45.

³⁵ Wai Chee Dimock, "Rethinking Space, Rethinking Rights: Literature, Law, and Science," *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 259.

³⁶ Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 198.

³⁷ Kristie Hamilton, *America's Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998), 3.

³⁸ Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884-1919* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 96; Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1967), 146. See also Carlos Baker's description of George W. Cable's work—"the book had shape, movement, richness of texture, and a kind of subdued violence, and it was crammed with living portraits"—in "Delineation of Life and Character," *Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert Spillers (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 857.

³⁹ Timothy Dow Adams's "Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography" discusses the complexity of portraiture and photography metaphors for life writing as "literary works on the border," *Modern Fiction Studies* 40.3 (1994): 480. For more visual readings of life writing, see Danille Elise Christensen's "'Look at Us Now!': Scrapbooking, Regimes of Value, and the Risks of (Auto) Ethnography," *Journal of American Folklore* 124 (493): 175-210; and Marilyn F. Motz's "Visual Autobiography: Photograph Albums of Turn-of-the-Century Midwestern Women," *American Quarterly* 41.1 (Mar., 1989): 63-92.

⁴⁰ Caroline Kirkland, *A New Home, Who'll Follow?, or Glimpses of Western Life*, ed. Sandra A. Zagarell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, [1839] 1990), 1.

⁴¹ Grace E. King, "The Balcony," *Balcony Stories* (Tutis Digital Publishing: [1892] 2007), 1.

⁴² Lucy Larcom, *A New-England Girlhood: Outlined From Memory* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Corner House Publishers, [1889] 1985), 5. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁴³ Jewett's turn to portraits resonates with the insights of other regionalist writers when they describe and theorize their writing artistically. See especially Hamlin Garland discussing "sketches of life so vivid" in local newspapers, "Provincialism," *Crumbling Idols Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting and the Drama*, ed. Jane Johnson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [1894] 1960), 14; Mary Austin calling for a more substantive artistic "view" of regionalist writing, moving away from "an automobile eye view, something slithering and blurred, nothing so sharply discriminated that it arrests the speed-numbered mind to understand, characters like garish gas stations picked out with electric lights," "Regionalism in American Fiction," *The English Journal* 21.2 (Feb. 1932): 107; Ruth Suckow defining "middle western literature" as "made of authentic materials, that it is what it is—not a false front, a cheap dye color, a pale copy or a flash-in-the-pan spurious brilliance, a diluted or pretentious imitation of something else," "Middle Western Literature," *The English Journal* 21.3 (March 1932): 181; and Eudora Welty comparing the act of writing to holding "two pictures at once in his frame, his and the world's" and comparing perspective to glass: "point of view is an instrument, not an end in itself, that is useful as a glass, and not as a mirror, to reflect a dear and pensive face. Conscientiously used, point of view will discover, explore, see through—it may sometimes divine and prophesy. Misused, it turns opaque almost at once and gets in the way of the book," "Place in Fiction," *Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays, and Memoir* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 789.

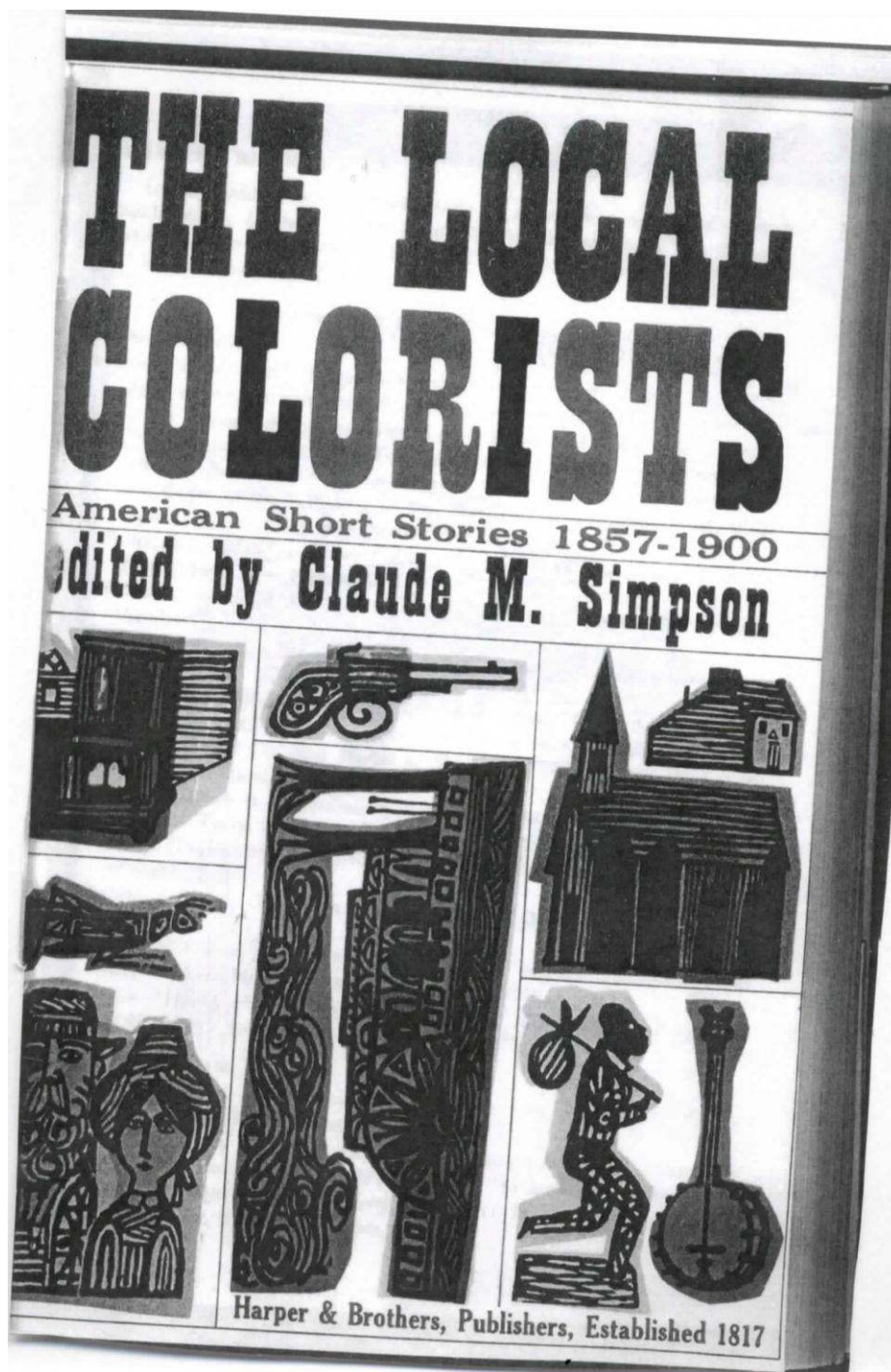


Figure 1: This collection's cover slices literary regionalism—of New England, the South, and the West—into stereotypical images. While caricatures like these were certainly common, regionalist writers revise these stereotypes by focusing upon the lives they obscure, in their fiction.

Chapter 1: Self and Other Portraits:

Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" as Human Documents

"The first story, 'A White Heron,' however, is perfect in its way—a tiny classic. One little episode of child life, among birds and woods, makes it up..."
—from an anonymous *Overland Monthly* review (1886) of
A White Heron and Other Stories

"She's gathered up all the time in the world
—nothing else—and waits for scanty trophies,
complete in herself as a heron"
—Denise Levertov's "The Great Black Heron"

Sarah Orne Jewett has been framed in many a critical portrait. At times, she is a local colorist, a regionalist—terms that privilege her depictions of nineteenth-century Maine, at a time when it was fast changing. Henry James chooses a small frame for Jewett's best-known novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896): "a beautiful little quantum of achievement," praising her for "an art of fiction all her own."¹ Richard Cary is one of many who would later develop the metaphor of a portrait to convey Jewett's accomplishments. He reads Sylvia, heroine of Jewett's best-known short story "A White Heron," as one of Jewett's "most durable regional portraits."² Yet, these frames tend to confine Jewett's accomplishments, rather than considering how Jewett herself responds to the role of both artistic and literary portraiture. Cary emphasizes Jewett's skill as a "landscape painter" (78), but considers her writing "less a social document and more a work of art than that of her colleagues" (81). He does not go so far as to link landscape painting with social documentation, a connection that Jewett clearly makes.³

Jewett, like her critics, pays attention to portraits, those she writes and those she views. One of which is certainly nine-year-old Sylvia's "pale face" throughout her best-known short story, "A White Heron" (1886).⁴ Yet the portraits we have most overlooked

(or underlooked) in Jewett's writing are, ironically enough, those of an actual portrait collection she prefaces. "Who can not read human faces?" she asks in her 1893 preface to "Human Documents," introducing this magazine series, featuring a collection of portraits of a single person at many ages, featured in the premiere issue of *McClure's Magazine*.⁵ Her words are the first to frame this collection that would become a regular, immensely successful installment in *McClure's*; it would run for the next three years.⁶ None of its other prefacing writers would introduce ensuing collections with the same length and interpretive complexity of Jewett's introduction. The format of "Human Documents" features paragraph-long introductory biographical sketches of prominent figures (for instance, General Lew Wallace, William Dean Howells, Professor Hjalmar Hjorth Bovesen and sculptor Alphonse Daudet in the first issue), followed by a cluster of their portraits at various moments in their lives. They look both at each other—the child at the old man, for instance—and away. Instead of introducing the particular portraits featured in the first installment, Jewett writes about the interpretive, self-reflective act of looking at such portraits—those of prominent figures and, more importantly, those of oneself.

"Human Documents" is a portrait not yet added to the collection of Jewett's regional portraits, since it has received no in-depth attention in Jewett criticism. According to Karen Kilcup and Thomas Edwards, Jewett criticism is currently transitioning from a "corrective stage," with a predominant focus on Jewett's "representation of the ethnic, racial, and class 'other'" into a stage of "equilibrium, with Jewett acknowledged as a writer of continuing cultural power" (3). Ours is also a time when the assumptions of past critical generations are being questioned.⁷ Silences such as Sylvia's, at the end of "A White Heron," are no longer being taken for granted or

ignored. These are silences about empire and economics in Dunnet Landing, racism at the Bowden Reunion, Jewett's Boston marriage with Annie Fields.⁸ While *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has often been the focus of such revisionary readings, "A White Heron" is also due for a re-reading—with implications for our understandings of Sylvia's growth, since Joseph Church has recently expanded the definition of "A White Heron" into an "autobiographical romance," just as Laurie Shannon has suggested that the "intimist" frames surrounding Jewett's fiction—which can include "A White Heron," her "tiny classic"—may be far more expansive than we have considered.⁹ The time seems right, then, to consider, for the first time, how the portraits of "Human Documents" can redefine the documentation, both artistic and social, of lives in "A White Heron." This essay links Jewett's written portraits of Sylvia (in "A White Heron") with the magazine portraits she introduces (in "Human Documents") to argue that Jewett best represents and responds to life writing in regionalism when she frames the process as a collection of portraits to be viewed. Reading the many ages of many faces transforms the art of a portrait into the commentary of a social document.

If, as Kilcup and Edwards suggest, ours is a moment of considering how and why Jewett can continue to influence literary history, it can also be a moment to read across such stages of Jewett criticism, considering especially how we have framed Jewett's interest in portraying the processes of aging. This fluidity and visibility of aging certainly speaks to the observations of Jewett's "creative time" that Mary Kraus describes in her 1979 essay, when she notes that "harmony between youth and age, present and past, apparently impressed and delighted Miss Jewett" and that "the symptoms of aging and the qualities of youthfulness in her characters are not closely connected with their

chronological ages.”¹⁰ While Jewett’s ongoing play among ages is indeed playful, it also points to tensions in her role as a regionalist. Nearly two decades later, Jacqueline Shea Murphy reads New England regionalism against the ages of Native American oral storytelling: “a relation between ‘time immemorial’ of ‘long ago’ and the moment at hand—a continual, achronological understanding of time.”¹¹ Jewett expresses a lifespan of ages in roomfuls of portraits, as a metaphor for writing fiction that places ages around each other, rather than in a single, chronological line.

In both “A White Heron” and “Human Documents,” looking at one portrait, one age, is not enough. It must be a collection of portraits—accumulated and aged over a lifetime. Jewett’s engagement with the placement of “A White Heron” casts it as a collection of approaches to portraying life narratives: in the question that Jewett asks and then answers about her story in her letters, about the oral storytelling practices that inspire her to write, and its eventual placement as a preface, among Jewett’s other prefaces. I read the faces and portraits included in “A White Heron” as Jewett putting into practice the call for reading portraits she details in “Human Documents,” suggesting that Jewett’s understanding of life-writing has contributed to her regional portraits, in portraying the ages of a young narrator through both her self portraits and other portraits, how she learns to look at others. By surrounding Sylvia with a number of portraits, Jewett includes voice of an unnamed narrator that generations of critics have considered the most perplexing part of the story. But this brief appearance of an unnamed narrator, I think, anticipates Jewett’s more controlled and restrained turn to another unnamed narrator throughout *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. “Human Documents,” published after “A White Heron” but just before *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, offers us an

overlooked source in Jewett's oeuvre for understanding how the language of portraiture can both face and efface the lives of women.

“A White Heron”: A Question and Some Answers

“...[W]hat shall I do with my ‘White Heron’ now she is written?” asks Sarah Orne Jewett in 1889. She quickly answers her own question: “She isn’t a very good magazine story, but I love her, and I mean to keep her for the beginning of my next book and the reason for Mrs. Whitman’s pretty cover.”¹² Of Jewett’s short fiction, “A White Heron” is undoubtedly the most-anthologized (the common selection in both the *Heath* and *Norton*, along with many other anthologies of American short stories) and the most wondered about. Louis A. Renza authors an entire monograph “*A White Heron*” and the *Question of Minor Literature*, which treats the story “from every conceivable angle.”¹³ *The Colby Library Quarterly* has consistently published an impressive array of thematic readings of “A White Heron” alone for more than two decades. It is certainly a singular piece for Jewett herself—nowhere else does she consider another story’s placement, once it is written. Its plot is simple, detailing the events leading up to nine-year-old Sylvia’s decision to “keep silence” from an attractive hunter, intent upon “preserving” a rare white heron, seen in the woods where Sylvia lives (232, 239). While we have found many places to keep *and* preserve this story in American literary history, Jewett questions this process of keeping a story (about keeping silence, no less) in the years immediately following its writing.

The questions within the story that go unanswered, or perhaps have too many answers, typically concern the ending. Though Sylvia has spent a wonderful day with a visiting hunter, she realizes that she must not reveal the location of the rare white heron

to him, even in exchange for ten dollars he has promised her.¹⁴ She makes this decision because “[t]he murmur of the pine’s green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (239). Her memory of the morning she discovered the heron’s hidden nest overtakes her earlier desire to please the hunter, when she was “[w]ondering over and over again what the stranger [hunter] would say to her, and what he would think when she told him how to find his way straight to the heron’s nest” (238).

Obviously something has changed and changes quickly—this unexplained decision is perhaps the most questioned and most intriguing aspect of the story. There are two choices that Sylvia has at the end of this story. She can choose to side with the hunter, revealing the location of the heron to him. She would thus continue being initiated into a world of heterosexual romance, in that “dream of love” (233) she imagines, when she watches him. Or she can choose to side with the heron, concealing its location from the hunter. Her silence at the story’s end, as it has consistently been read, preserves nature over norms, prolonging childhood rather than pursuing a crush.¹⁵

Jewett’s question (and admirable one-sentence answer) is a typical starting-point for readings of “A White Heron.” It is the epigraph in Joseph Church’s recent article; it opens a discussion of the story’s inability to “fit” with regional expectations.¹⁶ But emphasis has been on Jewett’s answer—in both the love she expresses for “A White Heron” and her understanding that it is certainly *not* a magazine story. Because she expresses both ownership and affection for the story, some critics have felt certain that the equation of “Sylvia equals Jewett” holds up. Most telling is her comment in an 1897

letter on her birthday: “This is my birthday and I am always nine years old.”¹⁷ While Jewett claims to be nine *always*, Sylvia is “nine years *growing*” (239 emphasis mine)—a distinction that is easy to overlook. For this reason, Sylvia has become a singular character, whose decision at the end of the story has come to obscure the changes that she experiences, nine years growing throughout “A White Heron.”

There is an ongoing tension between Sylvia as a singular young girl detached from her social surroundings and the innumerable interpretations that have been imposed upon this story. “A White Heron” is, in short, many things to many readers. For Sarah Way Sherman, it is “a *Bildungsroman* in miniature”; for Elizabeth Ammons, “resistance to heterosexuality” (6); George Held even notes that its famous tree could be considered “the largest phallic symbol in American literature.”¹⁸ But after all the ink detailing relationships between self and other, silence and womanhood, patriarchy and matriarchy, Renza sums it up best: “It was as if ‘A White Heron’ were a rebus that invited each reader to solve it in accordance with his own canonical bent, whether traditional or revisionary” (xxvii). I think Jewett imagined it both ways—a singular Sylvia influenced and created out of these many critical portraits of her decision.

However, I question this singularity of the Sylvia-figure in Jewett criticism, by building upon recent moves to understand the story more collectively, within a network of relationships: both of Jewett’s and of Sylvia’s. As Terry Heller argues: “Jewett has created a moment of timeless unity between narrator, character, and reader, by means of her rhetoric of communion.”¹⁹ Unity, certainly. But Sylvia is very much informed by and inscribed within Jewett’s time: timeful, perhaps, rather than timeless. Accordingly, Church reminds us that the transition between the death of Jewett’s father and the

development of her relationship with Annie Fields might explain the relationships in “A White Heron.” He contextualizes the story as “Jewett’s mid-career reflection on certain increasingly pressing problems and opportunities in her personal life,” her relationships and friendships, in particular.²⁰ Not only does he suggest that there are still unanswered questions about classifying “A White Heron,” but he also argues that Sylvia’s development reflects Jewett’s own developing relationship with Annie Fields: “Jewett embodies Annie Fields both in the white heron and in the two gray hawks that Sylvia mentally embraces” (37). Even though Jewett is certainly influenced by relationships with both her father and with Fields, “A White Heron” is also her overlooked experiment in writing *about* life-writing: at no less than a pivotal transition in her own career and in America.²¹ While Sylvia’s story is clearly the one foregrounded, “A White Heron” depicts an *ongoing* process of life writing, rather than only presenting Jewett’s fictional prowess, in order to question the wider social effects of both industrial and rural experiences on the life of a young girl.

To say that “A White Heron” is anything other than an excellent example of regionalist fiction might seem strange. But consider—what do we learn about Sylvia’s woods, named only a “New England wilderness” (231)? The surprising answer may be: very little. While Sylvia knows the woods so well, Jewett does not offer her readers the same knowledge. Unlike Dunnet Landing or Deephaven, (the carefully detailed regions of Jewett’s two best-known novels), Jewett’s New England wilderness in “A White Heron” remains just that, defined only by the famous tree. Even the hunter’s gift of a jack-knife—in thanks for her assistance—makes her feel like “a desert-islander” (233)—far from the trails and trees of her woods.

Because New England is more a backdrop than a focus, I believe that Jewett's question and answer about "A White Heron" can offer us a new model for imagining the cultural projects of "A White Heron," in addition to its status as a short story, written and published. There is still more to be learned from Jewett's brief, but rich, explanation for "A White Heron's" placement. First, her comment, "now she is written" suggests that "A White Heron" also contains a past that is not a written one (as we will see, a spoken one). Second, "isn't a very good magazine story" reminds us that Jewett explicitly questions her "White Heron" as a short story, but keeps it instead as a *preface* to a collection of short stories. Finally, "the reason for Mrs. Whitman's pretty cover" suggests that there is an understated visual dimension to it, rather than simply its conclusive silence.²² The portraits of "Human Documents" further connect these themes of spoken stories, prefatory writing and pictorial qualities with Jewett's understanding of life writing and its relationship to aging. Separately, these themes contribute to the plural faces of Sylvia (rather than a singular girl) that Jewett imagines. Together, they suggest that we might keep "A White Heron" historically, less as an expression of Jewett's turn towards nostalgia and more as her direct encounter with portraiture as a language for portraying American faces, in both magazines and stories. Ultimately, Sylvia keeps her life, rather than only preserving it, by facing the hunter and all that he threatens and offers. This turn to Sylvia's multiplicity, rather than her singularity, balances the integrity of her decision to save the heron's life with her relationships affected by that decision—to Mrs. Tilley and the hunter, and ultimately with herself.

“Now She is Written”: Telling Loulie a Story

Before Jewett begins writing “A White Heron,” she has already found an attentive audience in Louisa “Loulie” Dresel, daughter of Anna Loring Dresel (a friend of Fields). Jewett biographer Paula Blanchard reminds us that “A White Heron” “was told to Loulie long before it was written and in Sarah’s mind was specially linked to her young friend.”²³ This background certainly makes sense of Jewett’s comment—“now that it is written.” Not only is it the end of a writing process, it is also a continuation of the story’s telling, beginning long before she developed it as a short story.

In the same letter she mentions “A White Heron” in a letter, Jewett imagines possible former lives of a woman Jewett has met in France.²⁴ While Jewett writes her impressions of her surroundings abroad, she creates possible past lives for the women she encounters. Writing from France in 1898, Jewett first compares her own impressions of a bath-town to those that Loulie had written to her, when she was abroad, but soon shifts her attention to a “funny little Polish dame” (153) who keeps interrupting Jewett’s writing of the letter itself. Jewett caricatures the woman’s table manners and musical talents, apologizing to Loulie, but still saying “This is very wicked of me, but we are pretty friendly nevertheless, and I write in a grateful spirit for her good music” (153). As she writes, the distance between Jewett and the Polish woman oscillates, once Jewett begins to imagine her past—and the qualities that might surround her, were she a character in a story.

As we might expect, Jewett speculates on the woman’s origins, travels, and impressions of her world: “She looks as if she were born in the far edge of Poland, or wherever it was she came from, but had dwelt much in Paris and always by herself, with

not even a fellow kitten for company” (153-154). The woman has traveled from Poland to Paris. But what remains constant is her solitude, in Jewett’s imagining. No matter how close she becomes to this woman, her loneliness is what characterizes her, is how Jewett reads her, even moreso than the region from which she originated or calls home. In this letter, as in “A White Heron,” the regional details give way to a larger concern for the practices and experiences of a woman who does not readily disclose herself to those who seek to know her. This woman may be a product of stories, but more often exists alone, even when the narrator can have a conversation with her.

Such stories, like the ones she shares with Loulie, shape Jewett’s understanding of her own South Berwick region: they may be stories of travels abroad, but are also told within it. In her brief 1892 essay “Looking Back on Girlhood,” Jewett speaks of the “never-ending pleasure in making one’s self familiar with such a region,” remembering the “drives and tramps and voyages within the borders of my native town.”²⁵ For Jewett, the familiar thrives upon such voyages and cannot be fully separated from the strange and unknown, always yet to be discovered, within her region. She captures the tension between being intensely familiar with her home and embarking upon voyages within those ordinary borders when she writes: “I believe that we should know our native towns much better than most of us do, and never let ourselves be strangers at home” (3). She writes her childhood community as a collection of tellers and listeners, circulating stories that take place both inside and outside its borders.

These are the stories that fill her imagination as she grows up and that she features in this essay, rather than cataloguing only geographic details of South Berwick. Consider especially her grandfather’s presence in this essay—we know little about his home or his

daily life. Instead, Jewett renders him a listener of “exciting tales of great storms on the Atlantic, and winds that blew them north-about, and good bargains in Havana, or Barbadoes, or Havre” (5) and a teller of wars long past. Because he both listens and tells, Jewett terms him “a citizen of the whole geography” (5), once she has layered in all of his experiences outside of the region. To know such a geography is also to be estranged from it, physically. His words—in the telling and retelling of his stories—define him in South Berwick and beyond it.

Jewett’s conclusion to “Looking Back on Girlhood” travels far from an introduction that promises her readers impressions of “surroundings which have affected the course of my work as a writer” and “the lives of the people about me” (3). She shifts from advising young writers not to be strangers to situating *herself* as a stranger in the final sentence:

I was very shy about speaking of my work at home, and even sent it to the magazine under an assumed name, and then was timid about asking the post-mistress for those mysterious and exciting editorial letters which she announced upon the post-office list as if I were a stranger in the town. (7)

Interestingly, Jewett does not end her reflections with the act of writing itself. Nowhere do we see her composing. Instead it is *talk* about writing which characterizes her anxiety about becoming a writer. It is more important, for her, to remember what happens when her work begins circulating. Though she encourages writers to not be strangers, she ends with a moment in which she feels like one. Native and stranger, town and voyages—all terms that locate Jewett firmly inside *and* outside South Berwick.

In both of these instances—in writing to Loulie and of her childhood—Jewett captures the importance of regional fiction, both written and told. Jewett imagines South Berwick as a community telling stories that have taken place long ago, beyond its borders; yet she herself is the stranger, once people begin talking about her decision to write. Then, the essay ends abruptly. Tensions between these spoken and written voices, I think, are nowhere more persistent in Jewett’s writing than in the infamous narrative voice of “A White Heron.” Second only to Sylvia in “A White Heron,” as the character attracting the most critical attention, is this narrative voice. It would be a simple story of a young girl split between hunter and heron, if not for a narrative voice that does not respect *written* storytelling boundaries. Yet the irregularities in the narrative voice are comprehensible, when we consider Jewett’s earlier telling of it to Loulie—within a region’s oral tradition. Though these words stand out as exclamations in writing, they are not necessarily so in speaking.

Certainly, we identify a third-person, omniscient narrator in “A White Heron.” But its unexpected—even unnecessary—exclamations punctuate the plot. Its first is no sooner than the story’s second paragraph, affixed to the second half of a sentence: “The good woman [Mrs. Tilley] suspected that Sylvia loitered occasionally on her own account; there never was such a child for straying out-of-doors since the world was made!” (228) More often, however, it stands alone. These are brief exclamatory sentences, beginning with “what!”: “What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition! What fancied triumph and delight and glory for the later morning when she could make known the secret” (234-235).²⁶ This voice has received extensive (and exhaustive) critical coverage in readings of “A White Heron”—more than most characters: the

hunter, Mrs. Tilley and even Dan, Sylvia's briefly mentioned uncle (231-232). Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse encourage readers to see these moments as "interruptions" of a more didactic, all-knowing narrator: "Perhaps then we should read these interruptions as Jewett's way of alerting herself to the dangers that beset a writer trying to resist the seductions of plot."²⁷ Still, others consider: the voice embodies the "pathetic" fallacy at its worst; it weakens the story; it is an "emotional outburst."²⁸ But critics do agree: it is some kind of omniscient narrator, a voice growing increasingly invasive as Sylvia journeys up into that tree to spot the heron. The voice works as a grammatical intrusion, a key shift in the story that can be understood rhetorically to appreciate the development of Jewett's craft in this, her "tiny classic"—according to that *Overland Monthly* reviewer.²⁹

While I agree that the relationship between Sylvia and the narrative voice is extremely slippery, I think that it has more to do with Jewett's choice of a loquacious speaker to tell the story of a consistently silent girl.³⁰ Jewett leaves that narrative voice unnamed, strange in the story itself—not trying to write away the inconsistencies of its exclamations. Jewett frames an encounter not only between a young girl and a "handsome stranger" (233), but also between a young girl and the voice narrating her life, which consistently invades and takes over the telling of the story.

While this split between teller and told is indeed foreign to a plot that so carefully follows the tropes of regional fiction (which lacks such a intrusive voice), it also shares much continuity with splits in identity and memory, common in discussions of women's life writing. The narrative voice engaging with Sylvia's silence has its origins in relationships Jewett herself experiences, both in speaking and writing Sylvia's life, to

both Louie and to her readers. It is a voice that develops from Jewett's need to engage with the possibilities of life writing—by conveying life narratives, sometimes interrupted, in her fiction—in order to portray the boundaries of both lives and regions.

“She isn't a very good magazine story”: From Story to Preface

While Jewett acknowledges that “A White Heron” (due perhaps to its narrative voice) will not keep in the magazine fiction of her day, she also opens up the question of its status as a story, to begin with. If not a good magazine story, then what good is it? She specifically keeps it to act as a beginning. Due, in part, to the critical attention consistently directed to the *end* of “A White Heron”—when the unnamed narrative voice takes over—it's easy to forget that Jewett positions “A White Heron” as a preface. It certainly anticipates the themes of stories in *A White Heron and Other Stories*, yet it also begs a comparison with Jewett's overlooked work of preface-writing: first, because she consistently makes use of similar direct address interruptions in this format and, second, because she addresses modernity in her prefaces more directly than in many of her stories.³¹ As the preface it was kept to be, “A White Heron” also prefaces Jewett's other prefaces, anticipating the opportunities and limitations of life writing that would become more and more pressing for her as she reflected upon her writing. For a writer so often read as desiring a return to an older, less modernized New England, it is most striking that her references to current changes appear in prefaces—when she looks back at *many* of her stories, attempting to situate them for a newer audience. She does not use these opportunities to bemoan a New England that is no more. Instead, her prefaces are transitions into the second “life” of her short stories (into collections) and also within her own life.

Pointing out the key moments in Jewett's life is easy. Her first story's publication in 1868. Her father's death in 1878. Moving to Boston to live with Annie Fields in 1882. And, of course, 1896—the year *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is published, to wide acclaim. But growing out of the smooth rhythm of Jewett's annual life—"spring in South Berwick, summer with Fields in Manchester, autumn in South Berwick, and winter with Fields at 148 Charles Street"—we find an unexpected degree of questioning that Jewett expresses over the course of one year: 1893.³² In this year, she crafts three remarkable pieces of prefatory writing which relate her perceptions of modernity with the processes of aging: her introductory comments about a reading room in "A Word from a Neighbor," her preface to the 1893 edition of *Deephaven*, and her preface to "Human Documents" in the first issue of *McClure's* (June 1893).

1893—Jewett's year in prefaces—begins with "A Word From a Neighbor," in which she praises York Institute for its newly-opened reading room. She remarks:

We are too apt to say that our dear old New England towns are not what they used to be, that the best of their society drifted away after the building of the railroads, to the larger cities and wider horizons; that the smaller towns have dwindled in culture as the larger cities have increased, that the smaller towns have been given over to money and making alone. But I for one, rejoice in the fact that the general level of culture and intelligence has changed so much for the better.³³

Rejoicing is Jewett's response to a world supposedly drifting and dwindling. Certainly not the words of a writer trying desperately to preserve New England's past. In the York Institute appears a new reading room, one that stories can easily fill. Perhaps remembering both the value (and possible loss) of her grandfather's stories, she writes: "I

wish that we were more careful to make the writing of future histories possible, by writing down the valuable bits of tradition that every one of us has the chance of learning from older people” (2). Unlike the hunter of “A White Heron” who simply has his bird collection “stuffed and preserved” (232), Jewett’s sense of historical preservation has a far more nuanced connotation here. She praises a reading room that can *both* preserve and keep the past.

By October 1893, Jewett’s preface to *Deephaven* asserts a clear relationship between the changes to New England in “A Word from a Neighbor” and the act of aging—both for a writer and for her writing. Fields would draw special attention to this preface in a preface of her own to Jewett’s collected letters. She believes this particular preface “contains some of her [Jewett’s] very best and most autobiographical writing” (*Letters of SOJ* 7). She makes direct reference to a solution in the preface (dated October) to *Deephaven*: “the landscape generally takes its own way and furnishes impossible landmarks and impressions to the one person who can see it clearly and in large.”³⁴ Furnishes is a civilizing force, a regional landscape that a person might encounter “clearly and in large” within the York Institute’s reading room. She notes: “The short lifetime of this little book has seen great changes in the conditions of provincial life in New England” (1). But she immediately complicates such a lifetime: “twenty years ago, or a little more” is the imprecise estimate she offers of the story’s aging (1), as she contrasts “provincial life” with “the value of that wider life” (4). By the end of the preface, she has also questioned her own aging as a writer, which parallels that of *Deephaven*. She asks readers to forgive the “youthfulness” (7) and “childish soul” (8) of her writing, but characterizes herself “as if she were the grandmother of the author

of ‘Deephaven’ and her heroines” (8). Being both child and grandmother, from the provincial and wider life, Jewett portrays herself in this preface. To write of a place, for her, is to dwell upon the many ages that she can feel all at once—we might add daughter, friend, traveler, sister to her list as well. And as these moments of a life accumulate, they do so quickly.

Indeed, the immigrants moving to cities resemble “masses of quicksilver” (1) to Jewett in this preface, just as her own experiences are “like an atom of quick-silver against a great mass” (*Letters of SOJ* 51), an image she had written about earlier in her letters. Quicksilver is not embodied by the region itself—be it Boston or South Berwick. Rather, she suggests that the speed of change (like quicksilver), its transformative powers, are *within* people, both herself and masses of immigrants. Jewett’s most striking crystallizations of writing appear, then, from her thinking about regions and storytelling: “...what a wonderful kind of chemistry it is that evolves all the details of a story and writes them presently in one flash of time” (51-52). Between January and October 1893, Jewett takes up a more self-reflective practice of writing prefaces, linking regional reading and writing with life writing.

But how does Jewett work with aging—quicksilvered in her *Deephaven* preface, but still latent in “Word from a Neighbor?” She answers this question in the preface published between them: “Human Documents” in that first issue of *McClure’s*. It is here that Jewett voices a new language for reading biographical portraits. While Jewett is certainly prefacing something visual, something she has not written, she draws on her own experiences (and those of her readers) to intensify the act of reading of faces. More importantly, she emphasizes, both faces and lives are written: “The lines that are written

slowly and eventually by the pen of character, the deep mark that sorrow once left, or the light sign-manual of an unfading joy, there they are and will remain: it is at length the aspect of the spiritual body itself, and belongs to the unfolding and existence of life” (17). Like a preface, life is not written merely at the end. Its faces contribute to the ongoing unfolding—precisely how Jewett introduces in *McClure’s*.

Yet, it is significant that “Human Documents” has only been discussed as a preface to the inaugural issue of a magazine, rather than as a framing device for reflecting upon the development of Jewett’s career.³⁵ Jewett’s vision of human documents captures events in the life of a day: a trip to a gallery and time spent at home. 1893 is when Jewett discovers the quicksilver that writing a preface (in addition to short stories) can offer. In a form that asks a writer to look backward upon her collected stories and forward to future audiences, rapidly and within the limits of a few pages, she reads the act of looking as a gathered portrait collection of a single life, framed within particular regions. I read “A White Heron” as a similar array of portraits, which positions the expressions of Sylvia’s face, and not simply her silence, as its focal point. As a preface, we can keep “A White Heron” as a collage of the many moments in Sylvia’s life, rather than reading it only as a short story *par excellence*. It is a remarkable expression of the facial lines that Jewett attributes to viewing lives in her “Human Documents” preface.³⁶

“The Reason for Mrs. Whitman’s Pretty Cover”: Visualizing “A White Heron”

The final part in Jewett’s answer to her rhetorical question positions “A White Heron” beyond both oral and written contexts (either fictional and prefatory) into a visual genre: “the reason for Mrs. Whitman’s pretty cover.” But most importantly, it suggests a transition in Jewett’s thinking about her own writing practices—and her engagement with

portraiture as a capacious metaphor for fiction, life writing and art.³⁷ By comparing writing lives with writing regionally, Jewett expresses many ages of uncertainty. It should also inspire more confidence that regionalist writing is not simply nostalgic, a turn from modernization in the late nineteenth century, but instead expresses concern for those who face those changes.

Sylvia's face itself inspires attention in "A White Heron," twice referenced, both times pale: "Sylvia's face was like a pale star" (236); "he watched Sylvia's pale face and shining grey eyes" (231). It comes into focus at last at the end of the story—precisely when she chooses silence instead of providing the hunter with an answer about the heron's location. But before we see Sylvia's face at the end, it's helpful to consider the precision with which Jewett links faces with modernity in "Human Documents." In both her preface to "Human Documents" and in "A White Heron," a single life is expressed through a collection of portraits, of moments captured, however briefly. In "Human Documents," she quotes James Russell Lowell's reference to "our love of minute biographical details" (16) and then links these details with a specifically modern impulse: "This I believe to be at the bottom of even our insatiate modern eagerness to know the best and the worst of our contemporaries" (16). These many portraits are, as Jewett articulates from her first sentence, "a collection of the successive portraits of a man" (16). One reason why she writes so skillfully about the many faces in these portraits is that she herself is adept at writing faces, particularly those of a young girl in "A White Heron." Interestingly, she does not ask her readers to page through this magazine to understand only the lives of these few men. Instead of discussing the portraits in the magazine, she

shifts her attention to her readers, asking them to consider a chance encounter with one's own younger portraits.

Like "A White Heron," "Human Documents" has a dramatic second-person shift of its own. It is an even more drastic move than in "A White Heron," however, since the move is from a third-person description of a gallery into a second-person description of a drawer. Jewett focuses on the portraits that single person accumulates and, if she's lucky, encounters—whether in a gallery or a drawer (16). She imagines not only the faces of those in portraits, but the faces of those encountering portraits in two very different viewing environments. She imagines her readers in these locations, besides mere magazine pages, where they might encounter portraits of their own pasts, remembered and forgotten. She emphasizes the act of seeing as a portrait of oneself, but also as a portrait of another, in seeing oneself differently than expected. Wander through the gallery. Open the drawer you never do.

Jewett first positions her readers in a gallery of portraits: "Now and then, in an old picture gallery, one comes upon the grouped portraits of a great soldier, or a man of letters, or some fine lady" (16). Her "one" is certainly impersonal, suggesting that the distance between seer and seen is pretty far. But Jewett suggests that a closer look at the portraits' very textures can bring viewers closer into the lives of its faces: "The blurred pastel, the cracked and dingy canvas, the delicate brightness of a miniature which bears touching signs of wear—from these we piece together a whole life's history" (16). Removed are the great and the fine; replacing them are signs of wear that Jewett asks her readers to see, to read as though they could touch them. By looking beyond someone's current reputation, in the captions and in the posturing, Jewett suggests that the portraits

themselves undergo an aging process, while a viewer looks at such a collection. A face may seem bright, youthful and celebrated, yet the portrait itself evidences the signs of aging—as much as a wrinkle or frown. Ironically, the portraits with the youngest faces may feature the oldest portraits: cracking and crumbling material, even on public display. Jewett details portraits into five stages of life, from the “impersonal baby face” to the “older and vaguer face” (16). But her conclusion seems to leave something wanting: “As they hang in a row they seem to bear mute witness to all the successes and failures of a life” (16). Indeed, Jewett keeps the collection rather impersonal, as the trip to the gallery comes to a close. “A life” and “one’s” visit bracket the gallery—and truly draw out the distance between a face framed and the viewer’s face fixated upon it. Only in the middle of this gallery visit does Jewett replace “one” with “we.” It is the we—a relationship that Jewett imagines between herself and her reader—that makes the piecing, or interpreting, of the portraits take place.

After one leaves Jewett’s gallery of “Human Documents,” one heads home, where one becomes you. Emphasizing the relationships (rather than distance) between gallery and home, Jewett takes her reader to a more covert form of portrait looking: “...perhaps, you chanced to open a drawer and take in your hand, for amusement’s sake, some old family daguerreotypes” (16). Though a visit to the gallery was certainly intentional, the drawer encounter happens by chance. The act of grasping and holding the portraits gives “you” more agency than “one.” There is a level of chance in that “You may or may not be able easily to revive early thoughts and impressions, but with an early portrait in your hand they do revive again in spite of you; they seem to be living in the pictured face to

applaud or condemn you” (17). By opening a drawer, we open the past; and Jewett cannot underestimate the power that these portraits have.

She suggests that “in spite of you,” the portrait does indeed inspire a reaction; it is this tension between seeing and knowing, seeing and regretting, that Jewett makes use of in “A White Heron.” It too relies upon more public portraits—like those seen in a gallery—and portraits so private that they might easily go overlooked, hidden away in a drawer. When a viewer moves across the room to a window, to see the portrait more clearly, Jewett suggests that this motion is precisely what she is trying to inspire in her readers (17). Writing beyond models of chronological aging, Jewett argues that seeing our ages gathered together as portraits offers a new and powerful way for, what she terms, “reading character backwards” (17).

At first glance, “A White Heron” is a fairly predictable collection of such characters, with both regionalist insiders and outsiders. There is Sylvia, the insider, who knows the birds and the woods so well (231). There is a hunter, outsider to the region, just visiting on vacation (233). There is Mrs. Tilley, hospitable and responsive to the hunter’s needs (230). And, of course, the white heron, wandering the woods. But Jewett destabilizes any comfort that readers might find in such stock regional characters. Sylvia has only lived with her grandmother for a year (229). The hunter easily passes for one of the region’s farmer boys (230). Mrs. Tilley has lived there for so long that she knows the inside of her home better than the surrounding skies; she has relegated to Sylvia the duty of guiding her wayward cow Mistress Moolly home each day (228). Even the heron’s origins are a mystery: “Perhaps it was only migrating or had been chased out of its own region by some bird of prey” (233). As much as home defines each character, the heron’s

home away from home provides the tension that Jewett uses to build Sylvia's growth in the story, away from her own home.

Jewett collects these character portraits within a frame, in order to portray the differences between insiders and outsiders. It is a simple threshold of a door, between Mrs. Tilley's meticulously-kept home and that New England wilderness outside of it. This threshold marks the backdrop where the hunter first tells Sylvia and her grandmother about the heron *and* when Sylvia is silent, facing both him and her grandmother (still framed in the door). In Amy Kaplan's account, such lines between foreign and domestic are most visible along these literal "thresholds"—demarcating boundaries where we would not expect them.³⁸ "A White Heron" perfectly continues this paradigm. Mrs. Tilley, of the region, and the hunter, not of the region, stand equally astonished, crowded into a single threshold, speaking (though Jewett does not write dialogue for them) and trying desperately to understand Sylvia's silence (239). Neither a woman who has spent much of her life in this region nor the hunter who is just passing through can understand Sylvia's silence. Kaplan's model can be extended to look at splits between the foreign and domestic *selves* in regionalist stories. These stories portray the very precarious boundaries between life writing (often coded as foreign) and stock regional characteristics (coded as predictably domestic) that these writers so often develop.³⁹

Both Mrs. Tilley and the hunter rely upon their readings of Sylvia—their knowledge of her character and face—that they assume to be familiar and stable, rather than foreign and changing. To Mrs. Tilley, Sylvia is the girl who was so "afraid of folks" when she first met her (228); Sylvia fits into a frame of making Mrs. Tilley's life easier, keeping her life predictable, guiding Mistress Moolly home. Of course, Sylvia will

reveal the heron's location, if Mrs. Tilley asks her to. To the hunter, Sylvia is a pale-faced girl who should be able to lead him to that heron. He trusts in looking at her paleness, understanding a look in her eyes, appearing only once on her face. Unnecessary to him is the portrait that Mrs. Tilley offers. By focusing only on the pale portrait of Sylvia, the hunter shows us the danger in expecting a person to always adhere to a single portrait. They both read a single portrait of her correctly, yet they do not consider other possible portraits in their assessment.

The boundaries of the region slowly expand in the span of a single paragraph, as Mrs. Tilley tells her own portrait of Sylvia's past, remembered in the lives of her family. She tells her portrait of Sylvia's life as "the new-made friends sat down in the doorway together while the moon came up" (231). Her portrait is all about placing—and also misplacing—Sylvia. First Mrs. Tilley anticipates: "Soon it would be berry time" (231). Sylvia certainly has a place in that. Then, the cow's dislocation is one way that Sylvia has made her life a productive one, since her move from the town. She keeps track of the cow, thus enabling Mrs. Tilley to stay within the house and not be the one to encounter a hunter within the woods. Mrs. Tilley sees the children she buried "presently" (231) as a moment that layers the burials of her other four children with absences of both Dan and Sylvia's mother. That son, "a great wand'rer" (231) does not write her and she takes comfort that "Sylvia takes after him" (231). But between Sylvia and Dan there is also silence—"a minute's pause" (231), a silence certainly less important than Sylvia's at the end of the story, but still a silence that Mrs. Tilley creates in her own telling of Sylvia. Between Sylvia's legacy and her son's unknown location is Mrs. Tilley's life that she wished to lead. By telling the story of Sylvia's life in the next paragraph (or breath of

their conversation), she emphasizes the gap between the world she has seen and the world she has not. “There,” she says “I don’t blame him, I’d ha’ seen the world myself if it had been so I could” (231). Between these simple events in her life is the silence of an experience she has not had. Interestingly enough, it is not her region that Mrs. Tilley tells him about, information that he would certainly find interesting. Instead, she tells him about her life (though it bores him), as the three of them sit framed in the doorway that night.

For the hunter, Mrs. Tilley’s portrait of Sylvia is the kind that we might encounter in a gallery, with Sylvia an “unlikely” choice among her brothers and sisters (228). She is encouraged to run through the woods because of her cramped life before coming to live with Mrs. Tilley: “Everybody said it was a good change for a little maid who had tried to grow for eight years in a crowded manufacturing town, but, as for Sylvia herself, it seemed as if she had never been alive at all before she came to live at the farm” (228). For her, time begins not in the town of her birth, but instead during the afternoons spent “lingering” and “straying” in the woods, according to Mrs. Tilley (228). The summer season gives her both space and time to navigate the woods and to reflect upon an entire year of her life spent away from that crowded town (228). But, we might remember, Sylvia has a face of her own tucked away in the drawers of her memory—“the great red-faced boy” who used to chase her through the town (229). It’s important, I think, to consider both of these portraits, when we consider Jewett’s presentation of Sylvia’s past.

Unlike the red-faced boy, we know little of the hunter’s complexion, except that it is certainly attractive. But we do know a lot about the many names that Jewett has for him, names that add up to a collage-like portrait of the hunter, rather than a stereotypical

character. If the red-faced boy is the first one that Sylvia does not face, the hunter's is a second one, which Sylvia does not always see with such fear. While she is simply the "shy little girl" to him (though she does reluctantly tell him her name), Jewett never definitively names him (239). His names are many; often repeated, always part of a relationship to Sylvia that cannot be framed within a single portrait.

The hunter has mastered the art of putting forward his carefully-packaged self-portrait. His "way-farer's" tale is simple, not narrated, and is enough for him to get a place to sleep (230). He relies, similarly, on reading just one version of her face throughout "A White Heron." When the three of them are seated in the doorway, he is more focused on her face than on her grandmother's story. He, however, has misread her face—by assuming that he can rely on just one portrait. Jewett notes specifically that he is confident Sylvia will show him the heron; since he has read her face, once successfully: "He was sure from the way the shy little girl looked once or twice yesterday that she had at least seen the white heron, and now she must be persuaded to tell" (239). Packed within this assertion is his assumption that her face will not change—or age. He relies on "always nine years old" logic, rather than "nine years growing," which more closely defines Sylvia's experiences. By not realizing that Sylvia's face—and thus her mind—might be changed in a single evening, he believes that he can inspire her to tell what she knows. Most importantly, however, this is the only moment when Jewett permits us to face Sylvia from the hunter's perspective. But in facing her, he effaces her very identity—by referring to her as "the shy little girl" and not by her name—the second question he asked when they first met (239). His inability to read her face is also his

inability to think her name. Jewett points out an extremely important contrast here—not all can be learned from reading a young girl’s pale face, just once.

Jewett is constantly naming and un-naming this hunter. She spends almost the entire story distinguishing Sylvia from the hunter, only to bring them together, and keep them together, by its end. But Jewett has so much to say about the hunter; only at the end of the story does he become “the hunter.” His name is even more elusive than the heron he seeks.⁴⁰ Jewett does not name him.⁴¹ Instead, he acquires an incredible list of aliases as the story progresses: he is the “enemy” and “tall young man” in his first entrance (229). Many times he is a “stranger,” who resembles “one of the farmer-lads of the region” (230). Once accepted by Mrs. Tilley for his “way-farer’s story” (230), he is transformed into “the gentleman” (231) and “the guest” (232, 238), who works as an “ornithologist” (232). Twice is he a “sportsman” (233, 239). Sylvia, however, is simply “a little girl” (227) or “little maid” (228) transformed into “this lonely country child” (239). Even his many names do not match others—he is not “guest” when Mrs. Tilley is an “old hostess,” but is the more unlikely “young sportsman” (235). He does not answer to a single name (though he does ask Sylvia for hers immediately). He is instead named (and not named) by the blurry boundaries of foreign (guest, stranger) and domestic (farmer lad, young man). These boundaries depend upon his relationship to Sylvia at pivotal points in “A White Heron.”

His many names “hover” (233) about Sylvia. This unstable naming both divides and gathers the hunter into many portraits within Sylvia’s memory. It reveals that Sylvia knows him not through a single name, but as a shape-shifting figure who symbolizes many things to her (as she remembers him in relation to Mrs. Tilley and also to the

heron). It is perhaps most ironic that his alias most used in criticism is “hunter,” the one name so clear associated with the birds, but dissociated from Sylvia—“Were the birds better friends than *their hunter...*” (239 emphasis mine). As much as he has affected Sylvia, the name we choose for him preserves his distance from her, though he is clearly quite close to her at the story’s end.

The narrator’s exclamations are just one of the story’s notable inconsistencies; equally relevant to its telling is the silence surrounding the hunter’s name and the narrative voice’s inability to utter a single name for him. It also reflects all that this man stands for in Sylvia’s mind— and that story must be told by many names, rather than just one.⁴² “Hunter” is the name that we, and not Jewett, have most often kept. Because Sylvia cannot condense her relationship to him into a single word, that explains his many guises, he remains a relational character—depending on the environment around him.

Sylvia thus faces Mrs. Tilley and the hunter—within that doorway they now stand, perplexed. She responds with silence to each of their portraits or understandings of her. The hunter—so concerned with the look on her face, tries to connect with her, eye-to-eye: “the young man’s kind appealing eyes are looking straight into her own” (239). Mrs. Tilley tries desperately to convince Sylvia to speak, since that ten dollars would certainly be appreciated. Neither one of them has any real reason to doubt that she should do otherwise. But the many portraits detailed in “Human Documents” explains why Jewett cannot let Sylvia’s silence alone explain her decision. As she faces the woman who has brought about her current happy life and the unnamed hunter who represents the “great world” and its future possibilities, Sylvia can finally see that each version is incomplete. As she sees them standing there together, both of them also

become silenced (Jewett offers no details about what Mrs. Tilley says; we do not hear the hunter's pleas). In this moment, Sylvia becomes more complete, because she can see at least two different faces—as her grandmother and the hunter see her. It is in facing them that she faces herself, becoming, as Denise Levertov would put it a century later, “complete in herself as a heron.”⁴³

The last we see of Sylvia is a mere glimpse of her in the woods, not with the heron, not with her grandmother, but still with the hunter. Why is he the one that Sylvia last encounters, in this story that supposedly celebrates a young girl choosing not to appease him? Sherman points out similar complications about Sylvia's relationship to the hunter: “Finally, despite her ultimate rejection of him, not only is the hunter necessary to Sylvia's new consciousness but something of his presence is woven into its fabric. She takes his power and fuses it with her own feminine identity. In the process both are transformed.”⁴⁴ Sherman does not focus on this new consciousness in great detail after this point, except to say that Sylvia's “isolation from human companionship at the story's close remains troubling” (168). Because Sylvia overhears the hunter killing other birds (though *not* a heron)—Jewett suggests that Sylvia and the hunter will indeed have to confront one another again. Absent at story's end are the sound of Mistress Moolly's bell and the sight of Mrs. Tilley's well-kept home; present are the sounds of gunshots and the sight of bloody feathers.

Though the hunter's gunshots are audible, Sylvia's reactions to them are inaudible:

Many a night Sylvia heard the echo of his whistle haunting the pasture path as she came home with the loitering cow. She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and piteous sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood.

(239)

Critics have often emphasized just how strange, jarring, and violent the final paragraph is. Elizabeth Ammons argues: “This flossy feminine paragraph rips the fiction formally very much as Sylvia’s contrasting rhetoric—her complete silence—has already torn up the hunter’s plot.”⁴⁵ Sylvia’s silence signals that she has made a more mature transition from child to woman, rejecting the hunter and all that he offers.⁴⁶ While Ammons attributes silence to the tearing, I think Jewett frames this final paragraph as her most scathing, hidden one, among her many portraits of Sylvia. She is surrounded by blood; she does not know whether (or when) she will see him again. These woods become a nightmare version of both the gallery and the drawer. The gallery involves mere wandering through, with the portraits safely on the wall. Feathers fall all around her, creating a bloody space in which she cannot see. The drawer can be easily shut, but here Sylvia cannot hide from her past, in the daily rhythm of guiding Mistress Moolly home. The most shocking portrait then is that Sylvia and the hunter are so related that these woods are indeed just big enough to frame both of them.

Sylvia’s face—in a story that does not feature anyone writing—is where Jewett frames the process of crafting an array of regional written portraits. Though the unnamed narrative voice underscores the story’s influences from an oral tradition, Sylvia’s faces (and those of others) are where Jewett inscribes the importance of life writing to creating

readable regions. She places before us a montage of portraits displayed publicly and privately, suggesting that each face can be written to change. She ends “Human Documents” with such a face: “If we could read one human face aright, the history not only of the man, but of humanity itself, is written there” (18). It is not certainty that appears on Sylvia’s face; rather it is her ability then to exist in the same uncertainty with the hunter that matters so much to her life. She has faced him and met his gaze. Ultimately these portraits suggest that the narrative voice grows as much as Sylvia does. She expresses a concern for a life that is told just as much as a story that is written. Jewett foreshadows through the faces of “A White Heron,” the reversal in the story’s ending, much moreso than we have considered. Furthermore, the faces in the woods of “A White Heron” fill galleries and drawers of their own, since the attention to portraiture, as a form of regional writing, keeps a heron’s life and that of a young girl.

A Look at “Any Human Document”

Were there a straightforward explanation for Sylvia’s silence, “A White Heron” might lose some of its allure for feminist readings. Its strength relies upon Sylvia’s silence. But her silence may be more misunderstood than it is muted. It most explicitly follows a method for concluding that Jewett described in “From a Mournful Villager,” included in her 1881 essay collection *Country By-Ways*. She writes: “My sketch of the already out-of-date or fast vanishing village fashions perhaps should be ended here, but I cannot resist a wish to add *another bit of autobiography* of which I have been again and again reminded in writing these pages” (emphasis mine).⁴⁷ Withholding that autobiographical afterword (or coda to Sylvia’s post-silence) is not something she is willing to do, even as she models her own thinking process for readers. And, as Jewett

realizes (while in the process of trying to end such a story, no less), the autobiographical cannot be ended so easily—from her own life or from writing someone else’s. Since Jewett does suggest reading Sylvia as truly “nine years growing,” “another bit of autobiography” offers an “other” bit of autobiography that lets her express the challenges of writing a life, both her own and another’s.⁴⁸ That extra autobiographical writing shapes the excessive paragraph that seems to do too much in “A White Heron.”⁴⁹

This essay has sought to reframe “A White Heron” as a collection of portraits, of faces, of ages, reworking our assumptions about it only as a top-notch short story. I have also emphasized the centrality of “Human Documents” as a key transition in Jewett’s understanding of life writing as a plot device in regionalism. “A White Heron” is not only a story about silence, it is an experiment in the art of seeing an other’s portrait, not just a self-portrait—in both the galleries and drawers where we keep its portraits. Looking in the plural, at many portraits, aspires to understand the lives that each preface models and emphasizes in its endings. Indeed, reflections upon the art and act of looking make up the endings in both “A White Heron” and “Human Documents.”

Each ending features a shift into second-person, foregrounding the “you,” who is looking. The narrator commands Sylvia to look—three times: “Now look down again, Sylvia” and “look! look!” (238). It is the look that the hunter expects will be fully transparent (239). But it is also Sylvia’s look, once she climbs the tree (236). After her climb up the tree, but before she sees the herons, she looks in three key directions. First her eyes wander “[w]estward, the woodlands and farms reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church steeples, and white villages; truly it was a vast and awesome world” (236). West are the paths of her uncle Dan, away from the woods. Her

eyes span the regions of America—to imagine the lives lived within the churches and villages; it anticipates a comparative model that has read Jewett’s stories with other American regionalists writing and living westward from that tree. Her second direction is a transatlantic turn, beyond the land: “Sylvia could see the white sails of ships out at sea, and the clouds that were purple and rose-colored and yellow at first began to fade away” (238). This is the global turn that has expanded our vision of regionalism.⁵⁰ Jewett herself seems to have anticipated the kinds of looking that would frame reception of her work in the twentieth century and (more broadly) some key ways of looking that regionalism encourages.

“Look down” is the exclamation that takes us into the current moment in regionalism. Jewett does not ask her readers to choose among these different ways of looking. Instead, she piles them upon one another. Branch by branch. Portrait by portrait. Jewett suggests that climbing down the tree gives Sylvia the chance to link east and west, to bring into her life the worlds she has seen beyond that tree. With such forms of looking, “A White Heron” underscores the importance of contextualizing both of these looks within life writing at the same time.

In the final sentences of “Human Documents,” Jewett also articulates many possibilities for the act of looking among portraits: “you may read all these in any Human Document—the look of race, the look of family, the look that is set like a seal by a man’s occupation, the look of the spirit’s free or hindered life, and the success or failure in the pursuit of goodness—they are all plain to see” (18). While this sort of looking appears at the essay’s ending, it appears as a turn in the middle of “A White Heron,” as Sylvia looks around her, up in a tree. Once Sylvia has learned to look and to see a world, Jewett’s

story asks us (Mrs. Tilley, the hunter and readers) to see Sylvia's self-portrait made from a pale face, a childhood turning away from a red-faced boy, and her stance facing the doorframe when she returns from looking, perched in a tree. Jewett writes that such faces are "staring back to us out of the strange remoteness of our outgrown youth" (17). The narrative voice of "A White Heron" seems unruly as an unprecedented fictional device in a regionalist story. But as a second-person shift, characteristic of Jewett's preface-writing craft, it is a marker of continuity—between looking around in a tree and looking at portraits in a gallery and those in drawer.⁵¹

"Who Can Tell?"

This three-word question is the last one that the unnamed narrator asks (239). It seems most concerned with understanding why Sylvia does not or cannot tell the heron's location. But in Jewett's telling of the story, Sylvia conceals the heron's location, but she reveals her face—looking at the hunter and her grandmother no longer from within the frame of the door (like a portrait) but rather by standing back to face it. If her grandmother embodies the home, while the hunter embodies a world beyond, then Sylvia learns to view the social, romantic and economic expectations generated within that doorframe. No longer does Sylvia sit distracted by a toad within the door's frame (232). She instead can stand up, look towards the doorframe, and thus express the silence across her face. Attention to the written portraits of a "nine years growing" Sylvia finally renders her taken-for-granted silence into more than just voicelessness; it is her confident and fully-displayed face that Jewett tells.

By the end of the story, we are the ones to look at Sylvia's face, which comes into full focus—no longer a distant "pale star." The hunter's eyes look into hers (239). In all

of her facial features appears her strength, her ability to respond to the portraits that her grandmother and hunter have imagined for her. Her ears are full with “murmurs,” the hunter’s eyes, still “kind and appealing,” meet hers, she can vividly recall “watching” with the heron, and, of course, her mouth is silenced (239). Silence is but one aspect of Sylvia’s facial complexion as she looks back at the doorframe. Instead, Jewett has filled her entire face with a new vibrancy—all her senses react, creating yet another portrait of her. As Jewett writes in “Human Documents”: “we make our own faces” (17). Here then is Sylvia, making hers.

Since Jewett composes Sylvia’s face out of both portraits and documents, her understanding of the boundaries between art and social commentary may be far more fluid than expected. Linking Jewett’s prefaces with the written face of Sylvia revitalizes and historicizes the typical oppositions between society and nature, town and country, stranger and native that we have come to expect in readings of “A White Heron.” Together, they are *all* influences that age Sylvia’s face throughout the story. Regionalism is, for Jewett, a place to visualize the process of collecting lives—combining, rather than choosing between social documentation and artistic portraiture. It is here that she turns to aging portraits—whether found in a gallery or in a drawer—as visual vocabularies, to be faced and confronted, rather than turning away from them.⁵² While we may expect more nostalgic prefaces from a writer of stories placed firmly in a changing New England, we encounter otherwise here. As she chooses the face of Sylvia to introduce the many faces included in *A White Heron and Other Stories*, she admirably portrays, rather than obscures, the portraits of a growing young girl.

In November 1884, Jewett writes a letter to Fields, after wandering “far afield” in South Berwick (*Letters of SOJ* 24) and looking at a tree of her own. On her letterhead bearing that town’s name, she records a surprising discovery. Her favorite childhood tree has been reduced to a stump. Curiously, she frames herself, almost like Sylvia, approaching that stump:

It was a real affliction, and I thought you would be sorry, too, for such a mournful friend as sat down and counted the rings to see how many years old her tree was, and saw the broad rings when good wet summers had helped it grow and narrow ones when there had been a drought, and read as much of its *long biography* as she could. (emphasis mine 24)

By referring to “her tree” and thinking about herself as a friend, she makes a surprising turn from what must have been an intensely personal discovery, to say the least. She describes such an affliction not by recounting her childhood or elaborating on the remaining memories of the tree she “loved best of all the wild trees that lived in Berwick” (24). Her attention is on the still legible part, imagining what Fields might see, were she with her friend. Instead of detailing the summers of her own life spent near the tree, Jewett locates the tree within the many lengthier cycles of its life, suggesting a mode for reading regionalism: reading rings of a life, at times blurry, at times legible. Jewett chooses to linger upon “its long biography,” reading as many of its rings as possible—trying to understand its entire life, imagining her own life in only a few rings.

Carefully, Jewett suggests that a life, much like the topography of a region, is never transparent. There is both arithmetic and allusiveness in her reading. Her first move is to account for time, in the most thorough, straightforward way of reading ring by

ring, age by age. But among those rings lingers another story. Of dryness and inexplicable gaps. She must then acknowledge the stories that she cannot know. Though the biography is indeed long, Jewett still does not reveal its age to Fields. Her few words inscribe the rings of one long biography. She thus chooses biography as a language to make sense of a tree turned stump. Even more interesting is that Jewett is silent about why the tree was chopped down, in the first place. She does not speculate. It remains to be known why this tree, with its broad, sturdy stump, would be no more. Perhaps Jewett represents her own portrait of silences here (on the face of a tree stump), the effects alone (and not the causes) can be seen. The best she can do is linger briefly on its rings.

While collecting and developing regional stories into novels is the art that Jewett is most recognized for, such biographical lines of the faces in “A White Heron” contribute to our understandings of nineteenth-century life writing. Sidonie Smith, accounting for such shifts during this time, writes: “Cloaked in the garb of the natural, the common sensical, the fundamentally human, the metaphysical or universal subject appeared unassailable as the century turned.”⁵³ To a list of such cloakings, we might add young Sylvia “covered in pitch pine” (239)—her knowledge made visible and unspoken to her grandmother and the hunter. In Smith’s reading, the boundaries of the self then begin to break into “fissures” (53) at century’s turn, leaving only “fractures, splittings, maskings, dislocations, vulnerabilities, absences, and subjections of all kinds” (57). Most important in this catalogue, for understanding Sylvia’s particular life, are acts of masking. But masks also reveal something about the faces they conceal. Jewett’s understanding of aging as a collection of faces—sometimes masked, sometimes seen—suggests that “A White Heron” is not only a contribution to the writing of a region, but also to the writing

of a life. Fetterley and Pryse have recently emphasized the unsettling nature of “A White Heron’s” ending: “We read this story in part as Jewett’s expression of her own effort to resist imperialism, her struggle to avoid colonizing her subject(s) and to find a way *to portray the lives of regional persons without ‘selling’ them*. Sylvia’s refusal to speak establishes for Jewett the limits of representation” (emphasis mine 243). The fictional achievement of Jewett’s “A White Heron” has belied its contribution to the ongoing development of women’s life writing, as the twentieth century approaches—through the plurality of portraiture.

Jewett seated and squinting at the rings of a tree offers a different portrait than Sylvia’s; since Sylvia is standing in a tree, gazing wide-eyed at the view around her. Jewett cannot fully decipher the tree’s lines, but Sylvia can indeed see the white heron soaring through the sky—precisely what she seeks. Though they are nine years old always or growing, they are seeking an understanding of other lives—whether those of trees or herons—which teach them, in return, something about their own. We then have two distinct portraits, framed by trees, Sylvia’s precarious position atop a tree, Jewett’s surprised, mournful, deciphering at a stump.

Both how we tell and what we do with “A White Heron” matters particularly for our understanding of its place (or home) in her career. We can tell that the visible *and* written faces of “Human Documents” offer us the language to see what “nine years growing” looks like—in 1858, 1886, *and* 1893.⁵⁴ While the visual vocabularies of the sketch or local color often convey regionalism’s limited boundaries, Jewett’s attention to portraits suggests that such references may be more than metaphorical. They make up the language in which regionalist writers most fervently express their craft in the language of

collecting, looking at, and interpreting portraits. It is thus necessary to appreciate not only Sylvia's silence at the end, but also those contours, lines (and even rings) in clear display. "A White Heron" is indeed Jewett's own human document, filled with written portraits of Sylvia's faces. Jewett keeps that elusive quicksilver that so inspires her, in a story that can preface, as a preface that can tell a story.

Over a decade later, Jewett would return to such a "human documents" approach in relating life narratives in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), with glimpses of an unnamed woman writer—a summer visitor to Dunnet Landing—encountering and responding to the lives of others during her visits, including Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick telling the story of "Poor Joanna," Captain Littlepage and Elijah Tilley relating the earlier Dunnet Landings that they remember. However, the person we learn least about is this narrator. The most information we learn about her in *Country* comes from two disclosures—that she is a writer and that she is a returning visitor to Dunnet Landing. Towards the beginning, she realizes that she has "a long a piece of writing, sadly belated now, which I was bound to do" (6); she rents the local schoolhouse for days spent finishing writing, yet she struggles with "the half-written page" before her.⁵⁵ Though she acknowledges that "literary employments are so vexed with uncertainties at best" (7), she has encountered Dunnet Landing for the first time "in the course of a yachting cruise" (2), so hers is an upper-class background.⁵⁶ By masking so much of the narrator's autobiographical background, Jewett focuses *Country* more clearly on the biographical encounters and stories that this narrator seeks out. While Jewett toys with the ever-expanding, intrusive parameters of an unnamed narrator in "A White Heron," she relies

more upon restraint with her unnamed narrator in *Country*, showing that unnamed narrators grant her flexibility in experimenting with her fictional human documents.

Willa Cather names Jewett in the language of these visual human documents, remembering their first meeting pictorially: “As for Miss Jewett, she looked very like the youthful picture of herself in the game of ‘Authors’ I had played as a child, except that she was fuller in figure and a little grey.”⁵⁷ When Cather edits a 1925 edition of Jewett’s works—featuring “A White Heron,” other short stories, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*—she adds not only three lengthier Dunnet Landing stories to the novel, but also a preface that evidences Jewett’s influence upon Cather and Cather’s understanding of Jewett’s influence for future generations (see Figure 2).⁵⁸ Cather is known more for her preface’s ending, rather than its beginning: “If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once, ‘The Scarlet Letter,’ ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ and ‘The Country of the Pointed Firs.’ I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely.”⁵⁹ If her ending asserts Jewett’s legacy for literary history, its beginning articulates Jewett’s legacy for Cather, when Cather casts herself as a literary historian looking through Jewett’s letters—and her things: “In reading over a package of letters from Sarah Orne Jewett, I find this observation: *‘The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature’*” (6).

Just a few years earlier, in 1922, Cather detailed her own impressions of “the thing not named,” which would become her best-known principle for writing. While it is unclear whether Jewett’s things influenced Cather’s 1922 declaration or if Cather simply came across Jewett’s “things” later, the language of “things” informs Cather’s

understanding of regionalist writing like Jewett's—and, I think, her own—when she describes how “The ‘Pointed Fir’ sketches are living things caught in the open, with light and freedom and air spaces about them” (6). While things connote freedom when Cather introduces Jewett's work, Cather transforms these “things” in the endings of her fiction, to describe the lives of her characters that often seem to be anything but free. Cather's concluding “things” reveal how the art of collecting life narratives is far more complicated than her characters can fully name.

¹ Henry James, Qtd from “Mr. and Mrs. James T. Fields,” Rpt as an epigraph in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett: 29 Interpretive Essays*, ed. Richard Cary, (Waterville, ME: Colby College Press, 1973), xvii.

² Richard Cary, “Jewett's Literary Canon,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 7.2 (June 1965): 86.

³ Marjorie Pryse also emphasizes W. D. Howells's “personal taste for gentility in portraits of late-nineteenth-century life” (ix) in her “Introduction to the Norton Edition,” as she details his support of regionalist writers. See *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (New York: Norton, 1994) v-xix. And Richard Brenzo introduces “A White Heron” as “a thoughtful portrait” in his “Free Heron or Dead Sparrow: Sylvia's Choice in Sarah Orne Jewett's ‘A White Heron,’” *Colby Library Quarterly* 14. 1 (March 1978): 36. Katharine T. Jobs even refers to “A White Heron” as “a portrait of the artist as a young girl” in “From Stowe's Eagle Island to Jewett's ‘A White Heron,’” *Colby Library Quarterly* 10.3 (December 1974): 520. While Jobs emphasizes Stowe's influence on Jewett, she also locates a poetic source for “A White Heron” in “The Eagle Trees to J. G. W.” which Jewett wrote for John Greenleaf Whittier (518).

⁴ References to “A White Heron” are from *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, with introductions from Mary Ellen Chase and Marjorie Pryse (New York: Norton, 1994), 239. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁵ Jewett, “Human Documents,” *McClure's Magazine* 1.1 (June 1893): 17. See also the Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project: <http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/una/human.htm>. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁶ Jeannette L. Gilder emphasizes the success of the series in her article “When *McClure's* Began” in *McClure's* 41.4 (August 1913): 68-77.

⁷ Karen L Kilcup and Thomas S. Edwards structure Jewett criticism into four chronological stages (or ages?); the first two are the “preliminary stage,” with Jewett's life as the focus and the “feminist stage,” which celebrates the positive attributes of community in Jewett's work in their introduction in *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*, ed. Kilcup and Edwards (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 2.

⁸ See June Howard's *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially Sandra A. Zagarell's “Country's Portrayal of Community and the Exclusion of Difference” and Elizabeth Ammons's “Material Culture, Empire and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.” On “Boston Marriage” and *Country*, see Kate McCullough's *Regions of Identity: The Constructions of America in Women's Fiction 1885-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁹ See Joseph Church's "Romantic Flight in Jewett's 'White Heron,'" *Studies in American Fiction*. 30.1 (Spring 2002): 21-44. Future references will be cited parenthetically. On "intimist" frames (like those of James and Cary), see Laurie Shannon's "'The Country of Our Friendship': Jewett's Intimist Art," *American Literature* 71.2 (June 1999): 227-262.

¹⁰ Mary C. Kraus, "Sarah Orne Jewett and Temporal Continuity," *Colby Library Quarterly* 15.3 (November 1979): 173.

¹¹ Jacqueline Shea Murphy, "Replacing Regionalism: Abenaki Tales and 'Jewett's' Coastal Maine," *American Literary History* 10.4 (Winter 1998): 668.

¹² Jewett, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 60.

¹³ Sarah Way Sherman makes this observation in *Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 154. See Renza's "*A White Heron*" and the *Question of Minor Literature*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

¹⁴ Summaries of "A White Heron" often emphasize Sylvia's choice and her particularly *loyal* relationship with nature, rather than social codes. Consider Martha Hale Shackford's "Sarah Orne Jewett" in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett: 29 Interpretive Essays*: "'A White Heron' is a study of loyalty to Nature, a record of faithfulness to the wild, beautiful life which surrounds a little country girl. Repudiating the money that would relieve her poverty, she keeps the White Heron's secret, sharing the bird's mysterious, lonely freedom, and remaining true to the primitive brotherhood between man and winged creature" (68). Or Esther Forbes's essay "Sarah Orne Jewett, The Apostle of New England" in the same volume: "In 'A White Heron,' Miss Jewett shows a different phase of loyalty...But the secret of the bird the girl keeps hidden. She is truer to nature than to the potential lover she is instinctively conscious of in the young hunter" (*Appreciation* 76).

¹⁵ "The silence of Sylvia in 'A White Heron' is full of significance as to the transformation of the soul of this child...Suggestion succeeds in conveying the inexpressible" writes Jean Boggio-Sola in "The Poetic Realism of Sarah Orne Jewett," also included in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett*, 200.

¹⁶ See Kelley Griffith Jr's "Sylvia as Hero in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron,'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 21.1 (March 1985): 22. George Held also terms "A White Heron" a "title story," reading it more as a romance, rather than realism in "Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at 'A White Heron'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 18.1 (March 1982): 55. Held emphasizes another instance of Sylvia's singularity: "...Jewett establishes the aloneness of her heroine" (58). Carol Singley also emphasizes social conditions of Sylvia's singularity: "In their writing [Jewett's and Emily Dickinson's], the female initiate works through and with nature to achieve understanding, but finding no reception for her new-found insights, she must make nature her permanent retreat" in "Reaching Lonely Heights: Sarah Orne Jewett, Emily Dickinson, and Female Initiation," *Colby Library Quarterly* 22.1 (March 1986): 82.

¹⁷ *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, 125. Eugene Hillhouse Pool is most direct in his essay "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett": "Sylvia is obviously young Sarah" (*Appreciation* 225). So begins an entire paragraph detailing their similarities, concluding: "Perhaps this is one of the reasons, then, that 'A White Heron' is so consistently hailed as one of the best of Miss Jewett's short stories: because it is the expression of a situation closely paralleling her own personal problems, and thus contains her deepest feeling and surpassing attention" (*Appreciation* 225). Mary Wilkins Freeman, complimenting the story, writes to Jewett: "I would not have given up that bird any more than *you* would, if he had come first" (97 emphasis mine) in her collected letters: *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Brent L. Kendrick (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985). Arguments linking Sarah and Sylvia also link Sylvia with Nan Prince of Jewett's *A Country Doctor*, often considered Jewett's most autobiographical novel.

¹⁸ See Sarah Way Sherman's *Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone*, 169; Elizabeth Ammons's "The Shape of Violence in Jewett's 'A White Heron,'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 22.1 (March 1986): 6; and Held's "Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at 'A White Heron,'" 63.

¹⁹ Terry Heller, "The Rhetoric of Communion in Jewett's 'A White Heron,'" *Colby Quarterly* 26.3 (September 1990): 193.

²⁰ Church, 24.

²¹ *Country* is often considered the apex of Jewett's career; nothing ever surpasses it. Consider especially Alice Brown's 1897 review of *Country*: "It is a book made to defy the praise ordinarily given to details; it must be regarded *au large*. For it takes hold of the very center of things...It is the acme of Miss Jewett's fine achievement, blending the humanity of the "Native of Winby" and the fragrance of the "White Heron," included in Gwen Nagel's *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: J. K. Hall & Co, 1984), 37-39. Significantly, she emphasizes "A White Heron" as one of its influences. In "The Unity of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," Hyatt H. Waggoner writes: "It is finally, I think, chiefly unity of theme that transforms a group of semi-autobiographical sketches into a fiction that is at once a tribute to a way of life and an impression of life," *Appreciation*, 162. And Jean Boggio-Sola argues: "The use of these subtler appeals is the great innovation of Sarah Orne Jewett, and she brought it to perfection in her masterpiece, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). A body of loosely connected sketches and stories, it has been called Miss Jewett's swan song, for she produced little remarkable after it until her death of 1909," *Appreciation*, 197.

²² Sarah Wyman Whitman is known for her window designs. See Virginia Raguin's "Memorial Hall Windows Designed by Sarah Wyman Whitman" in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 11.1 (Spring 2000): 29-54.

²³ Paula Blanchard, *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 217.

²⁴ This letter is dated June 14 and was probably sent to Loulie during Jewett's trip to Europe in 1898; see *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, 152-154.

²⁵ Jewett's "Looking Back on Girlhood," *The Uncollected Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, ME: Colby College Press, 1971), 3. Future references will be cited parenthetically. Interestingly enough, Cary positions this essay as a preface—introducing the entire collection of short stories.

²⁶ It is a technique not limited to Jewett's regional fiction. She often speaks in exclamations in her letters: "Oh, do go next summer to see the most superb creatures that ever grew" (58). Exclamations appear most frequently in her letters to Annie Fields, right around the time that Jewett wondered about the placement of "A White Heron."

²⁷ Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women and American Literary Culture*, 179.

²⁸ For these three readings see Louis A Renza's "A White Heron" and the Question of Minor Literature, 103; Josephine Donovan, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, (New York: Ungar, 1980), 79-81; Heidi Kelchner, "Unstable Narrative Voice in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron,'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 28.2 (June 1992): 90.

²⁹ Paul John Eakin also emphasizes the rhetorical disruption of Sylvia's decision in "Sarah Orne Jewett and the Meaning of Country Life": "The rhetoric of emotion [in the final paragraph of "A White Heron"] suggests that the neat, symbolic structure of the story was inadequate to resolve the complexity of the artist's feelings which it contains; the image of violation and death provides an arresting contrast to the vision of life and beauty which the heron represents," *Appreciation*, 214.

³⁰ Some critics note that the story is too romantic or fantastic to be believable. See Margaret Roman's reading of the story in *Sarah Orne Jewett: Reconstructing Gender* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1992). Here, "A White Heron" is "a fairy-tale forest" (197). For Warner Berthoff, the story contains "sequences of unconvincing fantasy" (*Appreciation* 147) in his "The Art of Jewett's *Pointed Firs*" (144-161).

³¹ Sylvia is certainly the youngest main character in any of these collected stories. But there are connections to be made between her understanding of her life never truly beginning until she went to her grandmother's, just as John Craven finds himself starting a new life he never knew he was missing in "A Business Man." The stranger in town (who turns out to be death, rather than a hunter) is also the focus in "The Grey Man," directly following "A White Heron." Important for the facial emphasis in "A White Heron" are the references to a "half buried" face (40) and how Polly "might have stood for a picture of old age" (76) in "Farmer Finch." And Heather Love foregrounds the loneliness for older women in "Marsh Rosemary" (fourth story in this collection) which would certainly be a recurrent theme for readers, first observing it in Sylvia, the "lonely country child," "Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics," *ESQ* 55.3 & 4 (2009): 305-334.

³² "Chronology," *Sarah Orne Jewett: Novels and Stories*, ed. Michael Davitt Bell (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 920.

³³ Jewett, "A Word From a Neighbor," *The Artful Dodger* 1 (January 25, 1893): 1, 3. References cited from the Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project: <http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/una/neighbor.htm>.

³⁴ Jewett, "Preface," *Deephaven* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, [1877] 1893), 7.

³⁵ It does, however, play a role in Mary Esteve's "A 'Gorgeous Neutrality': Stephen Crane's Documentary Anaesthetics," *ELH* 62.3 (1995): 663-689. She identifies the work of "Human Documents" as "making human beings visible and legible" (669). While her focus is on Jewett's "unbetraying masks" (17) that can only be transparent, I think Jewett is more interested in how the viewer may see many such masks of her own past, in many portraits over time.

³⁶ While Renza has termed Jewett a "minor prefatory writer," (150) his mention is a brief one, mentioned only to link Jewett with Nathaniel Hawthorne—to establish her more clearly within a short story tradition. He does not consider how such a reading might change our understanding of Jewett's other prefaces.

³⁷ Jewett's interest in faces past and present reminds me of Mina Loy's 1919 essay "Auto-Facial-Construction," *The Lost Lunar Baedeker Poems of Mina Loy*, Selected and Edited by Roger L. Conover (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 165-166. For her, "the face is our most potent symbol of personality"; she also asks a question that Jewett would certainly be interested in answering: "For to what end is our experience of life, if deprived of a fitting aesthetic revelation in our faces?" (165)

³⁸ See Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70. 3 (September 1998): 600. Kaplan's essay emerges during a rich moment for American Studies in the late 1990s. Kaplan's essay also anticipates the theoretical boundaries in the introduction to *Between Woman and Nation*, ed. Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan and Mino Moallem (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999): "Women are both of and not of the nation. Between woman and nation is, perhaps, the space or zone where we can deconstruct these monoliths and render them more historically nuanced and accountable to politics" (13). See also Kristin Hoganson's "Cosmopolitan Domesticity," *The American Historical Review* 107.1 (Feb, 2002): 55-83.

³⁹ There is a fascination with mysterious portraits of women in regionalist writing. Consider the many second-hand accounts and frustrations that characters encounter when they seek others' stories *American Women Regionalists*: —Sui Sin Far's reporters, Mary Wilkins Freeman's "Sister Liddy," Mary Austin's "The Walking Woman," Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "The Praline Woman," and the story of "Poor Joanna" in Jewett's *Country*.

⁴⁰ Many recent critics have gone with "hunter," but "ornithologist" has also been popular. Or he still goes by his many names, just as he does in "A White Heron."

⁴¹ Renza acknowledges that the hunter has no name (127, 137), relating this fact to the fairy-tale mode of the story, rather than to Sylvia's more nuanced perception of him.

⁴² Considering Renza's emphasis on naming, it is even more intriguing that Jewett doesn't name the hunter. Renza notes that Jewett "can even inscribe her name through the story's three protagonistic images: *S-y-l-v-i-a* as *S-a-r-a-h*; *heron* as an anagram of *Orne*; the tree as a veritable *family* tree, a "great main-mast" metonym of the "Jewett" patrimony as first established by early patriarchal shipbuilders" (112).

⁴³ Denise Levertov's "The Great Black Heron" is in *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 71.

⁴⁴ Sherman, 168.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Ammons, "The Shape of Violence in Jewett's 'A White Heron,'" 16.

⁴⁶ There is especially strong criticism on this story as a *bildungsroman* redefined in feminist terms—see Singley's "Reaching Lonely Heights: Sarah Orne Jewett, Emily Dickinson, and Female Initiation" and Annis Pratt's "Women and Nature in Modern Fiction," *Contemporary Literature* 13.4 (Autumn 1972): 476-490; and Sarah Way Sherman's chapter "Ascending Spiral" in *Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone*. 154-188.

⁴⁷ Jewett, "From a Mournful Villager," *Country By-ways* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, [1881] 1969), 134.

⁴⁸ For another look at the relationship between autobiography and regionalism, see Mary Wilkins Freeman's essay "An Autobiography" in Mary Reichardt's *Mary Wilkins Freeman: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 134-136. She quickly dismisses the need to retell her own autobiography, in favor of discussing one of her stories.

⁴⁹ Or “another bit” may be the lives of Sylvia-figures appearing in twentieth-century writing—she has at least two important echoes. First is in Winnie from Natalie Babbitt’s children’s novel *Tuck Everlasting* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). Sitting on her own doorstep, Winnie fixates upon a toad so much that she gives it the water (from the woods her family owns) to live eternally—rather than drinking it herself. Second is “Elizabeth” in Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room.” They are both unlikely in their own way: Sylvia is Mrs. Tilley’s “unlikely choice...from her daughter’s houseful of children” (228). “Elizabeth” describes her moment of self-understanding as “How—I didn’t know any word for it—how ‘unlikely’ . . .” ; see *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 161. Bishop refers to “a super Miss Jewett” in a letter to Robert Lowell; see: *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 151. That mention is in the same paragraph as references to Lowell’s “landscape” and the “cow” in one of his stories (151). She mentions also the line between the “autobiographical” and her stories “In the Village” and “Gwendolyn” (151). It is unclear if she considers “A White Heron” to be super, but it would certainly make sense, considering Bishop’s thoughtful portrayal of shy children in “The Country Mouse” and “In the Village.”

⁵⁰ See especially Tom Lutz’s *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) and Philip Joseph’s *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

⁵¹ The pairing of an older narrative voice with a younger Sylvia certainly echoes and anticipates the many friendships among women of different generations, featured throughout the Jewett canon. I’m thinking especially of Kate, Helen and Mrs. Kew in *Deephaven*; Mrs. Todd and the unnamed *Country* narrator. There’s definitely more to be said about “A White Heron” as a kind of shorthand for these friendships, a technique she would return to and expand upon throughout her career.

⁵² What Richard Cary wrote in 1965 still seems true today: “...no conclusive examination has yet been made of Miss Jewett’s philosophy of composition.” See his “Jewett’s Literary Canon,” 87. He advocates a turn to her letters for such a philosophy, but it looks like her prefaces may be just as promising.

⁵³ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 53.

⁵⁴ Another of Jewett’s 1893 essays is: “A Lonely Worker,” *Far and Near* 3 (April 1893): 109-110, also at <http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/una/lworker.htm> on the Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project. Jewett conveys another “modern” transition, defined by gender and class: “We have such a fashion in modern life of working together in companies by roomfuls or shopfuls of cheerful, busy girls who, borrow and lend, and entertain each other, making the long hours shorter by companionship, that in spite of the wrong side of such a fashion it would be very hard to go back to the time when almost everybody did her work by herself” (1). Jewett argues that “there is a very dark wrong side often-times to this way of working together” (1). She emphasizes the contrast between the work that Sylvia would do at her grandmother’s (while still doing work around the farm, like guiding Mistress Moolly) with the work that she would do, were she to stay in town. So, for Jewett, class and gender constantly shape modernity. Interestingly Jewett concludes her essay by noting that “we are all solitary workers” (3). Although there may be more of a community of workers, Jewett still sees the model of a girl like Sylvia as a particularly rich case to consider. Also interesting is that a “lonely” girl is still not far from her mind, even after she has written many stories about older women.

⁵⁵ Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, [1896] 1994), 15. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁵⁶ Sarah Way Sherman best sums up the background given and withheld: “All we know must be gleaned from incidental clues, and from these we discover she is a professional writer, that she is no longer young, that she is wealthy enough to have been to Dunnet Landing once before, on a yachting cruise. She is well traveled, having been to London and France, and certainly highly literate, since her classical and other literary allusions establish her educational (and social) status. However, her more personal history, her family, friends, loves and losses are hidden. The history that gave her the emotional resources to interpret the people she sees or the stories she hears is not disclosed,” “Introduction,” *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, ed. Sarah Way Sherman (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), xlv- xlvi.

⁵⁷ Willa Cather, “148 Charles Street,” *Not Under Forty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), 54.

⁵⁸ To *Country*, Cather adds “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” “The Queen’s Twin,” and “William’s Wedding,” three lengthier Dunnet Landing pieces that were published individually in the *Atlantic*.

⁵⁹ Willa Cather, “Preface,” *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, [1925] 1956), 11. Future references will be cited parenthetically. Interestingly enough, a strange white bird also shows up in Cather’s Nebraska of *O Pioneers!*, dedicated to Jewett. This bird turns out to be a seagull, but it echoes many of the same traits that a white bird does in “A White Heron.”

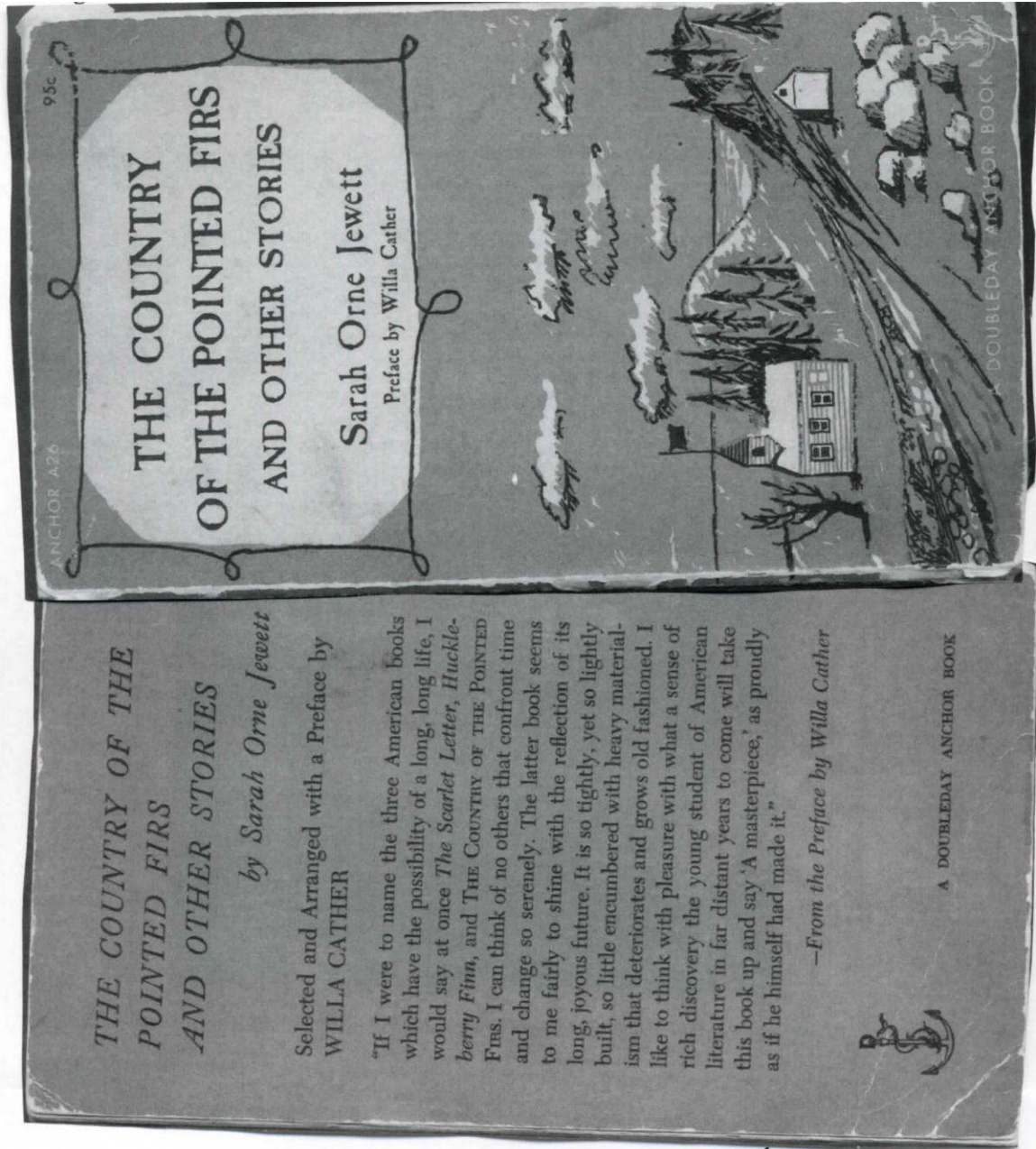


Figure 2: By comparing the front and back covers of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, we can see how this edition links Jewett's fiction with Cather's prefacing and editing. It is a project that writes them together into literary history.

Chapter 2: As If They Had a History:

Documenting the Things Named in Willa Cather's Regional Fiction

Of all the names Willa Cather is known for—*Ántonia* and *Alexandra*, Jim and “William”—her stunning act of not naming has proven just as (if not more) intriguing to her readers and to her critics. Most famously, a single, nameless *thing* shapes the key passage of her 1922 essay “The Novel Demeublé”:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.¹

Appearing towards the end of this essay, “the thing not named” is the simplified, desirable result of literary art, after her essay’s memorable call for un-furnishing novel writing—throwing all unnecessary descriptive clutter out the window (51). Its phrasing has inspired a wide array of responses—from her initial readers to contemporary critics. However, its inexplicable presence is more explicable, if we consider its role in her fiction. By naming Cather’s regionalist fiction as a place where the overtone of “the thing not named” sounds most clearly, I seek both a more capacious and precise connotation for the phrase. Whether in Nebraska, Virginia, New York, or Colorado settings, Cather composes, genders and assembles life narratives in her fiction in this language of things, expanding the influence of “the thing not named” in the Catherian canon.

Cather’s critics have named “the thing not named” through two approaches: for discussing her evocative descriptive writing and for emphasizing the sexual and gendered identities that she does not name. Cather’s friend (and one of her first memoirists)

Elizabeth Sergeant recalls that initial audiences immediately grasped the power of “the thing not named,” singling out the phrase from the entire essay because of its ability to explain the descriptive techniques in her earlier fiction, since it “seemed to account for the method used both in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*; it stirred up plenty of highbrow talk and critical concurrence.”² By emphasizing how “the thing not named” directly reflects Cather’s earlier approaches to specific novels, Sergeant describes a capacious reading practice, with the “thing not named” as a lens for considering Cather’s earlier novels. This critical concurrence, however, was only the first approach that “the thing not named” would inspire.

Since the late 1980s, critics interested in Cather’s sexual identity have pointed out the limitations of a simply stylistic reading of “the thing not named,” emphasizing the phrase as a stand-in for the name that Cather cannot give herself in print. Appearing initially in an essay bemoaning “overfurnished” (43) novelistic description, “the thing not named” also has an ensuing legacy of furnishing Cather criticism with a rich vocabulary to describe her frequently elusive representations of gender and sexuality. Most importantly, in Sharon O’Brien’s 1987 biography *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, “the thing not named” signals Cather’s simultaneous repression and expression of her lesbian identity.³ In O’Brien’s reading, “the thing not named” echoes Oscar Wilde’s “Love that dared not speak its name;” Cather “is the lesbian writer forced to disguise or to conceal the unnameable emotional source of her fiction” (126-127). The phrase simultaneously works as a stylistic expression and evokes the sexual repression that Cather herself experiences. Jonathan Goldberg revises O’Brien’s “primary translation” of “the thing not named,” calling for even more care when reading its “displacements

along the axes of gender and sexuality,” since “the thing not named” not only evokes Cather’s writing practices, but is a useful language for her readers, such as Goldberg, since he evokes “the thing not named” to describe his experience of reading Cather for the first time: “To feel what is not specifically named, as Cather invites, requires a heightened sense of attentiveness, a willingness to suspend determinate categories in order to allow resonances to sound. It requires more than a personal vantage point.”⁴ Seemingly fixed categories, such as gender, become blurrier, more difficult to fix in a single place. Goldberg frames “the thing not named” as a poignant description of a reading experience, as well as a writing experience. O’Brien and Goldberg have reminded us that stylistic questions are also gendered questions—particularly when Cather names the unnameable.

Both of these approaches to “the thing not named”—initially, stylistic, more recently, gendered—have been more attuned to the “not named” than to the “thing.” Whenever Cather mentions things in her fiction, such vague and easily overlooked terms, there is good reason to pay attention—and good reason to think that she does not consider these things lightly. “The thing not named” has played a leading role in Cather criticism, cast as a singular moment where her expression and expectations of fictional theories meet the repression and realities of her sexual identity. However, this important move has unintentionally, I think, overshadowed other key passages in Cather’s writing when the term “thing” shapes the process of assembling and gendering the life narratives Cather consistently includes in her fiction. The many versions, distortions, and even absences of life narratives continually fascinate her, whether in her early short stories or later novels. Critics have favored reading “the thing not named” singularly, rather than

relationally with these other things. O'Brien emphasizes "the thing not named" as a "startling phrase"; for Goldberg, it is both a "well-known pronouncement" and a "principle"; Jo Ann Middleton terms it "the essence of creation" for Cather.⁵ Whether an essence or otherwise—phrase, pronouncement, *and* principle—each of these critics attributes singularity to it, in its unparalleled position in Cather's career.

To revise the singularity attributed to "the thing not named," this chapter contributes a more relational understanding of things in Cather's regional fiction to support readings of "the thing not named" as an intensely gendered term, by showing that these fictional "things" frequently convey the gendered ambiguities of assembling life narratives—as productive and prohibiting forms of collaboration. These things appear towards the end of Cather's fiction, specifically when her characters are grappling with the gendered representations of their lives, in moments of crisis or transition. Things are Cather's more consistent and less singular vocabulary, frequently revised across the decades of her career. Together, these things add up to her less resistant and more nuanced interest in the politics of gathering life narratives—as the favored plots in her regionalist fiction.

This chapter first charts an alternative critical history of "the thing not named" in the pages of Cather's essays and interviews, showing that this phrase needs to be read with other things, rather than praised and singled out as a one-time memorable phrase. Cather's conflicting roles as a fiction writer and biographer, during her time at *McClure's*, become a productive tension that she never quite resolves, even when she is writing only fiction. The next two sections continue to chart a relational reading for "the thing not named"—first, in *My Ántonia* (1918) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940),

two novels that share storyteller-focused endings; second, in the life narratives distorted and silenced at the endings of Cather's short story "Paul's Case" (1905) and her novella "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932). Clearly, Catherian things are not limited to a particular genre (since they appear in novels, novellas, and short stories) and do not develop chronologically. These particular references to things have frequently been overlooked in her fiction; by recovering and contextualizing them with "the thing not named," this phrase contributes not only to her theories of fiction, but also to her interest in the gender politics of life narratives—how the lives of both women and men can be so easily lost and found.

The Things about Life Writing

When Cather considers her own career and details her writing practices before her 1922 essay, she consistently refers to such *things*, but never hesitates to redefine them and show how they must change, as she writes. Things evolve as a viable resource in her thinking, speaking and writing. Because she details the complexity of things in situations ranging from a short interview to literary review essays, hers is a relational understanding that cannot be defined once and thus fixed. Instead, she casts this phrase relationally in two distinct ways. First, is in one thing's contextual relationship to other things in the creative process—one final thing emerges out of many things that are silenced and discarded. Second, is in her sense that "the thing not named" can appeal to generations of young artists and those over forty. By noting Cather's relational interest in things—both creatively and generationally—in her essays and interviews, the things in her regionalist fiction become even more important, since her fiction features characters who imagine how their own life narratives will be reshaped and retold from one generation to another.

In an 1896 review, Cather declares art the process of rendering “an idea living” into “a living thing”: “To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original mood, preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing with color, odor, sound, life, all in it, that is what art means.”⁶ And, when she reflects on the 1912 publication of her first novel *Alexander’s Bridge*, she refers to writing as “the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night.”⁷ But, in a 1913 interview, Cather makes an important transition: from thinking about a final thing to relating the many things that together contribute to its creation. To consider the artistry of “a pianist, or a singer, or a writer,” she refers to Jean-Francois Millet’s “The Sower:” “It was probably the hundred sketches that went before that made the picture what it finally became—a process of simplifying all the time—of sacrificing many *things* that were in themselves interesting and pleasing, and all the time getting closer to the one *thing*—It.”⁸ She first appreciates the many sketches condensed to configure a single picture and also translates sketches into the many things that somehow become a single It for a writer.⁹ In this interview, she certainly anticipates the simplifying of “the thing not named” she would make famous in 1922.

Isolated, “the thing not named” has nearly become a sound-bite in Cather criticism. Since she writes of these *many* things before “The Novel Demeublé,” her famous phrase does not simply appear in 1922 without any earlier references. It has a lesser-known history in these interviews and essays.¹⁰ Just as “the thing not named” appears suddenly the end of “The Novel Demeublé,” each of these things appears at the end of a not-quite-polished creative process. A single thing might be the desired end, but

Cather uses the language of things to convey the sacrifices that come before that single thing. The things left behind and omitted capture Cather's attention and imagination.

The two very different publications of "The Novel D meubl " also clarify Cather's priorities in relating "the thing not named" to older and younger generations of artists, who might choose different things to sacrifice, when they create a single thing. Today's readers are most likely to find "The Novel D meubl " in Cather's 1936 collection of fiction and essays titled *Not Under Forty*; the collection is introduced with a paragraph long "Prefatory Note," which I quote in full:

The title of this book is meant to be 'arresting' only in the literal sense, like the signs put up for motorists: 'ROAD UNDER REPAIR,' etc. It means that the book will have little interest for people under forty years of age. The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts, and the persons and prejudices recalled in these sketches slid back into yesterday's seven thousand years. Thomas Mann, to be sure, belongs immensely to the forward-goers, and they are concerned only with his forwardness. But he also goes back a long way, and his backwardness is more gratifying to the backward. It is for the backward, and by one of their number, that these sketches were written. The Author ¹¹

While Cather is clearly distinguishing forward from backward, pivoting on 1922, she seems even more interested in addressing the 'sign' of her preface to those *over* forty, rather than trying to draw in the younger readers who might be intrigued by this recent break in 1922.¹² The preface thus associates the contents of this collection with 1922, looking back—especially "the thing not named," in the best-known essay in the collection. Cather's emphasis on 1922 has certainly helped in reading her as a modernist,

orienting her writing around that pivotal year. When Michael North aligns “the scene of the modern” with Cather in *Reading 1922*, he emphasizes how “it has always been hard for Cather scholars to explain why she placed this watershed so precisely in 1922.”¹³

Though Cather was once considered decidedly anti-modern, her fiction reveals a writer engaged with modernist tensions, responsive to the contradictions of a quickly changing America.¹⁴ Things are also abounding among modernists: Robert Frost wonders “what to make of a diminished thing,” William Carlos Williams declares “no ideas but in things,” Georgia O’Keeffe considers the “great American thing,” and Cather realizes that the things not named are as important as the ones named.¹⁵

Yet, Cather’s prefatory note, in all its emphasis on 1922 as a backward-looking division, obscures the initial publication of “The Novel D meubl ,”—which was in a quite forward-looking collection of essays: the spring literary supplement to the April 12, 1922, issue of *The New Republic*, titled “The Novel of Tomorrow.”¹⁶ Appearing with essays by Theodore Dreiser, Floyd Dell, Mary Austin, James Branch Cabell, Waldo Frank, Zona Gale, and others, Cather’s discussion of younger artists in “The Novel D meubl ,” before she even mentions “the thing not named” is especially compelling, since she is fully aware that she can reach younger generations reading a supplement titled “The Novel of Tomorrow.” She is attentive to a younger audience—those *under forty*—who can appreciate a minimalist approach. “The thing not named” is not something lost or limited to the past; it is more a potential thing to be named and created by new generations of younger artists. When she considers them, Cather praises the “hopeful signs that some of the younger writers are trying to break away from mere verisimilitude, and, following the development of modern painting, to interpret

imaginatively the material and social investiture of their characters” (48). Signs that Cather later puts up to turn away younger readers in her *Not Under Forty* preface are first these “hopeful signs” of new literary careers to come in the original publication of “The Novel Demeublé.”

Her essay, then, is equally capable of presenting “the thing not named” to readers under and over forty. It is not a single mention or climax in her career, but instead possesses this relational history—among her interviews and reviews, as a thing emerging from many things in a creative process and as a phrase directed to generations of older and younger artists. Yet how does this relational history of “the thing not named” and the things in Cather’s nonfiction relate to the things in her fiction? Is “the thing not named” simply a convenient lens when things get mysterious or especially evocative? Though O’Brien and Goldberg have pointed to more expansive gendered connotations for the term, critics who seek connections between Cather’s fiction and “the thing not named” have equated this turn towards Cather’s fiction with a turn away from the gender politics of “the thing not named.”

Though “the thing not named” has received the most sustained attention from critics in gender and sexuality studies, critics in the early 1990s have called for renewed attention to the term’s relevance for readers interested in Cather’s descriptive techniques. This approach points to strong descriptive passages from Cather’s fiction exemplifying the principles of “the thing not named,” but shies away from applying gendered readings to these passages. Middleton’s *Willa Cather’s Modernism* compares “the thing not named” to a biological vacuole, a gap in Cather’s writing that requires attention. A seemingly “empty” vacuole is “suggestive for the apparent absences in Cather’s work

that are nevertheless full of meaning” (11), yet Middleton does not account for the ways that vacuoles link the lives in Cather’s fiction with her life. Middleton credits the critics who have focused upon “Cather’s elusive personal life and its impact on her work,” but suggests that there is more to be learned from “Cather’s literary techniques, because our focus must remain on Cather, the reader, and the voids with which each must deal” (12). Middleton’s response to biographical criticism of Cather’s sexuality is one that refocuses attention only on her fiction, separating it from biography.¹⁷

Janet Giltrow and David Stouck also advocate this approach, calling for a “syntactical and discourse analysis” of Cather’s novels, as a turn away from sexuality-focused readings of “the thing not named” in the late 1980s.¹⁸ While Giltrow and Stouck aptly acknowledge the need to see many things, rather than just one, their analysis asks readers to make a choice between gender and language that Cather does not ask her readers to make. Arguing that “the phrase [the thing not named] has become synonymous with lesbianism” (1), they hold that “[t]his essay does not attempt to silence such issues of interpretation [gender issues], but it does situate the reader’s experience of ‘the thing not named’ and the problems of interpretation *amidst the linguistic data of the texts*” (emphasis mine 1), focusing upon several examples of “figures in a landscape” appearing in *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Their readings imply that gender analysis is somehow outside of such “linguistic data,” which is problematic, considering Cather’s clear commitment to questioning gender stereotypes throughout the many pages of her fiction.¹⁹ While they respond to O’Brien’s focus on “the thing not named,” by asking readers to look more closely at Cather’s descriptive skills, they rely upon an overly expansive mode of reading in which any mysterious thing—settings,

dialogue, character sketches—can be explained and categorized as a moment in which Cather is putting into practice the principle of “the thing not named.” They overlook the specific decisions that Cather makes, when she chooses “things” as her language to express gendered ambiguities. They downplay the role that gender politics have played in the things that Cather does name.

Cather’s biographers, such as Hermione Lee, have persuasively emphasized how Cather’s fiction is “...full of life stories, the recounting of autobiographies and biographies. Her characters review their own ‘destinies,’ or that person who has most influenced their own lives.”²⁰ A writer so interested in crafting storytellers—out of the stories they tell, by books they assemble—is one who is equally invested in representing the processes of how they collect, choose, and connect things in a life narrative. These processes are rarely without conflict. In her characters’ collaborative efforts to represent—and also distort—life narratives, Cather turns to the language of things, as a resource for expressing the boundaries of what is known and repressing what is not. While O’Brien has understood “the thing not named” as a practice of “reading as an act of collaboration and empathy, not a contest” (155), my sense of Cather’s interest in collaboration is not simply “the relationship between author and reader” (155), but is a more specific struggle among her characters, concerned with representing their life narratives, turning to the language of “things” to express their interest and frustrations. Although Cather was notoriously guarded about her own life and its representation, her fiction consistently (and perhaps surprisingly) features an array of characters concerned—and even obsessed—with the representations of their life narratives.²¹ Plotted into her fiction, these life narratives provide more perspectives for appreciating

Cather's engagement with life writing, besides her *own* life or in her biographical writing.²²

Her regional fiction—with its many lives—contains a carefully chosen relational archive of fictional “things”—whether capitalized, emphasized, quoted—which she revises and develops from early reviews and interviews, but most famously models as “the thing not named” in “The Novel Dèmeublé.”²³ Cather's “things” appear also at the end of her fiction, like a recurring concluding signature. These are the “strong things” Jim sees in *Ántonia* when he sees her among her children, the “somethings” that make the story of Nancy more mysterious in *Sapphira & the Slave Girl*, the “thing in the corner” that haunts Paul more and more in “Paul's Case,” and the “Things” that Mrs. Harris tucks away from her family in “Old Mrs. Harris.” These things convey Cather's awareness that life narratives are informed by and often constrained in collaborative efforts. In collaborative life narratives, Cather finds the repressive and expressive possibilities of the things she does name.

Ántonia and Till, Surprise Storytellers

No Cather novel is more framed by the perplexing art of life-writing than *My Ántonia*, beginning in its introduction. In it, Cather presents a conversation between an unnamed woman writer (who is the narrator only for the novel's first few pages) and Jim, whose manuscript becomes the rest of the novel. Jim finds it difficult to believe that his childhood friend has not yet written of one girl they both remember: *Ántonia Shimerda*.²⁴ So, they make an agreement to both start writing about her, hoping to “get a picture of her” (*MÁ* 5). For her and for Jim, the agreement is to combine their accounts of *Ántonia*, seeking to create a single picture. Months later, Jim has written a manuscript, which he

calls, rather casually, “that *thing* about *Ántonia*” (emphasis mine, *MÁ* 6). The unnamed narrator, however, has not even begun writing. Jim’s writing, that simple “thing,” becomes the rest of *My Ántonia*.²⁵ She instead becomes the editor of Jim’s manuscript, in the last sentence of the introduction: “My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim’s manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me” (6). We can only wonder, Cather suggests, how the narrator’s version would have been (substantially?) different. By considering this possibility, she conveys life writing as a relationship between writing a thing and getting a picture.²⁶

Even the most famous image in the novel is a moment when Cather transforms an elusive thing into a clear, memorable picture. But it is also a moment when Jim’s firsthand perceptions of his childhood end; he experiences a shift in his abilities as a storyteller. As teenaged Jim sits with *Ántonia* Shimerda, Tiny Soderball, and Lena Lingard, their attention shifts from one another to the sunset, just about halfway through the novel:

Presently we saw a curious *thing*: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten

red. There it was, heroic in size, a *picture* writing on the sun. (emphasis mine, *MÁ* 182-183)

They are in awe of this stunning picture writing, which begins when they are squinting at a thing. Slowly, the thing becomes a recognizable plough; the gold-washed sky is no backdrop—it precisely captures each piece of the plough against the sun. Interestingly, Jim’s perceptions are the only ones told. Absent is any sense of how each girl sees the plough initially or who first realizes what it is. Instead, a thing is slowly named as a picture—and then “they whispered about it” (*MÁ* 183). Up until this point in the novel, Jim has had firsthand experience of all that has taken place since he and *Ántonia* arrived in Nebraska on the same train. Her father committed suicide that first winter; both Jim and *Ántonia* eventually move into town; Jim has then developed friendships with the hired girls, which baffle the town. As Jim and the hired girls sit, in awe of the plough against the sun, Cather positions a thing (the plough) within a picture (the writing on the sun) in a beautiful display that cannot last—anticipating a key transition about to take place. As they look at the sun, there is both silence (among the girls) and the sense that the sun is setting.

Much of the increasing interest in Cather’s storytelling dynamics addresses *My Ántonia*; titles and first lines in recent criticism are instructive. Keith Wilhite begins his article with the term “Storytelling, narrative viewpoint and regional geography form a popular and theoretically rich nexus in the critical debates surrounding Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*,” just as Jan Goggans’s article begins, “*My Ántonia* is above all else a story of stories.”²⁷ This approach has also informed a pair of 1994 essays: Richard Millington’s “Willa Cather and ‘The Storyteller’: Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*” and Evelyn J.

Funda's "'The Breath Vibrating Behind It': Intimacy in the Storytelling of *Ántonia Shimerda*."²⁸ From Peter's and Pavel's stories of the woods, to *Ántonia*'s story of the thresher who throws himself into the machine, these "inset stories," as Michael Peterman has termed them, are often jarring and have been read as unrelated to the rest of the novel's events.²⁹

Indeed, after this sunset, Jim's firsthand impressions of *Ántonia* are fewer than ever. In the next book of the novel (just seven pages later), "Lena Lingard," *Ántonia* makes no appearance at all. In the final two books ("The Pioneer Woman's Story" and "Cuzak's Boys"), Jim returns to see *Ántonia* only after much time has passed; he is constantly trying, indeed, to get a picture of what her life has been like. His manuscript becomes increasingly focused upon the sources which allow him to tell *Ántonia*'s story, once he has left Black Hawk—ranging first from his own recollections, but subtly shifting to the Widow Steavens' memories and into *Ántonia*'s own photography collection.³⁰

In Book Four "The Pioneer Woman's Story," Cather makes her most explicit gesture towards Jim's need to learn from life narratives other than his own experiences. None of the other Books in the novel—"The Shimerdas," "The Hired Girls," "Lena Lingard" and "Cuzak's Boys"—possess a story in their title. It is the Pioneer Woman's story that he has to seek, when he returns to Nebraska for a visit. By giving the Pioneer Woman, Mrs. Steavens, the powerful voice (and history) in this chapter, Cather is clear that Mrs. Steavens's is the story that needs to be heard—not Jim's recollections of it. Listening to Mrs. Steavens, as Susan J. Rosowski acknowledges, changes Jim's perspective profoundly: "Cather moved Jim aside to the position of the tale recorder, and

made the midwife who attended *Ántonia* the tale teller. The Widow Steavens provides a woman's account of a woman's experience, and with it a significant change in tone towards *Ántonia*.³¹ Carefully, Cather shows how Jim has to encounter and weigh many different sources—the few references to *Ántonia* in his grandmother's letter, then Mrs. Steavens' account—in order to find out what has happened to *Ántonia*. Because Jim is silent with Mrs. Steavens, Cather suggests that silence is necessary (and desirable) in order to listen to and account for the other sources that might otherwise be flattened into a manuscript that holds only Jim's loosely recollected firsthand experiences. Though Jim claims not to “arrange or rearrange” (*MÁ* 6), Cather's re-arranges Jim's sources, to show that the writing of the manuscript is a product of both Jim's firsthand experiences and his silences.

But Mrs. Steavens is not the only person who fills in the blanks for Jim when he is not in Nebraska. Her words, and Jim's silence, prepare readers for an even more surprising shift when Jim returns to Black Hawk on his next visit, years later. Then, he learns more from *Ántonia* herself; to his final pages of “that thing about *Ántonia*” she adds “all the strong things of her heart” (*MÁ* 259). But what are these things, exactly? Her children? Her words? Sergeant recalls Cather's desire to represent *Ántonia* from as many perspectives as she could (from Jim's memories to Mrs. Steavens' account):

She [Cather] suddenly leaned over—and this is something I remembered clearly when *My Ántonia* came into my hands, at last, in 1918—and set an old Sicilian apothecary jar of mine, filled with orange-brown flowers of scented stock, in the middle of a bare, round, antique table. ‘I want my new heroine to be like this—

like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides.³²

Though Jim is interested in writing down “the thing about *Ántonia*” that he keeps in his mind, she surprises him by sharing another side with him: her collection of photographs. As he meets her children for the first time, *Ántonia* appears among them with her “big boxful” of a lifetime in photographs (*MÁ* 255). Much like Jim’s “bulging legal portfolio” (*MÁ* 6) containing his manuscript, *Ántonia*’s box is just as surprising to Jim as his portfolio was to the woman narrator at the beginning of the novel. These pictures surround *Ántonia* and become the sources for the stories she tells. Jim realizes that this gathering around a boxful of photographs is not the first time that his life has entered into the growing archive of family memories.³³ Cather asks us to see Jim’s composing process as a collaborative one with an unnamed female editor. But he has also had the experience of seeing his life, from many sides, through the contents of *Ántonia*’s box.

Although her box is likely an old one, since it evokes years of telling and retelling, it is housed in a relatively new room in the Cuzak home: the parlor.³⁴ Jim first hears of the parlor from the Cuzak boys; *Ántonia* does not introduce him to the room. Her son Ambrosch asks: “Has mother shown you the pictures you sent her from the old country?...We’ve had them framed and they’re hung up in the parlour. She was so glad to get them. I don’t believe I ever saw her so pleased about anything” (*MÁ* 253). Less than a decade before Cather published *My Ántonia*, writer and activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman had bemoaned the deadening, stifling effect of such parlors in her *Forerunner* essay “Parlour-Mindedness,” published in March 1910. She criticizes in particular the facades that adorn such a parlor: “Over the strong, ever-lasting life-processes, we spin

veil on veil; drape and smother them till they becoming sufficiently remote and symbolic for the parlor to recognize.”³⁵ *Ántonia*’s newly constructed parlor represents these stereotypes and limitations of life processes in order to transform them. *Ántonia*’s décor certainly lives up to the expectations that would be demanded of a good hostess. But her parlor is hardly about the stagnation and immobile conversation, which Gilman attacks.

Instead, *Ántonia*’s parlor provides, as her children realize, a location for enacting more meaningful and surprising life processes. The photographs seem to have the same temporary effect as Gilman’s veils; they smother Jim; he is uncharacteristically quiet as he takes in the stories told back to him—just as he was in listening to Mrs. Steavens. Some of the photographs he has even forgotten, since Jim’s photographed body seems remarkably distanced and awkward. The squirmy, childish Cuzak bodies—which “leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other” (*MÁ* 256)—are in sharp contrast with the stiffness that Jim seems surprised to see in the family photographs of him. *Ántonia*’s son Leo announces Jim’s presence among the family photos, giggling “at a tintype of two men, uncomfortably seated, with an awkward-looking boy in baggy clothes standing between them...” (*MÁ* 257). And Jim’s other picture, before leaving for college, is no better: that of “a tall youth in striped suspenders and a straw hat, trying to look easy and jaunty” (*MÁ* 257). While Jim gives no indication that these are the only two photographs of him, it is especially surprising that these uncomfortable ones are all he recalls. Not any pictures of him seated with his family or giving his graduation speech.

Christopher Nealon argues that Cather’s writing often creates such an “affect—a combination of self-assertion and hiding, of determination and embarrassment.”³⁶

Between these emotions, he argues, is where Cather “imagines the possibility of real American social bonds” (10). Indeed, a photographic relationship between self-assertion and hiding maps nicely onto the economies of life writing in *My Ántonia*: self-assertion as Jim’s manuscript being read, hiding as the parts that are overlooked or saved until the end, like Ántonia’s unnoticed collecting. While Jim’s written manuscript is different from the pictures that inspire Ántonia to tell stories about her childhood, this difference is indeed what bonds them together: Jim’s “thing about Ántonia” meets Ántonia’s “strong things” at the novel’s ending. While O’Brien emphasizes that “we are never given Ántonia’s story” (emphasis mine 17) in her recent overview of *My Ántonia* criticism, that story is certainly given to Jim, from Ántonia herself and her family.³⁷ Cather saves Ántonia the collector for the final few pages. Seeing her collection for the first time, is both Jim’s surprise and our own.

But Cather has more in mind for this photography collection than a nostalgic glance back, near the novel’s ending. Just as Jim looks at these photographs and hears his life in Ántonia’s voice (and her children’s voices), Cather’s readers have encountered a series of eight illustrations (line sketches) that Cather commissioned from W. T. Benda, interspersed throughout the novel. Jean Schwind’s exemplary essay connects these illustrations with both Ántonia’s photographs, and with the “pictorial imagery” appearing in the introduction. Schwind advocates moving “beyond Jim Burden’s narrative” in order to “examine the ‘quiet drama’ [the pictures] that Jim’s editor provides to ‘get a picture’ of Ántonia.”³⁸ Yet, these illustrations are hardly the ones readers might expect. Where is the picture writing on the sun of the Nebraska prairie? Or even Ántonia’s children looking at the photographs together? It is unclear, in Cather’s writing, in the publication

history of the novel, why *these* eight illustrations are chosen. Though Schwind focuses upon the content of *Ántonia's* photographs, she does not consider the reactions that they inspire among the Cuzak children. Schwind terms the illustrations and photographs “silent” in her essay’s title, which downplays the ongoing reactions to and retelling of the photographs, as *Ántonia* reveals them. While it is true that Jim is silent, the Cuzak children are quite enthusiastic and eager to voice the things they have learned from their mother and about themselves in the photographs. If we do consider their *reactions* important as the photographs themselves, there does seem to be a subtle relationship among the eight illustrations in the novel, if we consider the photographs and the subsequent stories they inspire from the Cuzak children and their mother.

Cather evokes each of Benda’s line illustrations in the family’s conversation as they look at the “strong things” that are the photographs in *Ántonia's* box. First, the Cuzak family gathering itself is, as Jim observes, “a physical harmony,” which describes perfectly the first illustration, in which the Shimerdas stand huddled at the train station. The children in *Ántonia's* family “are not afraid to touch each other” (*MÁ* 256). Of course, there is an illustration (the second one in the novel) of *Ántonia's* father working in the fields; his memory is undoubtedly alive to his grandchildren, since they recall someone who “built grandfather’s coffin” (*MÁ* 257). And the illustration of Jake, who guided Jim from Virginia to Nebraska, carrying the Christmas tree is linked to *Ántonia's* own regret that she was “saucy and impertinent” (*MÁ* 257) to Jake, as she looks at a picture of Jim, Otto and Jake. Jim also clarifies the appearance of Lena Lingard as “a trifle too plump” (*MÁ* 256) for *Ántonia*; there is an illustration of Lena alone in the fields, knitting, with one of her nipples pressing against her tight dress. The illustration of Jim

and *Ántonia* looking at the sunset does not show Jim's face, just as Jim is slow to recognize his own face in the pair of stiff, posed photographs that represent him in the collection (*MÁ* 257). And, the two contrasting illustrations of *Ántonia* (one working the fields, the other wrapped up in a winter coat) capture her changing attitude, as she shows the photographs to Jim. She expresses pride in how "steady" the other Bohemian girls have "turned out," yet she is simply "filled" when she remembers Jake and Otto (*MÁ* 256, 257).

Cather has translated Benda's line drawings, scattered about in the novel, into a two-page conversation about photographs near the novel's end. The contents of the line illustrations, then, represent the conversations that *Ántonia*'s photographs inspire among her family. Her ekphrastic writing emphasizes just how much artistic vocabulary—picture books, line drawings, photographs—makes the transitions in her characters' life narratives visible and grants texture to life narratives.³⁹ To see the relationships among the line drawings, we must attend to the life narratives that *Ántonia*'s children relate, when they look at the photographs. To understand Jim's incomplete "thing about *Ántonia*" (his manuscript), we have to acknowledge *Ántonia*'s collection of photography as an equally compelling life narrative.⁴⁰

Of those eight illustrations, however, there is one that seems missing from this family gathering. It is the scene that Jim imagines, as a young boy—of a girl collecting mushrooms in "some deep Bohemian forest" (*MÁ* 63). He imagines this story, after he tries mushrooms for the first time from the Shimerda family. Unlike the other illustrations, it is the only fiction that Jim himself has created; all the rest are based on events that have taken place during his life. But, if we turn to the walls of the parlor,

rather than the box of photographs, we remember that Bohemia is hardly missing, despite all of *Ántonia's* Nebraska memories. *Ántonia*, as her sons have informed Jim, decorates her new parlor with photographs that Jim has sent her, from his trip to Bohemia. Even in a room so filled with *Ántonia's* Nebraska teenaged years, she still makes room for the photographs of her Bohemian village—not when she knew it as a child, but when Jim first saw it, as a man. By featuring one line sketch without a Nebraska setting, the novel's illustrations resemble the exquisite cultural texture of *Ántonia's* photography collections, stored in a box *and* displayed along the walls. Surrounding the Cuzaks' parlor is a gallery that juxtaposes Jim the photographer with *Ántonia* the collector. Paging through *My Ántonia*, the relationship among the line drawings is clear only when we consider the reactions of the Cuzak children to *Ántonia's* photography collection.

Precisely because Jim's manuscript seems so deliberately unarranged, *My Ántonia* portrays a fascinating experiment in life writing, undertaken not by two, but by three characters. While it's easy to think that Cather is making some kind of commentary on the woman writer's version that does not get written, *Ántonia* tells her own life stories pictorially and consistently, while Jim's "thing about *Ántonia*" appears for the first time, much later. The space between manuscripts and photography, clarity and mystery, is where a biographer must work, according to Cather's understanding. And that perhaps is the most important contribution that Cather makes to both fiction and to life writing—to relate a biographer's journey *to* the telling. *My Ántonia* begins with the final act of writing a manuscript, but concludes with the initial act of Jim seeing pictures and hearing his life told by the Cuzak children. Jim has found himself in "the strong things of her heart" even more than he expected—in her own illustrated *My Jim* or *Burden's Boy*.

But the parlor is no static or unchanging place, with opportunities for stories to be safely rehearsed over and over again. When Cuzak, *Ántonia*'s husband, returns from town, he adds "a tintype of himself and Rudolph for *Ántonia*'s collection" (*MÁ* 263). Even though the children repeat the stories that Jim would likely remember, Cather's attention to Cuzak's tintype suggests that the collection will someday need more than one box. For Jim, the challenge seems to be choosing just one picture of *Ántonia* to write about—in short, adding his own tintype to that collection. He experiences her not as a single memory, but as possible relationships, when he tells her: "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to a man" (*MÁ* 237). Jim cannot pick just one *Ántonia* to frame his own manuscript, like a frontispiece for his scrapbook; she is instead a succession, a collection.⁴¹ Once Jim has seen this box of photographs, we realize that he has not succeeded in getting just one picture of *Ántonia* into his manuscript; he has always possessed too many:

Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. In my memory, there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: *Ántonia* kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; *Ántonia* in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; *Ántonia* coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line.
(*MÁ* 258)

These *Ántonias*, never a singular version (just like Jewett's many human documents), emphasize the many sources of Jim's manuscript more clearly.⁴² In his quest to create just one manuscript, he features many sources, but has not selected one to rely upon the

most. It is both the strength and the weakness of his manuscript. Cather's commentary upon Jim's silences when he learns from other sources suggests that she is interested far more in the relationship between the female editor and Antonia than we might expect. Jim's silences are places where others are necessary, where Antonia's "strong things" must inform "the thing about Antonia," which Cather carefully foregrounds.

While *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are not often read together, their endings have much in common with one another, since both Ántonia and Till become "surprise storytellers," passing along life narratives to children. Cather's final novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* returns to the Virginia of Cather's childhood, which *My Ántonia* only mentions at its beginning. Yet the interior surroundings bear striking similarities. At the ending of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, like the Cuzaks' home in *My Ántonia*, there is a parlor, along with Till's "pinewood chest with a sloping top" which preserves the past, holding Henry's books and shawl, along with Sapphira's accessories and her brooch.⁴³

Till's transformation from a silent, hard-working mother into a storyteller character is just as unexpected (if not more) as the appearance of a character named Willa in the final pages. As Sapphira's housekeeper, Till is silent for much of the novel; more often we hear her own thoughts or what others think about her. However, Cather likely does that for a reason; as Toni Morrison has so eloquently pointed out, Till's four words, directly following her daughter Nancy's flight from the sexual threat of the Colberts' nephew, breaks a silence that has lasted until that moment the novel—*now* this mother needs to know what has happened to her daughter.⁴⁴ "You ain't heard nothin'?" is the question that Till asks, breaking her novel-length silence to ask about Nancy (249).

Cather grants first Till's words and then her stories a high value; after all, it is common knowledge that Till can read (31).

But Cather hardly describes her as someone who tells, reads or writes stories before the final chapter. Till praises Nancy only by saying that she takes pride in her work (59). Perhaps this kind of pride seems off-putting because the value is on the work and not on the relationship between Till and Nancy. But understanding Till's silence as aloofness would be a misreading, since she becomes, just as *Ántonia* does, a surprising storyteller figure at the end of the novel. Even though Till unexpectedly tells the stories and collects the objects left behind by the Colbert family, her role is overshadowed by the quick, unexpected shift into the voice of a young girl, who tells the stories of her parents and comments upon the importance of Till's stories. Willa learns from Till "the old stories and saw Till's keepsakes and treasures" (291). Cather's unexpected "Willa" especially remembers that Till's storytelling is, like Jim and the unnamed narrator's goal, to get a picture of the life she has known, when she visits the Colberts' graves: "...[S]he [Till] was sure to remember something she had not happened to tell me before. Her stories about the Master and Mistress were never mere repetitions, but grew more and more into a *complete picture* of those two persons" (emphasis mine 292). In Till's voice, a complete picture does not come from repeating, but from adding (like Cuzak's tintype) and revising (like Till constantly telling more stories of the Colberts).

If the "thing about *Ántonia*" meets the "strong things of her heart," when her photography collection is revealed to both Jim and Cather's readers, the "thing" plays a similar role in the final chapter of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in the vague term "something" that distorts and blurs some of the details Willa voices. It specifies, but still

makes even more uncertain, the young girl's age—even though the chapter seems quite aware of the changes that have happened precisely twenty-five years hence. Willa's first words in the chapter are "I was something over five years old, and was kept in bed on that memorable day because I had a cold" (279). Willa's father is downstairs "tinkering at something," which suggests that her memory in this chapter is indeed aware of its limits, remembering some moments clearly, while others remain something unknown (280). And when Nancy and Till are reunited after twenty-five years, Willa realizes: "There was something Scriptural in that meeting, like the pictures in our old Bible" (283). Willa continues to observe Nancy's movements, behavior and concludes that all the descriptions she has received of Nancy are outdated and unable to match this new "something" that takes place when she returns.

Willa realizes that, in Nancy, "there was something so smooth and measured in her movements" (284), which reveals her admiration, but also suggests that Willa yearns for the more simple, seemingly complete pictures that Till has passed along to her, throughout her childhood. She wishes for the objects, because her observations as onlooker do not measure up to the ones that have shaped her earliest perceptions of Nancy's life narrative as an unchanging object she can keep in her memory. Willa's "somethings" suggest that she too will have to find words—or melodies—of her own to understand Nancy, the "lissome girl" (284) of her father's descriptions, and the selective stories that Till has told Willa again and again.

Echoing throughout the final pages of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is indeed something of a melody—the first lines to a song, "*Down by de cane-brake, close by de mill, / Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till.*" *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

features another Nancy Till, Till's daughter, owned earlier in the novel by title character Sapphira and Henry Colbert, her husband. But they are not the ones singing the song. Instead, Martin Colbert, their visiting nephew, sings it as he saunters towards the cherry tree where Nancy is sitting. He asks her if she knows the song and she wisely answers that she doesn't (even though it is likely she might have). When she introduces it, Cather terms it "the old darky song," which suggests its origins in the Southern communities surrounding Nancy Till (178).

This song captures the equally complicit racial and sexual boundaries of Nancy's early life at the Colberts', creating a vagueness much like the "something" that Willa cannot quite identify when Nancy returns. Nancy's birth father isn't known; he might be a portrait painter, another Colbert, or someone who isn't even mentioned in the novel (9). The song lyrics certainly reflect Nancy's mysterious origins as "a yaller gal" and her duties for Henry Colbert at the mill—which Lizzie certainly does not miss: "An' you makes his bed cumfa'ble for him? Ain't dat nice! I speck. Look out you don't do it once too many. Den it ain't so fine, when somethin' begins to show on you, Miss Yaller Face" (61). Lizzie's words spin out the sexual implications of "close by de mill" for Nancy's racial appearance and future. It's clear from Lizzie's attitude that Nancy is associated with this song and that being close to the mill means more than just making Henry Colbert's bed. The suspicions surrounding Nancy are blurry, like Nancy and Till dusting the Colbert family portraits from the traveling painter (42). But the blurriness of Nancy's birth is not as threatening as her work "close by de mill." In this verse, in Martin's voice, the unknowns in Nancy's lineage and job duties collide—signaling her sexual danger, as Martin appears among the cherry trees.

If this were the only mention of the song, readers might easily overlook it. Unlike the pages in *My Ántonia* that Cather dedicates to the Southern background of Blind d'Arnault and his skill at the piano—which Cather also terms the “Thing” (MÁ 141)—African American music appears to have something of a smaller, subdued role in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.⁴⁵ But the song also reappears in the final chapter of “Nancy’s Return.” This section features two chapters that are strikingly different from the novel’s first couple hundred pages. The penultimate chapter shifts to a “time passes” sort of chapter (like Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*), summing up a twenty-five-year gap in the novel. In the final chapter, when Nancy is finally reunited with her mother Till, Cather surprises her readers with a young girl’s first person voice—she isn’t named Willa Cather until the last two words.⁴⁶ Most importantly, the young girl remembers the song ““Down by de cane-brake, close by de mill, / Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till” and declares “I never doubted the song was made about our Nancy” (281).

Willa’s mother sings the same song to her daughter that Martin did to Nancy, but instead sings it as a lullaby (281). Naomi E. Morgenstern asks the unsettling question: “Does a mother’s lullaby become a seducer’s song, or is it the other way around?”⁴⁷ Morgenstern traces the song back to the point that Cather does—in “the old darky song”—but neither of them refer to it by its title (178). The remaining lyrics of the song, “Come, Love, Come,” appear in Charles C. Finger’s *Frontier Ballads* (1927) collection. I quote in full:

“Come, Love, Come”

Down in the cane brake, close to the mill,
Ther lives a yeller girl whose name is Nancy Till.
She knowed that I loved her, she knowed it long,
I’m gwine to serenade her and I’ll sing her this song.

*Chorus: Come, love, come, the boat lies low.
She lies high and dry on the Ohio,
Come, love, come won’t you come along with me,
I’ll take you down to Tennessee.*

Softly the casement ‘gins for to rise,
Stars am a shinin’, love, above us in the skies.
The moon is declinin’ behind the hill,
Reflectin’ its pale rays on you, my Nancy Till (chorus)

Farewell, my love, I must now away,
I’ve long to travel, love, before the break of day.
Next time I come, love, I hope you’ll go,
A-sailin’ with me, love upon the Ohio.⁴⁸

Finger locates “Come, Love, Come” in a tradition of “both real and imitation Negro songs,” (164) but features it in his collection “in no contracted fashion,” since it is “potent in an artistic way as making for the gaiety of nations” (165). Cather twice references only its first verse, so that it becomes a kind of chorus for the life of Nancy. Even though it is threatening to Nancy, when Martin sings it, young Willa finds in “Come, Love, Come” the fragments that she has relied upon to imagine Nancy.

The song becomes important not for the story it tells about Nancy Till, but rather for its incomplete repetitions of those first lines. Cather evokes Nancy’s life story as a beginning without an ending, without a chorus. Ben Gray Lumpkin discusses a condensed version of this song, in which Nancy Till becomes Nancy Hill, retitled “Down in the Valley”:

“Down in the Valley”

Down in the valley, close by the mill
There lives a yallah gal; her name is Nancy Hill
She knows that I love her, she knows it long,
Goin’ down to the river to sing her a song.

Come, Love, come! The boat lies low
It lies high and dry on the Ohio.
Come, Love, come! An’ go ‘long with me.
An’ I’ll take you down into Tennessee.⁴⁹
(Repeat)

Cather importantly condenses this song as well, when Willa recalls it, when she looks for the Nancy Till of the song in the Nancy Till arriving from Canada. The “gold-coloured” (284) “yaller girl” has become a “tall, gold-skinned woman” wearing “a long black coat and black turban” (282), speaking in “too precise” a fashion for the narrator (284). Nancy’s words are “rather cutting in their unfailing distinctness” (284). Young Willa fixates most on how Nancy voices “his-to-ry,” compared to “hist’ry,” as Rachel Blake and Willa’s father put it (284). Willa realizes that Nancy’s picture has changed, from the song she recalls: “ ‘Down by de cane-brake, close by de mill, Dar lived a yaller gal—’ That was the picture I had carried in my mind” (284). This time, Nancy’s name goes missing from the song (cut off by the dash), reflecting Willa’s inability to relate an imagined picture to the new one in front of her. While Cather may be suggesting that Nancy’s return at the end of the novel is, in fact, the symmetry and closure that the final verse to a childhood song would offer, the song—for young Willa—is twice begun, but never done. There is “something” missing for young Willa, in place of that girl, whom Willa had pictured so clearly from that song. Nancy Till’s song has been abbreviated, but her his-to-ry has been lengthened. Willa cannot fit Nancy’s life his-to-ry into the hist’ry of the stories in Willa’s childhood.

Even though there is something moving in these endings to *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather comments on the weaknesses of both novels. In a 1925 interview, she remarks: “If you gave me a thousand dollars for every structural flaw in *My Ántonia*, you’d make me very rich. I know they are there, and made them knowingly, but that was the way I could best get my squint at her.”⁵⁰ But she also admits: “The best thing I’ve done is *My Ántonia*. I feel I’ve made a contribution to American letters with that book.”⁵¹ Here is a Cather who was not fraught over the flaws of the novel, but instead confident in its contribution. And after the publication of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sergeant recalls that Cather thought “not long before she died, that she had, she felt, made an artistic error in bringing herself into the story. But I like her there myself. I like to see her being affected in childhood, as potential genius often is, by a mysterious visitant” (270-271).⁵² Cather must have had some self-awareness that she was doing something unexpected, by introducing jarring and innovative life-writing devices, of surprise storytellers, into novels which might otherwise be deemed regionalist accounts of life in Nebraska or Virginia.

Cather is willing to silence an unnamed narrator’s “I” after only two pages in *My Ántonia*, willing to interject an “I” after two hundred sixty pages in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Clearly, her interest in the dynamics of life-writing in fiction hardly diminishes as her career continues. In her ambivalence about both of these novels, she wonders—much like Jewett did—if a writer should feel self-conscious adding “another bit of autobiography” to fiction. In both Jewett’s words and Cather’s, there is hesitancy and careful reflection when life writing meets fiction. And yet, they both acknowledge their hesitancy within their regionalist writing, granting it a kind of meta-vision,

simultaneously aware of fictional conventions and eager to explore regionalism's potential to document the parameters and possibilities of life-writing: for Cather, in the (some)things she names at the end of each novel.

Paul and Mrs. Harris: A Study in Temperaments

My Ántonia and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* feature a “surprise storyteller” device that Cather relies upon at these two different points in her career. *Ántonia*'s “strong things” influence Jim's “thing about Ántonia,” just as the many “somethings,” which young Willa tries to express in both a song and her memories, underscore inconsistencies in experiences with surprise storytellers. When Ántonia reveals her photography collection, readers (and Jim) realize that she too has been shaping and naming the events of her life into a collection that is legible and fascinating to her children. When Till has more stories to tell than in a mere fifteen pages than she has voiced throughout the other two hundred fifty, Willa's role is equally a first person speaker and a first person listener who learns from Till's collection of stories and objects. These transformations suggest that life narratives are told in ways that surprise, but also in ways that conceal. Will Ántonia's children simply understand Jim as a character in their mother's stories? Will they understand that the Bohemia in the photographs lining the walls of the parlor is related to the tintypes they add to their mother's box? Does it matter that Till's “complete picture” of the Colberts omits Martin or that the young girl cannot comprehend Nancy's return without referring to a few verses of the song she was sung as a child? These life narratives do get told, by complicating the more “official” (and in these cases, masculine) versions—like Jim's manuscript. But Cather shows that even these storytelling interventions cannot smooth over the histories that are most

difficult to detail. She also features life narratives that are either inaccurate or not told at all in “Paul’s Case” and “Old Mrs. Harris”—showing that surprise storytellers cannot always bring things to a happy ending. While children, new generations, and the future of family stories are the focus in the endings of *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Paul and Mrs. Harris both die, which inspires Cather’s reflections upon the inaccuracies and silences that will certainly dominate the versions of their lives that will circulate and inform others: the things that express the ambiguities in ending life narratives.

To turn to “Paul’s Case” in an essay explicitly interested with Cather’s career-long interest in regionalism and life writing may seem unusual. After all, we hardly speak of Cather’s Pittsburgh, the way that we do Cather’s Nebraska. Like Jewett’s “A White Heron,” “Paul’s Case” is a most singular and popular story among Cather’s work—the one that she most often allowed to be anthologized. Just as “A White Heron” appears in biographical readings of Jewett’s childhood, “Paul’s Case” marks a key transition in Cather’s gradual move East—the years after she moved to Pittsburgh from Nebraska, but before she left her job teaching high school English (and her home with Isabelle McClung and her family) for a position at *McClure’s* in New York. As Loretta Wasserman has noted, the story “seems to lack her [Cather’s] stamp. In place of vast prairie horizons or silent cliff dwellings we have a ‘smoke palled city’—turn of the century Pittsburgh—and a boy who markedly lacks the vibrancy we expect in Cather’s central figures.”⁵³ Paul’s missing vibrancy reflects the overwhelming influence of his Cordelia Street home on his mind, always threatening to consume him into a lifetime of blandness. It would be as if Jim Burden continued to assess Nebraska, according to his

first impressions—“Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out” (*MÁ* 12)—and never learned to experience Nebraska as happiness: “to be dissolved into something complete and great” (*MÁ* 20). Both descriptions convey Jim’s sense of disappearance, but there is a big difference, even from one chapter to the next, between being blotted out and being dissolved. That is a shift that Paul never undergoes.

From the story’s first pages, Paul is a moody, misunderstood teenaged boy. Eventually, he leaves his home on Cordelia Street in Pittsburgh for New York, to escape his fear that “all the world had become Cordelia Street.”⁵⁴ But, he has stolen money and run away from home; desperately, he ends his life by jumping in front of a train. In this final sentence, Cather once again creates a relationship between things and pictures, as Paul dies: “Then, because the picture making mechanism was crushed, the disturbing visions flashed into black and Paul dropped back into the immense design of things” (189). However, his story is not just a psychological case study, an “unusual case,” (170) as his teachers agree; it is also developed through a continuous series of pictures, both artistic objects and metaphors, which break down into “things” by the story’s end.

Cather relies upon a series of backdrops as a more layered explanation for both the temperament and the case of Paul. Frequently, readings emphasize Paul’s attitude in “his shrug and his flippantly red carnation flower” (171). But, as Paul leaves his high school disciplinary hearing, his drawing master suggests a different view. Instead of seeing someone guilty of “various misdemeanors” (170), he remembers that Paul’s outward, conscious demeanor and attire (like the carnation) hide another personality. The drawing master recalls a Paul who “had gone to sleep at his drawing-board, and his master had noted with amazement what a white, blue-veined face it was; drawn and

wrinkled like an old man's about the eyes, the lips twitching even in his sleep" (172). Against the drawing-board, an aging Paul comes into relief. Paul's temperament is rarely fixed. In two of the most influential readings of the story, Paul's visibility to himself and to others is never a given; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes "Paul's glance is a jerkily unsteady one," while Judith Butler emphasizes how Paul's eyes are themselves "watched with such close scrutiny," in a story that becomes a "magnified searching that scours every corner of these eyes."⁵⁵ Cather's drawing-board changes Paul's appearance just as his earlier reaction at the blackboard, which shocks his English teacher, transforms Paul's temperament. Here, he attempted "a synopsis of a paragraph at the blackboard"; when his teacher "attempted to guide his hand" (170). Immediately, "Paul had started back with a shudder and thrust his hands violently behind him" (170-171). Rather than opposing these two pedagogical boards, Cather suggests that Paul's case can only be understood by paying close attention to a series of many backdrops, written or drawn, which consistently surround Paul throughout the story. Against these boards, Paul appears both as an exhausted old man and a jumpy boy. This technique parallels Jewett's writing in "Human Documents," in which these boards are the artistic backdrops out of which Paul's life emerges.

But Paul is no Aunt Georgiana of Cather's "The Wagner Matinée," who "burst into tears and sobbed pleadingly" at the end of a concert.⁵⁶ Paul's experiences in a gallery and a concert are not among the more intense emotional experiences of art Cather conveys elsewhere. His shudders towards Cordelia Street reveal more of his passionate detachment from a street than his desired attachment to the gallery or the concert does. When Paul goes home, he sneaks into his bedroom, also decorated with a backdrop of

pictures. But not those of the artists in the gallery. His is a room with heroic pictures of George Washington and John Calvin, complete with horrific yellow wall-paper—possibly the same brand that haunts Gilman’s unnamed narrator in her short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” For Gilman’s narrator, the wall-paper’s grimy hue “is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.”⁵⁷ Cather depicts Paul’s bedroom as a masculine, historical decor, in the eyes of Washington and Calvin, meets a feminine hysterical motif, coded in the yellow wall-paper. Unlike Gilman’s narrator, who eventually tears through the stifling wall-paper, Paul constructs and is constructed against the backdrops of changing pictures, like coordinates that Cather uses to complement his movement from Cordelia Street to Carnegie Hall, to the Waldorf.

Furthermore, next to those pictures, on the yellow wall-paper, is a “framed motto ‘Feed My Lambs,’ which had been worked in red worsted by his mother, whom Paul could not remember” (175). Beyond this room that Paul clearly has not decorated himself, and a brief reference to his mother, readers know very little about Paul’s family dynamic inside that house on Cordelia Street—only his father and sisters are mentioned. Pictures of Washington and Calvin, along with his mother’s motto, are the backdrops through which Cather selectively depicts Paul’s history.

Most days, Paul can find some reason not to be on Cordelia Street with his family. But then there is Sunday afternoon. He is relegated to the street, more specifically, to his “stoop” in front of the house (176). It is here that Cather most clearly illustrates what Paul believes will be his pre-determined backdrop and life narrative, by dwelling upon

his relationships to others on their respective stoops each Sunday afternoon. Stratified by age and by gender, the stoops present sameness and rigid roles—none of which Paul desires. He is no longer a child, permitted to run around in the streets, which are transformed into “the recreation grounds of a kindergarten” (177). Instead, he sits sullenly and silently on the stoops of the stairs, where he ponders not his past on Cordelia Street, but fears his future there. The life narratives told on these porches, which Paul listens to with both intrigue and disdain, never seem to go anywhere, as women are seated “in their rockers” (177).⁵⁸

Paul finally decides to exchange his Sundays on Cordelia Street for the plans he has “cut from the Sunday papers” (182). As he stands alone in the New York hotel, which meets his standards so perfectly, he is still dissatisfied. He has escaped the schoolroom punishments, his bedroom and stoop, only to realize that the picture of his own creation does not exist in that hotel room. He remembers in clear detail his “scrap book at home,” with its “pages of description about New York hotels” from those Sunday newspapers (182).

Ten-year-old Jim Burden joins Paul as a would-be scrapbooker. Jim doesn’t have a long history of making books or a strong reputation for making them, but the first harsh Nebraska winter forces him to improvise, in finding presents for his neighbors.⁵⁹ Cather also casts Jim’s problem in the precise language of things: replacing the already made “things” (picture books) he seeks from the blizzard-stricken town with the many “things” he decides to make (*MÁ* 64). Jim’s first book is not *about* *Ántonia* (like his manuscript titled *My Ántonia*), but is instead made specifically *for* her and her younger sister Yulka. His chosen things are layers of his grandmother’s cloth, calico with “scenes from a

circus,” “files of old family magazines,” “Sunday school cards and advertising cards,” and even a frontispiece (64-65).

In a novel so informed by intricate gender politics—of a woman editor’s possession of a man’s manuscript of his own story and another woman’s story—Cather tucks biographical complexities into the quiet two days young Jim spends making this life narrative, a picture book out of things. Ultimately, Jim’s efforts, like Paul’s, seem disappointing. There is no heartwarming image of *Ántonia* and Yulka happily receiving the book and learning new words together. Jim does not teach *Ántonia* English from the advertising cards or show Yulka the spectacle of the circus pictures.⁶⁰ Cather transforms Jim’s picture book into a meditation upon what it means to think as a biographer, in foregrounding the process of including and excluding *things*—simultaneously giving voice to and silencing other things in life narratives.

Like Jim’s picture book, Paul’s scrap book is assembled out of materials from home. Unlike Jim’s picture book, Paul’s scrap book is not detailed while it is being made. While Jim’s picture book evokes the past, Paul’s scrapbook takes place in a future he has imagined for himself.⁶¹ Paul notes, however, that his plan was considered “[n]ot once but a hundred times” and that he “had gone over every detail of it with Charley Edwards,” his friend from the theatre (182). Between “Paul’s Case” and *My Ántonia*, boys’ book-making projects transition from a hidden collection of plans, pictures and descriptions into a gift of pictures for young girls learning English. Cather’s attention to a private (though collaboratively created) scrapbook and then to a circulating picture book is a most important shift that she makes, in documenting the ways that they learn to piece books together, out of the materials in their homes.

Standing in his hotel room, where he remembers that scrap book, Paul turns to the most recent newspaper. Unfortunately, he no longer sees the New York images, routes and plans that he would cut out and add to his scrap book. Finding himself and not New York in the paper, Paul is dismayed to see:

the whole affair exploited in the Pittsburgh papers, exploited with a wealth of detail which indicated that local news of a sensational nature was a low ebb. The firm of Denny & Carson announced that the boy's father had refunded the full amount of the theft, and that they had no intention of prosecuting. The Cumberland minister had been interviewed, and expressed his hope of yet claiming the motherless lad, and Paul's Sabbath-school teacher declared that she would spare no effort to that end. The rumour had reached Pittsburgh that the boy had been seen in a New York hotel, and his father had gone East to find him and bring him home. (187)

Once he learns, from the Pittsburgh newspaper, that his father is en route to the city, Paul realizes that now "he would finish the thing splendidly" (187). But what truly horrifies Paul is that his life narrative has already been determined, written and circulated, with a lifetime of consequences to come: "It was to be worse than jail, even; the tepid waters of Cordelia Street were to close over him finally and forever" (187). Even as a "little boy," Paul has feared a *single* "thing in the corner," a "dark place into which he dared not look" (183). This is the "the thing not named" which haunts Paul. Cather amplifies this fear, as Paul's anxiety grows; he cannot turn away from that thing "always there—behind him, or before, or one either side" (183). Here, like ending of "some things" in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is where things begin to overwhelm Paul because he cannot make meaning

out of them at all: “His mind, unable to cope with the vital matters near at hand, worked feverishly and deftly at sorting and grouping these images” (189). Cather begins referring to the “thing” increasingly, as the story concludes—after Paul has seen the newspaper article about his New York entry, certainly not part of his plans. Paul knows that “[i]f he had to choose over again, he would do the same thing tomorrow” (187); he wants to just “finish the thing,” once “the thing was winding itself up” (188).

Rather than becoming the one beautiful “living thing,” which Cather strives for, the language becomes incoherent, with things saturating Paul’s thoughts.⁶² Only when Paul reflects upon “the sort of life he was meant to live” (188), does he consider “his mind a medley of irrelevant things” (188). These piles of things—which Paul cannot name—become the language through which Paul makes his decision to jump in front of the train, only to realize “the folly of his haste [which] occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone” (189). Once he reads the Pittsburgh newspapers, things are everywhere—and they give Cather a vocabulary for replacing Paul’s enjoyment of artistic backdrops with his growing desperation, when he can only imagine one backdrop in his future.

While “Paul’s Case” may seem to lack that Cather stamp of her later regional writing, it is clear that writing Cordelia Street as one among the many backdrops of Paul’s life prepares her to capture such “evasions and negations” (*MÁ* 164) that Jim experiences in Black Hawk. “Paul’s Case” features a series of backdrops, which dramatize the shifts in Paul’s temperament: when the “thing in the corner” becomes one among too many things by the end of the story. Overwhelmed by all things, Paul’s story ends, before he could find another place for himself not on the steps, but closer to the

gallery. In the case of Paul, both his life and temperament, as they are written in the newspaper, will never be like the descriptions he cuts out of it.

In his attempts to explain Paul's frustrating temperament in the beginning of the story, Paul's drawing master supplies some extra information about Paul's past: "I happen to know that he [Paul] was born in Colorado, only a few months before his mother died out there of a long illness. There is something wrong with that fellow."⁶³ In later editions, Cather omits this background completely.⁶⁴ Nowhere else in the story do readers get the sense that Paul is relatively new to Pittsburgh and trying to fit in or stand out; his impressions of Cordelia Street's monotony actually suggest that he's been there awhile. The space between the two sentences—the long illness of his mother, then Paul's strangeness—are not quite causally related, but instead juxtaposed, like pictures on a wall. Because Paul's mother died, there is something wrong with this fellow? Or because he's from Colorado, "out there," something is wrong with him? Cather leaves these questions unanswered. But they suggest that "Paul's Case," in its attempts to represent Paul's mother and his earlier, unwritten life in Colorado, shares more with Cather's novella "Old Mrs. Harris" than we might suspect. "Old Mrs. Harris" also takes place in Colorado—and is deeply interested in such frustrating relationships among generations, especially between mothers and daughters within the Templeton family.

At the end of that 1932 novella, Cather concludes that Mrs. Harris's life narrative will never be known after her death—not to her daughter Victoria, or her granddaughter Vickie. No scrapbooks, no photographs, perhaps only a brief obituary in a newspaper. In a story with Mrs. Harris' name in the title, this seems especially strange. Yet its final

paragraph leaves no ambiguity at all; Victoria and Vickie, especially, will want to know much more about her, but will not be able to:

Thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons' story; but Victoria and Vickie still had to go on, to follow the long road that leads through *things* unguessed at and unforeseen. When they are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember *things* they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers. They will regret that they heeded her so little; but they, too, will look into the eager unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves: 'I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted *things* so much. But now I know.'⁶⁵

If *Ántonia's* children had not listened eagerly to her stories, *Ántonia* and Mrs. Harris would have much in common. But Mrs. Harris's family continually overlooks and diminishes her role in their home, to the point that their memories will, once again, only involve vague references to *things* that they cannot quite remember, *things* they wanted instead (much like Paul's oft-repeated things, near the end of his life).

For all the distance and regret in the novella's ending, Edith Lewis admits that it "might well have been called *Family Portraits*" (6) in its resemblance to three generations of women in Cather's family.⁶⁶ But where are the family portraits to be found of Mrs. Harris? Unfortunately, her place within the household is relegated "between the kitchen and the dining-room," more a "passageway" than a bedroom (269). In this passageway, "[s]he left nothing lying about" (272). While Mrs. Harris is pleased to read aloud from *Tom Sawyer*, "the Bible or the continued story in the Chicago weekly paper" (268), she carefully conceals anything that might tell her own story. Cather

emphasizes the things that Mrs. Harris must conceal: “The little rented house was much too small for the family, and Mrs. Harris and her ‘things’ were almost required to be invisible” (272). Cather’s quotation marks around things signal that they are both more and less relevant to the family than they realize; they are the things that clearly belong to her, but they are things that no one else names or even sees enough to wonder about. Certainly, they are ordinary, daily things: a total of four calico dresses, aprons, and a cashmere dress (272). But Mrs. Harris relates the apron and her cashmere dress to memories of her daughter Victoria. The aprons are fresh and ready to use, since Victoria consistently replenishes the supply at church fairs; the cashmere dress is for special excursions, which usually end with Victoria upset (272-273). Mrs. Harris hides more than her clothing in the passageway; she also blocks any access that her family might have to these memories. Unfortunately, as Cather notes in the ending, they too do not wish to know what Mrs. Harris hides there, until she is no longer there to tell them.

In “Old Mrs. Harris,” “things” not named, hidden in a passageway, express what no one knows of Mrs. Harris’s life. In Cather’s portrait of a dying old woman, she writes about the consequences of no life writing, no life telling—and how a family cares too late about them both. Indeed, Cather’s late and most poignant representation of life writing is its absence. However isolated Mrs. Harris is in her household, Cather makes clear that she is still part of a relationship: “Indeed, she ceased to be an individual, an old woman with aching feet; she became part of a group, *became a relationship*” (emphasis mine 289-290). Mrs. Harris is always becoming a relationship, even when she does not want to. When her grandson Albert begins reading his “boy’s book” to her, she listens to his voice, but “did not follow the story” (311). Mrs. Harris, usually the reader, is now the

listener. She instead imagines a relationship between *Joe's Luck* and a passage from *Pilgrim's Progress* (311). When she listens to and reflects upon reading, she finds a way to compare and create relationships of her own, while she does not voice them to anyone else.

In "Katherine Mansfield," the concluding essay of *Not Under Forty*, Cather also considers family relationships as degrees of becoming: "One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life...In those simple relationships of loving husband and wife, affectionate sisters, children and grandmother, there are innumerable shades of sweetness and anguish which make up the pattern of our lives day by day."⁶⁷ Mrs. Harris's relationship tends closer to anguish; yet, in the pattern of Cather's career, the sweetness of relationships, generated in her attention to life writing, also appears. Cather's focus seems to have shifted drastically from the "thing" in the corner haunting Paul (and all the other things that surround him at the end of the story) into an even sweeter and anguished collection of things that Victoria and Vickie can only wish to find preserved in a scrapbook.⁶⁸

As If They Had a History

Cather's many named things in her regionalist fiction surround her most famous "thing not named," in her career-long project of conveying the limits and possibilities of representing gendered identities in these endings. When Jim rides a train to Nebraska for the first of many times, he is awestruck at Otto Fuchs's "lively and ferocious" masculine appearance, realizing that this man "might have stepped out of the pages of *Jesse James*"; Jim then stares at Otto Fuchs with even more fascination: "as if he had a history" (*MÁ*

11). Cather, I think, advocates approaching lives to be written as if they too had a history—one that is outside of books, waiting to be written into them.

In the endings of *My Ántonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and of “Paul’s Case” and “Old Mrs. Harris,” it is clear that Cather does not take lightly this continuity in her representations of life narratives being created. In all of them, Cather revises the role of framed life narratives in her fiction—often dissatisfied with her initial efforts. Critics have frequently commented upon Cather’s revisions to the introduction in *My Ántonia*, cutting much of the background information about Jim’s wife (Genevieve Whitney). In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the final postscript with “Willa” was added on after Cather had written the ending; yet, as Sergeant has noted, Cather was continually concerned that the novel’s ending revealed too much of her.⁶⁹ Paul’s mother is both absent and present from “Paul’s Case,” as Cather eventually removes references to her death in Colorado, but keeps the mother’s motto on Paul’s bedroom wall. And, of course, “Old Mrs. Harris,” as many have noted, is a revision of Cather’s matrilineal history itself. Cather’s revisions reveal both her anxiety and her fictional outlet for considering the relationships between excluding and including, silencing and voicing the details of a life narrative.

In her talk (and then essay) “The House of Willa Cather,” Eudora Welty presents herself, like Goldberg does, as a reader intensely influenced by the language of Catherian things: “Willa Cather would like our minds to receive what she is showing us not as its description—however beautiful—but as the *thing* described, the living *thing* itself” (emphasis mine).⁷⁰ Though she never quotes the phrase directly, Welty’s observation certainly seems to develop Cather’s “thing not named” as an approach to reading across Cather’s writing. For Welty, Cather’s inspiration is “the urgency to make out of

whatever was there *something*—a thing of her own” (149). Welty’s focus upon the thing, without naming it the “thing not named” from Cather’s essay, shows that the language of things is most useful for readers to articulate their experiences of reading Cather.

Decades later, in 1955, Annie (Sadilek) Pavelka—Cather’s friend and inspiration for *Ántonia*—was receiving mail from a high school student reading Cather. Pavelka addresses a brief letter to the student—which roughly corresponds with the opening section “The Shimerdas” in *My Ántonia*—detailing her life in Nebraska before her father’s suicide. “Most all is true that you read in the Book,” Pavelka concludes, “though [sic] most of the names are changed.”⁷¹ Cather’s Book (capital B), in Pavelka’s terms, is made out of a wide array of sources, names and things. Pavelka emphasizes the layered, constructed Book, which recalls the carefully-assembled picture books young Jim makes for *Ántonia*.

Because the “thing not named” is one among Cather’s many things, Cather’s 1922 page can inspire us to seek the history of the phrase across the “Book” of her career. The “thing not named,” as a flexible, constantly revised term, can provide continuity, rather than division, for grouping and reading trans-regionally Cather’s representations of life-writing—as manuscripts, newspaper articles, song lyrics and even in the lives that go unwritten. When the processes of seeking life narratives inform the plots of her regionalist fiction, Cather constantly revises and reinvigorates her written things until they too, like Mrs. Harris, become part of a relationship that attributes the constructions of masculinity and femininity to the pieces of life narratives that Cather’s characters assemble. Among the documents and pictures that Cather includes in her many books—scrapbooks and otherwise—she pictures things again and again, but never the same.

Throughout her career—early short stories featuring movements across America, novels of Midwest prairie heroines, and her later novels—Cather develops vague things into more specific representations of the voices and silences of life writing. Like the tintypes to be added to *Ántonia*'s collection, Cather's fiction features an ongoing, ever-growing collection of both visual vocabularies and things, revealing that “the thing not named” has many names and pages, many silences and lives.

When Blind d'Arnault, the traveling pianist in *My Ántonia*, arrives in Black Hawk, his concert is the “break in the dreary monotony” of March that Jim despises (*MÁ* 137). As Blind d'Arnault begins to play, Jim accounts for this piano player's upbringing, on a Virginia plantation. It is unclear where Jim has learned so much about him: perhaps from Mrs. Harling, who “had known d'Arnault for years” (*MÁ* 137), or from his earlier visits to Black Hawk. This pianist is known for first grasping that “Thing” of a piano for the first time as a child, “ran his finger tips along the slippery sides, embraced the carved legs, tried to get some conception of its shape and size, of the space it occupied in primeval night” (*MÁ* 141), before beginning his travels from town to town.

However, a visiting piano player does not simply show up for one performance; his presence is framed through the lengthy life narrative that Cather provides. Without telling us where—he's simply “here on tour from the city”—Welty's short story “Powerhouse” announces: “Powerhouse is playing!”⁷² Her piano-playing Powerhouse also thrives upon the excitement surrounding his visit, but suggests that this performative persona begins with his desire to tell a story: “ ‘Powerhouse and His Keyboard’— ‘Powerhouse and his Tasmanians’—think of the things he calls himself! There's no one

in the world like him. You can't tell what he is" (131). Only when Powerhouse stops playing does a waitress tell him that he and his band are in Alligator, Mississippi (136). Traveling pianists both add to and interrupt the lives in regionalism, since their travels, the lengths of their visits and their performances seem to disrupt calm with chaos, filling dance halls with an intensity that is not soon forgotten.

By mid-century, these visits are so familiar that they can be parodied, in order to further the genre of visiting musicians and their influences on smaller towns. Ann Petry's short stories continue these legacies, with an unnamed teenaged narrator who encounters Chink Johnson, a visiting piano player to the town's hotel, for the summer tourism season. While the narrator is more enthralled by Chink Johnson, the narrator's father (Samuel Layen) begins to parody the stereotypes of characters like Blind D'Arnault and Powerhouse, when he names the piano player with—what he sees as—an array of exchangeable, replaceable names, generic stage names for piano players: "Lightfoot Jones," "Shake Jones," "Barrelhouse Jones," "Duke," "Bubber," "Count," "Maharajah," and "King of Lions."⁷³ All of these terms add up to Layen's resistance to the "restless" attitude and behaviors that Chink Johnson's life narrative brings into the drugstore, which is also his allure for Petry's unnamed Wheeling narrator: "Rhythm in his feet. Rhythm in his blood. Rhythm in his feet. Rhythm in his blood. Beats out his life, beats out his lungs, beats out his liver, on a piano" ("MM" 21).

With material that could be taken from one of his publicity posters, Chink Johnson's possible background appears to the narrator in her father's voice, which unsettles her, but positions him among a number of piano players influencing the social and racial geographies of American regionalism. While Petry is better known for her

novel *The Street*, my next chapter discusses her short stories with that novel. They more closely feature her engagement with traditions of regionalism, especially in her Wheeling narrator, who is eagerly experimenting with possible media—crafting life narratives to circulate among her family and her surrounding community.

¹ Willa Cather, “The Novel Demeublé,” *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, [1922] 1936), 50. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

² Elizabeth Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 170. Future references will be cited parenthetically. Michael Peterman also pairs “The Novel Demeublé” with *My Ántonia*, when he teaches the novel; see Peterman, “Kindling the Imagination: The Inset Stories of *My Ántonia*,” *Approaches to Teaching Cather’s My Ántonia*, Ed. Susan J. Rosowski (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1989), 156.

³ O’Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1987), 3-8. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁴ Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1, xi.

⁵ Sharon O’Brien, *Willa Cather, The Emerging Voice*, 126; Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others*, ix, 1; and Jo Ann Middleton, *Willa Cather & Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 52. Future references to Middleton’s work will be cited parenthetically.

⁶ Cather, “A Mighty Craft,” *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*, Ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 417; first published in *Nebraska State Journal*, March 1, 1896.

⁷ Cather, “My First Novels—There Were Two,” *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1949), 77-78.

⁸ Cather, “Willa Cather Talks of Work,” Special Correspondence of the Philadelphia Record, New York, August 9, 1913, Rpt in *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*, Ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 447.

⁹ Janis P. Stout’s recent work has been particularly responsive to pictures, autobiography and the broader connections to other “things” in Cather’s canon. In “Between Candor and Concealment: Willa Cather and (Auto)Biography,” *Biography* 32.3 (Summer 2009), Stout focuses on Cather’s attempts to write autobiography (from writing her editor S. S. McClure’s autobiography to her own earlier reviews), yet she quickly traces a genealogy among Cather’s novels, demonstrating Cather’s ongoing (and increasing) interest in life writing. Stout begins with *The Song of the Lark*, moves from *My Ántonia* and “Old Mrs. Harris” into *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (477), showing that Cather certainly draws from her own experiences, regrets and perspective in order to write her fiction. In *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Austin and Cather* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), Stout argues for a more expansive understanding of Cather’s illustrations into the later twentieth century. Furthermore, her edited collection *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005) includes essays on quilt-making, magazines, and film, among other things—but not pictures. Because Cather’s material “things” are growing in critical importance, as evidenced in this collection, attention to her many pictures and photographs should further this interest.

¹⁰ O'Brien briefly mentions how Cather turns to the language of "things" in one of her early reviews, but suggests that this decision simply "anticipates the language she used in articulating her literary aesthetic in "The Novel D meubl " in "The Thing Not Named: Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9.4 (1984), 589. Here, "the thing not named" still receives more attention, as the fuller expression of Cather's approach.

¹¹ Cather, *Not Under Forty*, v.

¹² See Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) for more on Cather's "backward" turn towards history.

¹³ Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173.

¹⁴ Middleton has succinctly made this argument in her *Willa Cather & Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique*: "This study will not attempt to prove that Willa Cather should necessarily be numbered among those who consciously sought the designation 'modernist,' but rather will note those modernist affinities that elucidate her work..." (10). To name Cather both a modernist and a regionalist writer is no simple classification. See John Duvall's "Regionalism in American Modernism" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), which explains this complicated relationship: "If regionalist fiction between the 1890s and 1910s typically focused on matters of domesticity in rural localities, modernism was an international movement, encompassing the fine arts as well as literature" (242). But Duvall is optimistic about their overlap in the future: "...[W]hat we mean by the regional will be more fully a part of the modern, and our modernity will be unknowable apart from the various regions of identity represented by American literature" (259). Cather is also deemed a modernist in two lists of prominent women modernists. The first list is of "vital contributions to Anglo-American Modernism" in Marianne DeKoven's essay "Modernism and Gender" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 188. Second, Cather is also cited among women writers "who were integral to the development of modernism" in Katherine Mullin's "Modernisms and Feminisms" in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, Ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 148. Scott Herring also calls for reading both a "plurality of modernities" and "a multitude of regional modernisms" in his "Regional Modernism: A Reintroduction," *MFS* 55.1 (Spring 2009): 8.

¹⁵ In his *Mountain Interval* collection, Frost concludes his poem "The Oven Bird" with "The question that he frames in all but words is what to make of a diminished thing," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), 120. See William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* for his declaration "no ideas but in things," (New York: New Directions, 1992), 6. Wanda Corn includes a sharp discussion of Georgia O'Keeffe's statement in her same-titled *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). While 1922 is an important year for Cather's "thing not named," it is also a moment when she was beginning to think through how literary history is made, while writing a preface to Jewett's *Country*. The 2007 *Cather Studies* "Cather as Cultural Icon" special issue includes Janis P. Stout's essay "Willa Cather and Her Public in 1922," which considers Cather's "professional activities during a single year, 1922, as they relate to her involvement in the construction of her public reputation" (1-2). Stout classifies her reading as a "revisionary challenge," suggesting that there is still much to be considered in Cather's 1922 that may not be backwards, especially if we consider more closely *New Republic* readers—Stout terms them the "liberal intelligentsia"—first encountering "the thing not named" (7). See also Marilee Lindemann's important reading of "Cather's makeover of Jewett" in *Willa Cather Queering America* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999), 94. Lindemann aptly contextualizes the 1920s as a decade when Cather's awareness of her own role in literary history was rapidly changing.

¹⁶ “The Novel D meubl ,” *The New Republic: Spring Literary Supplement* (April 12, 1922): 5-6. Sergeant offers a similar perspective, when she discusses the contents of *Not Under Forty*: “Next in the volume was ‘The Novel D meubl ,’ her own declaration of faith as a novelist made in 1922 in *The New Republic*—hardly ‘backward’ in trend at the time, and indeed never ‘dated’ or abandoned as a faith” (259). Her understanding suggests both a current and lasting importance for Cather’s essay, rather than its divisive, and possibly dated, status in Cather criticism.

¹⁷ Joseph R. Urgo relates Middleton’s vacuoles of “the thing not named” to “Cather’s picture making,” along with “the consequent picture making performed routinely and unconsciously by the reader” in *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1995), 22-23.

¹⁸ Janet Giltrow and David Stouck, “Willa Cather and a Grammar for Things ‘Not Named,’” *Style* 26.1 (Spring 1992): 1. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

¹⁹ Helen M. Buss interweaves such biographical and gender issues in her article “Willa Cather: Reading the Writer through Biographies and Memoirs,” *Cather Studies* Vol. 4 (1999): 118-143. She focuses upon biographers’ and memoirs’ representations of two key moments in Cather’s life: Cather’s “concerted effort to dress like a boy” and “her brief but intense friendship with Louise Pound,” reading gender as “a lifelong process involving these two categories [biological sex or sexual orientation] plus many societal dictates and personal choices that make our gendering an evolving and ongoing process” (120).

²⁰ Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 18.

²¹ This trend intensifies throughout Cather’s career, as Deborah Carlin has noted: “The late novels [of Cather] are devalued not specifically because they are less masculine, but because they are about telling women’s stories,” *Cather, Canon and the Politics of Reading* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 17. Despite the explicit (and successful) process of life writing detailed throughout *My  ntonia*, many of Cather’s characters—in both her early and late writing—struggle, as they negotiate their life narratives, in many cases with disastrous and silenced results.

²² Cather was twice a collaborative biographer, in her first lengthy assignment at McClure’s with Georgine Milmine — *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science* (1907-1908), Willa Cather and Georgine Milmine, *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1909] 1993)—and with S. S. McClure in his *My Autobiography* (New York: Frederick Stokes Company, 1914). McClure credits Cather’s influence in his introductory note: “I am indebted to the cooperation of Miss Willa Sibert Cather for the very existence of this book” (v). When she first met Jewett, Cather was traveling throughout New England, revising what would become the four hundred plus pages of *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science*. While she strives to make clear the methods of collecting reliable opinions from neighbors in Eddy’s childhood, Cather also considers another perspective for her method: “a kind of autobiography in cryptogram; its form was determined by a temperament, and it retains all the convolutions of the curiously duplex personality about which it grew” (219). While this puzzling cryptogram describes the relationship between Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science, it shows Cather considering the more complicated demands of life writing.

²³ In Elaine Freedgood's "Introduction: Reading Things" in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meanings in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), things offer readers "critical cultural archives" for understanding fiction through both its subjects and objects (1). She argues that such "things often overwhelm us at least in part because we have learned to understand them as largely meaningless" (1). Particularly in American regionalism, the homes and "local color" would be akin to Freedgood's objects, while heroines like Antonia Shimerda or Alexandra Bergson tend to overshadow these things. Cather's ongoing interest in things suggests that they too have lives, along with her characters. Bill Brown, whose arguments Freedgood builds upon, has read "thing theory" in the regionalist context of Jewett's work in "Regional Artifacts (The Life of Things in the Work of Sarah Orne Jewett)," *American Literary History* 14.2 (Summer 2002): 195-226.

²⁴ Cather, *My Antonia* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 5. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

²⁵ Cather certainly was aware of the intricacies of this introduction. In fact, she cuts out the portion about the unnamed narrator attempting to begin her own manuscript (and details about Jim's wife Genevieve Whitney) in her 1926 revisions. It is especially compelling to consider that she was likely revising this introduction, editing Jewett's novel and publishing the first mention of "the thing not named" all in a decade.

²⁶ In her interviews, Cather was especially fond of such artistic metaphors to describe her writing process. In a July 1925 interview with Walter Tittle for the series "Glimpses of Interesting Americans" in *Century Magazine*, she details: "The American language works on my mind like light on a photographic plate, or on a pack of them, creeping in at the edges," *Willa Cather in Person*, Selected and Edited by L. Brent Bohle (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 85. And to Flora Merrill, Cather notes that "there is nothing but the portrait. Everything else is subordinate"; she also mentions that "memories are like the colors in paints, but you must arrange them, and it is a hard job to do a portrait in ink without getting too much description," *Willa Cather in Person*, 77.

²⁷ See Keith Wilhite's "Unsettled Worlds: Aesthetic Emplacement in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*," *Studies in the Novel* Vol. 42, Numbers 3 & 4 (Fall and Winter 2010): 269; and Jan Goggans's "Social (Re)visioning in the Fields of *My Antonia*" *Cather Studies* Vol. 5 cather.unl.edu, 1.

²⁸ See Richard H. Millington's "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller': Hostility to the Novel in *My Antonia*," *American Literature* 66.4 (December 1994): 689-717; and Evelyn I. Funda's "'The Breath Vibrating Behind It': Intimacy in the Storytelling of Antonia Shimerda," *Western American Literature* 29.3 (Fall 1994): 195-216.

²⁹ Peterman, *Approaches to Teaching Cather's My Antonia*, 156.

³⁰ Because Jim has so many Antonias to represent, even the most recent articles concerning *My Antonia* focus upon the relationships between Jim's voice and Antonia's, building from Blanche Gelfant's important insight—"Our persistent misreadings of Willa Cather's *My Antonia* rises from a belief that Jim Burden is a reliable narrator"—in "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*," *American Literature* 43.1 (March 1971): 60. See especially Karen Hoffman's "Identity Crossings and the Autobiographical Act in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*," *Arizona Quarterly* 58.4 (Winter 2002): 25-50 for a more recent reading of their relationship. I also appreciate Jessica R. Feldman's formation—"Cather asks us to take Jim and Antonia together, as metamorphic versions of each other, as layers in her palimpsestic creation of the dandy"—as another understanding of the relationship between Jim and Antonia in *Gender on the Divide: The Dandy in Modernist Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 173.

³¹ Susan J. Rosowski, "My Antonia: The Closing of The Circle," *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 75-91. Rpt in *Major Literary Characters: Antonia*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991), 159.

³² Elizabeth Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 139-140. Merrill Maguire Skaggs reminds us that Sergeant also considered Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady* to be the other heroine Cather evokes in her jar metaphor in *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 47-48. This jar metaphor does offer ways of reading both Marian and *Ántonia*, I think, since Cather introduces Marian “arranging old-fashioned blush roses in a glass bowl,” *A Lost Lady*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1923), 14.

³³ Paula Woolley shares my reading of Jim as a character in the Cuzak family stories, when she notes that *Ántonia* “has made him into a character in the stories she tells her children” in “Fire and Wit,” 152.

³⁴ As much as Jim appreciates the historical textures and careful decoration of *Ántonia*’s parlor, Lena Lingard’s parlor dims in comparison: “How well I remember the stiff little parlour where I used to wait for Lena: the hard horsehair furniture, bought at some auction sale, the long mirror, the fashion-plates on the wall. If I sat down even for a moment, I was sure to find threads and bits of coloured silk clinging to my clothes after I went away” (MÁ 208). The difference between the two parlors, and Cather’s emphasis that *Ántonia*’s is a new addition to the home, underscores the cultural implications of having a parlor at all during this time. For a thorough account of the “protracted debate about the character of that quintessentially Victorian domestic space of the parlor,” see Sally McMurry’s “City Parlor, Country Sitting Room: Rural Vernacular Design and the American Parlor, 1840-1900,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 20.4 (Winter 1985): 261.

³⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Parlor-Mindedness,” *The Forerunner* 1.5 (March 1910), Rpt in *The Forerunner: A Monthly Magazine: Volume 1* (McClean, VA: Indypublish.com), 241.

³⁶ Christopher Nealon, “Affect-Genealogy: Feeling and Affiliation in Willa Cather,” *American Literature* 69.1 (March 1997): 10.

³⁷ Sharon O’Brien, “Introduction,” *New Essays on My Ántonia*, ed. Sharon O’Brien (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17.

³⁸ Jean Schwind, “The Benda Illustrations to *My Ántonia*: Cather’s ‘Silent’ Supplement’ to Jim Burden’s Narrative,” *PMLA* 100.1 (Jan 1985): 53, 55.

³⁹ For a persuasive discussion of an ekphrastic tradition among women writers, see *In the Frame: Women’s Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, Ed. Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern and Willard Spiegelman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009). Joanne Feit Diehl especially emphasizes such a tradition among twentieth century poets like Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and Jorie Graham in her contribution to this volume: “Toward a Theory of Ekphrasis: The Female Tradition.” While this book is limited to women poets, Cather’s prose would certainly fit nicely in this tradition, especially in the complicated relationships of what Diehl calls “a paradigm in which the viewer is identified as male and the object of the gaze as female” (43).

⁴⁰ Consider especially how Ann Douglas describes *My Ántonia*: “a central portrait backed and adorned by smaller scenes illustrating various aspects of her trials, temptations, and virtues” in *Major Literary Characters: Ántonia*, 27. While Douglas compares this structure to that of a “saint’s life,” it’s important to note the centrality of the portrait metaphor to her thinking. The portrait, indeed, does not sit alone on the wall, but gains its support from the surrounding context.

⁴¹ Martha Banta's authoritative *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) and Bailey Van Hook's *Angels of American Art: Women and Art in American Society 1876-1914* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) remind readers just how frequently (and pervasively) pictures of women were circulating during this time. Banta's chapters "Literary Portraits and Types: Crises" and "Literary Portraits and Types: Possibilities" considers the vivid role of literary portraiture in the writings of Henry James, W. D. Howells, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, Stephen Crane, and Kate Chopin (287-338). Van Hook emphasizes that "revisionist art, cultural, and literary historians" are all invested in understanding the "international language of the female figure"—which persisted in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American art (5).

⁴² Jim's mention of woodcuts also evokes Alexandra's relationship with Carl in Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), when he returns in *O Pioneers!* (New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Book, 1992). Seeing Alexandra, Carl realizes, "I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own" (64). And he wants to return to the older "wood-engraving" technique, but cannot: "Wood-engraving is the only thing I care about, and that had gone out before I began. Everything's cheap metal work nowadays, touching up miserable photographs, forcing up poor drawings, and spoiling good ones. I'm absolutely sick of it all" (67). His distaste suggests that even the woodcuts of a primer may not last. Carl's understanding of art as re-working reinforces Jim's sense that there are many competing and complementary media for representing the same thing—or woman.

⁴³ Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 287, 291, 292. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁴⁴ Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) emphasizes Till's silence:

She [Cather] both acknowledges and banishes this wholly unanalyzed mother-daughter relationship by inserting a furtive exchange between Till and Rachel in chapter 10:

...Till asked in a low, cautious murmur: 'You ain't heard nothin,' Miss Rachel?'

'Not yet. When I do hear, I'll let you know. I saw her into good hands, Till. I don't doubt she's in Canada by this time, amongst English people.'

The passage seems to come out of nowhere because there has been nothing in a hundred pages or so to prepare us for such maternal concern. 'You ain't heard nothin'?' Till asks of Rachel. Just that—those four words—meaning: Is Nancy all right? Did she arrive safely? Is she alive? Is anybody after her? All of these questions lie in the one she does manage to ask. (21-22)

Morrison clearly acknowledges that Till's voice is rarely heard; her reading of Till's question, in its importance to the novel as a whole, certainly foreshadows how Till's voice will be the one to pass along stories to Willa.

⁴⁵ The song receives only a brief mention in Richard Giannone's *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 233. He argues that "The meaning of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* does not depend on music, but music does amplify Cather's theme in an important way" (233). This song, he argues, is simply classified among "matters of detail" (233). For a persuasive reading of Blind d'Arnault's role in *My Antonia*, see Elizabeth Ammons's "My Antonia and African American Art," *New Essays on My Antonia*, 57-84.

⁴⁶ While the “I” in the final chapter is never referred to as the “Willa Cather” in the postscript, I agree with critics who argue that Cather identified with her “I” narrator. In *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, O’Brien writes: “Then we realize that the child—who grew up to become the author Willa Cather—is indeed telling the story herself” (30). Lindemann notes that the novel’s final chapter “is abruptly taken over by a first-person narrator... who names herself in a postscript ‘Willa Cather’” in *Willa Cather Queering America*, 138. And Toni Morrison refers to “little Willa,” when she describes the novel’s ending as “a kind of memoir, the author’s recollection of herself as a child witnessing the return, the reconciliation, and an imposed ‘all rightness’ in untenable, outrageous circumstances” in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 27.

⁴⁷ Naomi E. Morgenstern, “‘Love is Homesickness’: Nostalgia and Lesbian Desire in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*,” *Novel* 29.2 (Winter 1996): 202.

⁴⁸ “Come, Love, Come,” *Frontier Ballads Heard and Gathered by Charles J. Finger, Woodcuts by Paul Honoré*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Page & Company, 1927), 165-166. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁴⁹ Ben Gray Lumpkin, “Colorado Folk Songs,” *Western Folklore* 19.2 (April 1960): 84. Future references will be cited parenthetically. Lumpkin argues that this is “an English love song” and has traveled “from Indiana to Kansas” (84).

⁵⁰ Flora Merrill, “A Short Story Course Can Only Delay, It Cannot Kill an Artist, Says Willa Cather,” Rpt in *Willa Cather In Person: Interviews, Speeches and Letters*, 79.

⁵¹ Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 203.

⁵² Sergeant’s observation convinces me that Cather realizes that “Willa Cather” can be understood as the “I” and eventually questions her decision to leave things so ambiguous at the end of the novel. A postscript alone might not inspire Cather’s unease. It is the continuity between the voice in the final chapter and the “Willa Cather” of the postscript that would be most troubling to her.

⁵³ Loretta Wasserman, “Is Cather’s Paul a Case?” *MFS* 36.1 (Spring 1990): 121-122.

⁵⁴ Cather, “Paul’s Case,” *Willa Cather: Collected Stories*, 188. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁵⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Willa Cather and Others,” *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 170; Judith Butler, “‘Dangerous Crossing’: Willa Cather’s Masculine Names,” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 164.

⁵⁶ Cather, “A Wagner Matinée,” *Willa Cather: Collected Stories*, 196.

⁵⁷ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Rpt in *Herland, The Yellow Wall-Paper and Selected Writings*, ed. Denise D. Knight (New York: Penguin, [1896] 1999), 168. Gilman also suggests that this wall-paper does “look as if a boys’ school had used it” (168), complicating the narrator’s feeling that she is treated like child in a nursery.

⁵⁸ Jennifer L. Fleissner pays particular attention to women “stuck” both in their rocking chairs and in the patterns of their own lives during this time (such as Carrie Meeber in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*) in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.

⁵⁹ Cather's inspiration for Jim's scrapbook certainly draws from those she made, as a child, particularly one "made of cloth with a blue cover in a circus design," featured in Bernice Slotte's *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir*, with the caption "Scrapbook described in *My Antonia*," (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 93. Yet, Cather's scrapbook is different from the one that Jim constructs. In her scrapbook, Cather collects pictures of two children holding an American flag, sketches of flowers, a young man writing a list at a table, and a basket of flowers. Among these more vibrant pictures is a single foreboding house. No people appear in the picture of a house; its colors are darker and more melancholy than the flower sketches. While Jim's scrapbook appears more haphazardly pulled together as a picture book for instructing Antonia and her younger sister Yulka, this page from Cather's scrapbook reminds readers that Jim's scrapbook draws selectively from the materials on hand at home. In both her scrapbook and Jim's, Cather suggests that books are composed from an array of pictures, fragments and words. In her early short story "The Diamond Mine," Cather compares one character to "a book in which she [Cressida] had written down more about herself than she could possibly remember—and it was information that she might need at any moment," *Willa Cather: Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 114. These scrapbooks, for both Burden and Cather, are both too full of information, but also draw our attention to their incomplete and fragmented appearance.

⁶⁰ Cather is particularly attentive to the gender politics of collecting, making and reading the things of this book—Jim may be making the picture book, but a woman and two girls are doing the collecting and reading. Jim seems to recognize his grandmother's role in collecting household things for the book, but does not fully detail her role. Though it is her idea to get the cloth, the foundation of the book, it is not clear how much the book might be more a collaborative effort than Jim can remember (or admit). He is particularly interested in his growing authority as maker of the picture book, remembering how he was "allowed to use" certain "popular paintings" in his picture book (64). Cather asks her readers to acknowledge Jim's authoritative role as a maker of things, at the expense of the quieter roles that Jim's grandmother (as collaborator of things) and Antonia & Yulka (as the book's intended readers) play. His picture book is not merely a pedagogical tool for the Shimerdas to learn English, but emphasizes Cather's interest in the gender politics of authorship and readership that Jim does not seem fully aware of.

⁶¹ While Paul and Jim are certainly very different boys, there is something of teenaged Jim's growing disorientation in Black Hawk present in Paul's propensity for wandering away from Cordelia Street. Surprisingly, some of the Cordelia Street boredom does play a role in Jim's perception of Nebraska—when there's not a plough in front of the setting sun. Cather makes Jim's perceptions sound a bit more like Paul's, when she emphasizes how Jim "used to prowls about, hunting for diversion. There lay the familiar streets, frozen with snow or liquid with mud" (*MÁ* 163). He moves from saloon to drugstore, to cigar factory to depot, but still isn't able to find "diversions" or "distractions" to suit him (*MÁ* 163-164). He begins to notice the houses lining the streets, the lives that take place inside. Like Paul, he notices their porches (without gatherings of people, though) and shudders at the "wasteful consuming process of life" (*MÁ* 164). "The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations" (*MÁ* 164) realizes Jim, in a voice that could be Paul's as he sits on the stoop of Cordelia Street.

⁶² Claude Summers has emphasized that "'the thing not named' is Paul's homosexuality, a presence made palpable not by direct statement but by numerous hints and a distinct emotional aura and verbal mood" in "'A Losing Game in the End' Aestheticism and Homosexuality in Cather's 'Paul's Case,'" *MFS* 36.1 (Spring 1990): 108. I agree with his reading about the many obvious hints *and* coded references to homosexuality in "Paul's Case," but I seek to relate the story's abundant explicit references to things to "the thing not named," as well.

⁶³ Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 245.

⁶⁴ In "Why Willa Cather Revised 'Paul's Case': The Work in Art and Those Sunday Afternoons," *American Literature* 59.4 (Dec. 1987): 592, David A. Carpenter emphasizes how Cather removed references to Paul's early childhood in Colorado and his mother's death, not long ago.

⁶⁵ Willa Cather, "Old Mrs. Harris," *Willa Cather: Collected Stories*, 313-314. Emphasis on "things" is mine. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁶⁶ Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record by Edith Lewis* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 6.

⁶⁷ Willa Cather, "Katherine Mansfield," *Not Under Forty*, 136-137.

⁶⁸ This perspective resonates especially well with Diane Middlebrook's recent reflections in "The Role of the Narrator in Literary Biography," *South Central Review* 23.3 (Fall 2006):

The narrator must make the story feel complete, and that means selecting the material to be included and—more difficult—selecting the material to be left out. A life is not coherent.

Coherence is a property of things *made*; it is not a property of things *experienced*. The narrator must come up with explanations that feel consistent with one another, and deliver a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. (14)

It is especially remarkable how much Middlebrook's reflections upon biographical "things" sound like the many struggles that critics have attributed to Jim as the fictionalized narrator of *My Ántonia*.

⁶⁹ In "Political Silence and Hist'ry in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. Ann Romines (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), Tomas Pollard reveals that the postscript was a "late addition to *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*," in Cather's revisions to her novel's proofs (48). He emphasizes a public Cather distanced from her narrator's "I," but a private Cather "who repeatedly stated in letters to her friends that the epilogue accurately represented her past" (48). We can only wonder, it seems, if contemporary readers would have simply assumed Cather's "I" to be Cather, without her postscript or her name.

⁷⁰ Eudora Welty, "The House of Willa Cather," *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Random House, 1978), 146. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁷¹ Annie Pavelka, "Pavelka Letter" (February 24, 1955), *My Ántonia: The Road Home*, ed. John J. Murphy (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 116.

⁷² Welty, "Powerhouse," *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York: Harcourt, 1994), 131.

⁷³ Ann Petry, "Miss Muriel," *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, [1971] 2008), 21.

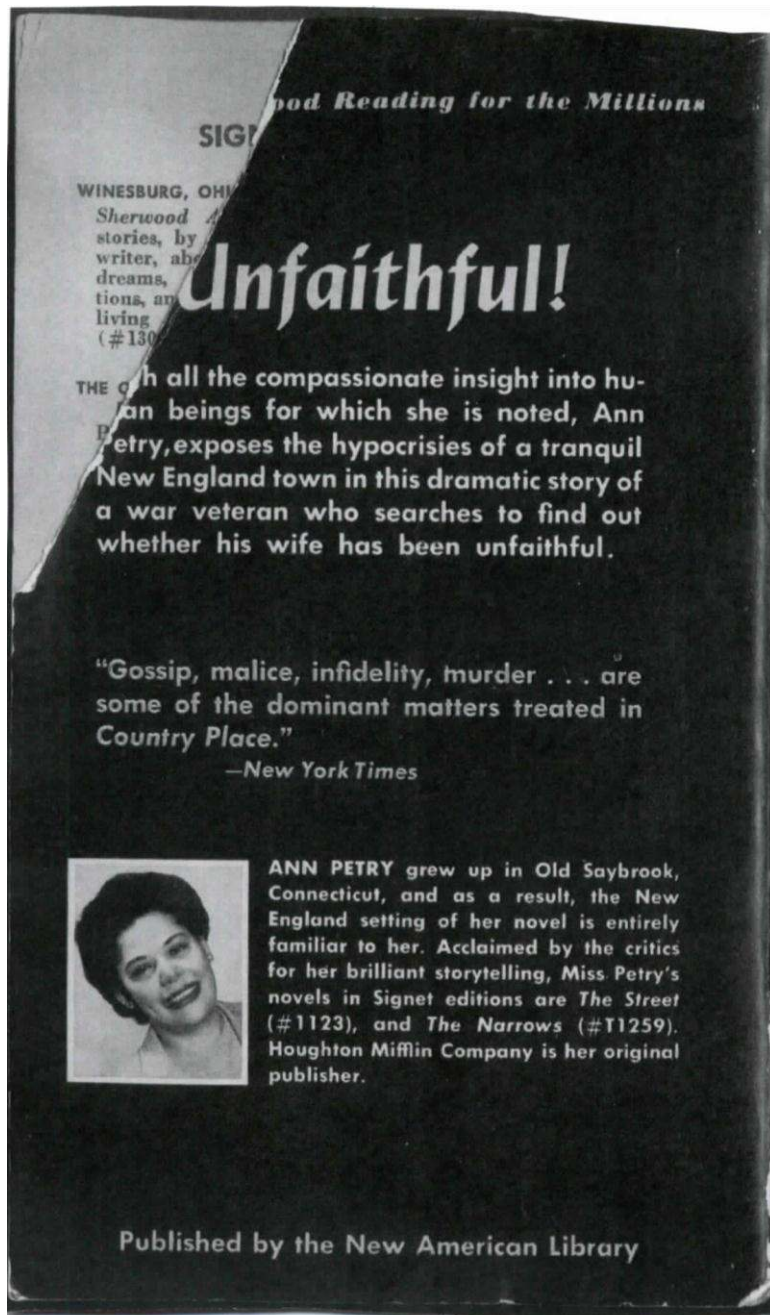


Figure 3: On the back cover of Ann Petry's *Country Place*, her New England background markets her fiction to a wider audience. Here, we do not see the tensions that Petry experiences throughout her life as an African American woman writer, with an authoritative perspective, but consistent outsider status. She would later define her New England identity through the language of picture-postcards: visual vocabularies that simultaneously reveal and conceal.

Chapter 3: In Place of Picture-Postcards:

“Some Measure of Privacy” in Ann Petry’s Wheeling

Along a Harlem street, among piles of littered paper, appears Ann Petry’s Lutie Johnson: soon after a 1940 *Native Son*, but a bit before an *Invisible Man* of the 1950s in American literary history. As the first bestseller by an African American woman, Petry’s 1946 novel *The Street* begins with a “barrage of paper” that Lutie faces along 116th Street, including “theater throwaways, announcements of dances and lodge meetings, the heavy waxed paper that loaves of bread had been wrapped in, the thinner waxed paper that had enclosed sandwiches, old envelopes, newspapers.”¹ Just as these documents go unread and discarded at the beginning of the novel, Lutie’s practices and memories of writing become more fragile and less a source of strength, when Lutie remembers the callous words of her teacher—“I don’t know why they have us bother to teach your people to write” (TS 435)—in the final question of the novel: “*What possible good has it done to teach people like me how to write?*” (TS 436)

Though Lutie’s agonizing question goes unanswered in *The Street*, Petry seeks its answer beginning in 1958 with another heroine, unnamed this time, in a decade-long exploration of this character’s childhood and family life in a fictionalized, predominantly white community of Wheeling, New York.² Petry collects these Wheeling stories in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (1971), featuring this narrator at ages forty-two, nine, twelve and fifteen.³ Working, writing and reading at her family’s drugstore counter in these stories, this narrator is in good company with a rich literary legacy of black women at work in stores—from Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Maya Angelou’s Marguerite in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.⁴ In the voices of a

woman at different ages, Petry positions the Wheeling narrator at the Layens' drugstore counter as a careful observer: equally aware of the Layen family rules on one side of the counter and the social, racial and economic pressures from drugstore customers on the other.

In "The New Mirror," published in 1965 in *The New Yorker*, this unnamed Wheeling narrator has a striking resemblance to Lutie Johnson, since they share a final posture of doodling. On her one-way train ride to Chicago, Lutie "began to trace a design on the window. It was a series of circles that flowed into each other" (TS 435), just as the unnamed Wheeling narrator observes her hand against the prescription order pad, standing at a drugstore counter: "I was doodling on the big white pad. The skin on my hand was so dark in contrast to the white pad that I stared, because that was the second time that day that I had taken a good look at the color of my skin against something stark white."⁵ These are ephemeral surfaces—window glass easily cleaned, a sheet easily torn away—but they are consistently racialized, as social boundaries both transparent and impenetrable. In *The Street*, Petry has sad conclusions for Lutie, limited by what Barbara Smith terms the "connections among racial, sexual and class oppression in the life of a particular Black woman," but Petry's Wheeling narrator seeks to negotiate these connections, as she encounters the coverage and distortions of her life.⁶ While critics have often compared Petry's later novels—*Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1953)—with *The Street*, especially in her portrayals of black womanhood, her Wheeling stories have not been credited with continuing Petry's interests in technologies of self-representation, from the loops in windows and doodles on notepads in *The Street* to an array of newspapers, radios and telephones in her Wheeling stories. Her Wheeling

stories have not been read with *The Street* in part because the stories were collected decades after her novel, but more likely for reasons of both class and region: a lower-class woman in Harlem is different from a middle-class teenager in Wheeling.

This chapter suggests that the parallels between these two reading characters have been long overlooked and that they can include Petry in early critical narratives of black feminism, emerging in the 1970s: precisely when the stories of this unnamed Wheeling narrator were first collected in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (1971). Petry's interest in stories of reading and writing does not end with Lutie Johnson on a train, but continues in Petry's Wheeling stories, in a narrator who reflects Petry's growing concerns for representations of privacy (and its transgressions) and her career-long engagement with regionalism's traditions.

Once Petry gains publicity from *The Street*, she starts to lose and, consequently, value even more her privacy. She recalls reflecting more carefully (and urgently) on the relationships between writing and privacy when she leaves Harlem in 1947, before publishing these Wheeling stories: "I began to feel as I though I were public property. I was beleaguered by all the hoopla, the interviews, the invitations to speak. I decided that as soon as my husband was discharged from the Army we would start looking for another place to live, a place where we would once again have some measure of privacy" ("AP" 266). Between writing the streets of Harlem and those of Wheeling, Petry measures publicity and privacy as a sliding scale, rather than a fixed line.⁷ As Petry experienced, mid-century America becomes increasingly concerned with representations of writers as public property, threatening to diminish her necessary measures of privacy.⁸ Distinguishing public and private spaces is then not only confusing, but also urgent, since

Petry “refigures the idea of ‘public’ politics to include the interrelated notions of privacy, intimacy, and domesticity,” which John Charles notes in his discussion of her fiction published in 1947.⁹ What Charles terms “racial privacy” intensifies in Petry’s writing even after 1947, particularly throughout her Wheeling stories, in transgressions and constructions of technologies that render private personalities into public words of both print and sound.

This chapter considers Petry’s investment in the publicity and privacy of life narratives at a particularly rich moment in Petry criticism, with the increased attention to her individual short stories, especially in *Ann Petry’s Short Fiction: Critical Essays*, and the publications of both a recent Petry biography *At Home Inside: A Daughter’s Tribute to Ann Petry* (2009) and a collection of Petry’s family letters and narrative in *Can Anything Beat White? A Black Family’s Letters* (2005).¹⁰ Petry’s daughter, Elisabeth Petry, has written and collected both of these and makes clear in the “Prelude” to *At Home Inside* that “My mother did not want this book to exist. While she lived she discouraged all biographers and shunned most interviews. She wanted readers to direct their attention to her writing, not to her life” (*AHI* 1). Though Petry may not be discussing her own privacy in her Wheeling stories, she does not hesitate to show how the privacies shaping the Wheeling narrator are far more fragile than this character believes. This narrator learns to imagine her family’s life narratives—whether in newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, or over a telephone call—as they could be read and mis-read by others. Petry undoubtedly imagines a Wheeling composed out of various media, since she even considered revising Wheeling “into an episode of a television series called *Drugstore*, modeled on the television shows *Taxi* and *Barney Miller*, which

used their sets as part of the plot” (*AHI* 103). While these processes of self-representation clearly extend outside the Layen household, Petry’s innovation is in revealing the tensions that emerge within a family, as it attempts to configure a daily life around seeking some measure of privacy from the drugstore’s customers and Wheeling residents.

That measure, I argue, foregrounds the importance of Petry’s Wheeling narrator in her oeuvre more than ever; this narrator furthers Petry’s interest in reading and writing throughout *The Street* and sustains Petry’s interest over a decade, representing not just an extended bildungsroman, but more collage-like visual vocabularies for portraying African American women who negotiate and measure the boundaries of privacy and publicity by reading assorted materials and relying upon various technologies to do so. This chapter first shows how the Wheeling narrator continues Petry’s portrayal of Lutie Johnson as a reader and writer and then shifts to the “picture-postcard” vision of regionalism that Petry seeks to disrupt, with her Wheeling narrator skilled at creating coverage of her life through technologies of self-representation. With this narrator who reads and writes her life as something to be revealed and concealed, she epitomizes the emerging strands of black feminist criticism focusing upon the lives of black women: shifting our focus from Petry’s fiction in the early twentieth century among writers to the unnamed narrator who embodies the most prominent concerns of black feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s. As the Wheeling narrator doodles on a notepad, she concludes Petry’s Wheeling stories and evidences Petry’s ongoing engagement with regionalist traditions of women writers, as a practice that Petry turns to, in order to cover and uncover the lives of black women.

Regionalism's Bits and Bundles: From the Streets of Harlem and Lyme to Wheeling

In her 1988 autobiographical essay, Petry traces her literary legacy to other nineteenth-century women writers, mentioning first Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig*. She begins the essay: "Having been born black and female, I regard myself as a survivor and a gambler writing in a tradition that dates back to 1859 when *Our Nig*, the first novel written by a black woman in this country, was published in Boston, Massachusetts" ("AP" 253). As a woman writer, she expresses her writing (and her living) as one part surviving and the other part gambling: surviving by considering her heritage among women writers like Harriet Wilson and gambling by adding the experiences of Lutie and her Wheeling narrator to literary regionalism, though she consistently finds herself racially excluded as a New Englander. In *Little Women*, she is captivated by "Jo March, the tomboy, the misfit, the impatient quick-tempered would-be writer. I felt as though she were part of me and I was part of her despite the fact that she was white and I was black" ("AP" 254).¹¹ These traditions add up to feelings of belonging and bewilderment towards a regional identity that she never quite identifies as her own.

Yet Petry surprises readers with one more nineteenth-century novel, by a writer whose inclusion in a New England regional tradition has never been questioned. "I have always felt that I had a special understanding of Mrs. Susan Fosdick in a book called *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," she writes in the same autobiographical essay, remembering Jewett's novel, "When she heard a story about a minister who suddenly stood up in a small sailboat and nearly capsized it, she said, 'I do think they ought not to settle any more of them landlocked folks in parishes where they're liable to be on the

water.”¹² Of all the characters Petry might remember from Jewett’s *Country*, why such a “special understanding” of Mrs. Fosdick, Mrs. Todd’s visitor? Without the intrigue of Joanna, the tourist’s naïvete of *Country*’s unnamed narrator, or the personae of Mrs. Todd—“landlady, herb gatherer...rustic philosopher...mariner”—Mrs. Fosdick travels with “royal progress,” as the narrator terms it, throughout the surrounding shores “laden with bags and bundles” (*Country* 57). Though the *Country* narrator seems skeptical of Mrs. Fosdick—“a serious-looking little bit of an old woman”—as she terms her, she is equally (if not more) intrigued by Mrs. Fosdick’s “unexpected bits of modern knowledge” (*Country* 58-59), in one of only three moments where the term “modern” appears in *Country*.¹³ Mrs. Fosdick, for the narrator, is a sum of collected bits: she returns to Dunnet Landing carrying a bit of an insider’s expertise and an outsider’s perspective; she does not travel lightly, carrying along her life in bags and bundles. Both Lutie Johnson and the Wheeling narrator resemble the storyteller characters in regionalist fiction like Jewett’s and Cather’s, since they collect bits of materials in order to recollect their lives, materials featured prominently in Petry’s fiction—stacks of scraps, layers of litter.

Despite her limited, though memorably meandering, visit in only three chapters of *Country*, Mrs. Susan Fosdick is someone Petry “always” remembers, evidencing the unexpected influences of prominent regionalist writers on later twentieth-century writers like Petry. With a mother who collected autographs from Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Clemens family (meeting both families in Hartford) and an aunt who took sociology with W. E. B. Du Bois at Atlanta University, Petry has a wide array of family life narratives and literary influences informing her upbringing in a predominantly white New England

town, placing her both inside and outside literary traditions of regionalism (*Anything* 23-24, 157).

Though Petry's own New England identity and childhood provided a crucial selling point for marketing her second novel, *Country Place*, she consistently complicated her relationship to New England—and thus her classification as a regionalist writer. The back cover of a 1957 Signet edition of *Country Place* (see Figure 3) reads “Ann Petry grew up in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and as a result, the New England setting of her novel is entirely familiar to her.”¹⁴ While Petry details such familiar belonging that comes with being born in New England, she later tempers it with the restrictions and isolation that she has felt while living there. In sharp contrast to the *Country Place* blurb, she acknowledges in an interview that “I am a birthright New Englander, specifically a Connecticut Yankee. But of course I am not. I am by birth an outsider, a maverick. I am not a member of the club. I am not part of the establishment. I have a tenuous, unsubstantial connection with New England” (“AP” 254). Because Petry readily states the difference between being born in and belonging to a place, her fiction relies less upon the nineteenth-century model of regionalism associated with empathy among residents of the same community—in the way that Jewett conveys Maine—and more upon what can break down what appear to be strong relationships among friends and family.¹⁵ The term “tenuous” shifts Petry's regionalism away from celebratory and nostalgic representations of New England and towards a more critical vision, foregrounding the changing racial, gendered and class-based representations of women's lives in the early twentieth century.

Since *The Street* takes place mainly in Harlem, Petry's thoughtful attention to a lesser-known figure in American literary regionalism, Mrs. Fosdick, might seem surprising. Critical attention to Petry's engagement with legacies of literary regionalism focuses upon her third novel, *The Narrows*. "To overlook the ways in which *The Narrows* is shaped by Petry's New England heritage is to miss part of its complexity," argues Sybil Weir, in an essay detailing the novel within many New England traditions.¹⁶ And Jennifer Fleissner's more recent mention in the final pages of *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* suggests there still remains more to be considered: "*The Narrows*, often overshadowed in the critical literature by *The Street*, is particularly fascinating for enabling the same linkages between naturalism and nineteenth-century New England writing that we have seen in a writer like Mary Wilkins Freeman."¹⁷ With a New England approach, Weir and Fleissner can emphasize *The Narrows* instead of Petry's more canonical *The Street*, but Petry's lesser-known Wheeling stories feature a more sustained engagement with her fictionalized early twentieth-century town, continuing such traditions of Jewett's Dunnet Landing and Cather's Black Hawk, along with Hurston's Eatonville, Florida.

Petry complicates her Wheeling setting, distinguishing it from the easily-identifiable settings of Jewett's Maine or Cather's Nebraska, since it is located not in Connecticut (and is not the Wheeling in West Virginia), but instead near Buffalo, New York. This makes Petry a New England writer who features a Mid-Atlantic setting that she admittedly bases on her coastal Connecticut hometown.¹⁸ Petry tends to defamiliarize Wheeling more than granting it a stable picture throughout her stories. Its first mention in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" positions it simply as a starting

point, since the narrator immediately leaves her Wheeling home for another town. The rest of the story she recalls from a childhood memory, in a private phone call overheard by the narrator. The further she gets from Wheeling, as she drives along “forty-five miles of winding road—all hills and sharp curves,” the closer she gets to Wheeling’s past tense, in her memories growing up there.¹⁹ In “Miss Muriel,” Wheeling is a summer destination, participating in the touristic economies popular in nineteenth-century regionalism, since the narrator declares: “It is summer now and the Wheeling Inn is open for the season. The great houses along the waterfront are occupied by their rich owners. We are all very busy.”²⁰ In these stories, Petry twice introduces Wheeling through the residents and visitors who move between Wheeling and somewhere else, from the South, Buffalo, and other neighboring towns.

However, Petry’s Wheeling is still far less familiar in American literary history than her unforgettable vision of Harlem in the first pages of *The Street*, where Petry offers a regionalist vision more threatening than stable. Winds do not blow simply along it; they blow “through” it. They wage a “violent assault” upon “a few hurried pedestrians,” who have to cover themselves from the winds, “bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface” (*TS* 1). Against the assaults of paper, prejudice and poverty, these pedestrians cover themselves in surfaces, both physical and social; they are also Petry’s audience: she acknowledges writing for these “walking wounded” adults, for those who bend double, even triple and beyond, on a daily basis (“AP” 253). On this street, written words are “swirled” (*TS* 2) and cast aside: legible only as paper, illegible as words. To Harlem, Petry ascribes this movement of constantly and quickly

accumulating piles of writing, anticipating the malleability she portrays in the technologies of self-representation elsewhere in *The Street* and in her Wheeling stories.

But 116th Street is not the only street that assaults, labels and covers Lutie's reading practices, since Petry interrupts the unforgettable street of her first chapter with Lutie's time working on another, quieter Connecticut street in Lyme in her second chapter, which influences how Lutie understands her gendered, racialized and classed identities as an African American domestic worker.²¹ Petry pairs these Harlem and Connecticut streets through the movements of paper: she first introduces us to a street where paper swirls haphazardly, then to a cleaner Connecticut street which leads to the Chandlers, a family involved in paper manufacturing. Indeed, Lindon Barrett notes the economic dependence of these streets upon one another: "The marked similarity between Lutie's arrival in Connecticut and her arrival several years later on 116th Street in Harlem shows the indiscretion of the system in which the protagonist is held and which she comes eventually to understand."²² Petry's interest in such comparative regionalism appears first as this interplay between Harlem and Connecticut streets in *The Street*, since she is more invested in representing how Lutie reads paper between regions, rather than dwelling only in one.

While Petry is most concerned with showing the public *effects* of a street where words, letters and address labels do not hold still in *The Street*, her Wheeling stories detail the more private *causes* of such uncertainty in her focus on the technologies of self-representation that also enable such words to be circulated, beginning with—but not limited to—paper documents. Instead of scrutinizing address labels, Petry's Wheeling narrator encounters possible strategies for representing life narratives, in newspapers and

on the radio and telephone. Each time she samples these technologies, the unnamed narrator—an avid reader and writer—considers different definitions of privacy, for herself and for her family, even more carefully than Lutie does.

This chapter locates Petry's Wheeling narrator among traditions of American literary regionalism so influenced by storyteller characters—like Jewett's Mrs. Tilley and Mrs. Todd, along with Cather's Till and *Antonia*. This narrator differs from them, since she does more reading than any of them: in regionalist fiction, such representations of reading are surprisingly rare. In *Writing Out of Place*, Fetterley and Pryse explain how regionalist writers often favor spoken, instead of written, words:

in a body of literature that emphasizes reading, there are very few scenes of actual reading; in contrast to the novels women wrote during this period, many of which compulsively iterate the scene of women reading, in regionalist fiction women occasionally get a letter but they rarely, if ever, read printed matter of any kind. Instead, regionalist fiction presents scenes of talking and listening—dialogue, storytelling, rehearsal of stories already told.²³

In Wheeling, Petry surrounds a narrator known for reading in the drugstore with a rich oral tradition of family storytelling. Since Petry is writing decades after Jewett and Cather, she relates reading books to other popular technologies for self-representation, including newspapers, radios and telephones. For Fetterley and Pryse, reading in regionalism is private and rarely portrayed, while talking and listening are public and frequently portrayed; for Petry, privacy and publicity mutually inform her representations of reading. By uncovering characters in the process of reading—one another, books,

frequently both—Petry reworks a tradition of women’s regionalism to emphasize the pressures of both publicity and privacy in assembling the materials of her life.

Reading and Writing in “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” and “Miss Muriel”

Though Lutie’s question “What possible good has it done to teach people like me to write?” marks an ending—rather than a beginning of her life in Chicago, once the train ride ends, or a lengthier flashback to Lutie as a child—Petry places a narrator who is learning both to write and read life narratives at the center of her Wheeling stories.

While many critics have focused upon the lengthier “Miss Muriel” and “The New Mirror,” which feature this narrator as a teenager, Petry published “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” before either of them, prefacing the kinds of reading that the narrator will experience, when she learns that her skills at reading books can also inform her experiences with other technologies of self-representation, featured in “Miss Muriel” and “The New Mirror.”

The chronology of these stories shows the narrator at various ages in stories that are not reliant on or referential to one another. In *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, these are the first three stories of the collection, which feature the narrator at twelve in “Miss Muriel, at fifteen in “The New Mirror,” and as a forty-two-year-old woman reflecting on a telephone conversation she overhears at age nine in “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” Although Hilary Holladay is one of the only critics to trace the Wheeling narrator throughout Petry’s stories, she organizes her reading according to the order of the collection, which follows the age of the narrator, rather than the publication dates.²⁴ By reading the stories in the order that Petry publishes them, with “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” first, rather than last, Petry’s unnamed narrator zigzags throughout her

Wheeling childhood, in stories linked not simply by chronology, but through her voracious reading practices. Both of the longer stories “Miss Muriel” and “The New Mirror” include variations on the image of a nine-year-old girl reading a book, which is how Petry introduces this narrator in “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?”

When Petry moves back to Old Saybrook and her writing moves to Wheeling, her unnamed Wheeling narrator makes her first appearance in the October 25, 1958 *New Yorker*, in “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” Since this narrator is an adult remembering her childhood, unlike Petry’s other New England heroines, this shift in age reflects Petry’s emerging interest in writing for children during this time, turning to a character the same age as Jewett’s “nine years old and growing” heroine Sylvia in “A White Heron.” Written for children, Petry’s two historical novels *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* and *Tituba of Salem* appear after she shifts from writing about adults in her realistic novels to writing about a single character at various ages in her Wheeling stories.²⁵ For this narrator, Petry offers what she only begins to for Lutie Johnson: an array of experiences with reading as a social and historical practice, influencing this narrator’s creation and control over life narratives. Reading becomes the device through which this narrator marks her access to and distance from the technologies of self-representation that she encounters as a child.

When she searches for apartments, Lutie pauses to read the paper mailbox labels. In them, she reads the always changing tenants and ambiguously labeled last names—a snapshot of its current geography and still-visible history, which Lutie studies before she decides to rent there. “Most of the names were inked in over the mailboxes in scrawling handwriting—the letters were big and bold on some of them,” she notices, realizing also

how: “Others were written in pencil; some printed in uneven scraggling letters where names had been scratched out and other names substituted” (*TS* 7). She knows that reading the most recent ones will only render her a limited picture of the building. Instead, she understands the undisciplined, imprecise handwriting that conveys the histories of each apartment—some overlapping, some intending to cover the other. While Michele Crescenzo points to the importance of print culture and reading practices to Lutie’s self-comparisons with Benjamin Franklin, she considers Lutie “a naïve and accepting reader,” which does not account for Lutie’s reading of these apartment mailbox labels, one of the few instances when Lutie is actually reading, not remembering something she has read earlier in a book or heard from someone else.²⁶ It takes a careful reader to discern the layers of writing on the public mailbox labels, in all the scraggling, scratching, and substituting that together convey a historiography of the building with and without Lutie—though she clearly is aware that she would be among the many Johnsons of the building (*TS* 7). Her name on the mailbox will both denote her sameness and relation to others in the building and will be just another name to be covered by the next tenant. Lutie reads across individual address labels and among their layers, revealing the social backgrounds of reading that most concern Petry. After establishing Lutie’s skill at reading social situations, Petry returns to this motif in her Wheeling stories to show how reading provides access and limitations for women writers.

As a woman in her forties in “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean,” the Wheeling narrator is no less immersed in books than she was as a child and teenager. Indeed, the first sentence details a conflict between reading a book and answering the telephone: “One afternoon last winter, when the telephone rang in my house in Wheeling, New

York, I started not to answer it; it was snowing, I was reading a book I had been waiting for weeks to get hold of, and I did not want to be disturbed” (“Anybody” 89). Conscious that continuing reading also means not answering, this narrator chooses between an awaiting book and a ringing telephone with relative ease. But the telephone soon appears “more insistent than usual,” so she finally puts the book down to answer (“Anybody” 89). In her childhood, her reading posture diverts adults from noticing her, a practice that actually offers her more access to the adults’ concerns:

I was always being shooed out [of the drugstore] until I discovered that if I sat motionless on the bench, with a book held open in front of me, and did not glance up, everyone forgot about me. Occasionally, someone would stop right in the middle of a hair-raising story, and then my father would say, ‘Oh she’s got her nose in a book. She’s just like she’s deaf when she’s got her nose in a book. You can say anything you want to and she won’t hear a word.’ It was like having a permanent season ticket in a theater where there was a continuous performance and the same play was never given twice. (“Anybody” 93)

Her books cover her presence, offering her privacy, in order to understand that her parents are also granting themselves privacy when she is—to them—not paying any attention. Books and telephones act as complementary technologies for the narrator, since she gets to overhear adults’ conversations behind a book cover, while the telephone reminds her that there are stories that concern her family outside her book.

The most important telephone conversation she overhears while reading provides the narrator with information about Sarah Forbes, her mother’s childhood friend, when these adults are discussing the suicide of Sarah’s husband, Forbes. This information is

but the beginning of a family life narrative to be circulated long after Mrs. Layen hangs up the phone. Petry's narrator remembers that "I overheard my mother's side of the conversation [with Sarah Forbes]. I can still repeat what she said, word for word, even imitating the intonation, the inflection of her voice" ("Anybody" 91). By recalling with complete clarity the conversation on the phone, like memorized words on a page, she reveals her carefully cultivated skill at impersonation and performance. Despite this precision, Petry underscores just how fragile and limiting the narrator's acquired information actually is, since it is one-sided and partial.

When she overhears her mother and Sarah Forbes on the phone, discussing Forbes's suicide note, this narrator rapidly becomes aware of the constructed nature of the Layen family's life narratives and how an overheard phone call or an ongoing family conversation can contribute to an archive of spoken materials through which family life narratives are shaped and exchanged. A nine-year-old's accurate eavesdropping, whether behind a book or not, influences her understanding of how the family tries to make sense of Forbes' life: in realizing that their own lives can be represented accurately and distorted. A phone call can be but the beginning of a life narrative, not the only version.

Petry turns to a telephone discussion of a suicide in both "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" and *The Street* to show how life narratives can be easily manipulated and revised to meet the needs of the communities surrounding them. The Wheeling narrator slowly becomes more interested in the life narrative of Forbes, and her family's reaction to it, when she overhears her mother encouraging Sarah Forbes to cover up one detail: "A letter? Forbes left a letter? Tear it up! You mustn't let anyone know that—" ("Anybody" 93). His suicide becomes public knowledge, but the narrator is shocked that

the final part of Forbes's life narrative could be granted privacy and even revised. And, in *The Street*, Lutie eavesdrops during a telephone conversation that does revise Jonathan Chandler's suicide in the Chandler family's public life narrative. Petry emphasizes that Lutie is unconcerned with "what had prompted Jonathan Chandler to kill himself" since she is far more fixated on "the way in which money transformed a suicide she had seen committed from start to finish in front of her very eyes into an 'accident with a gun'" (TS 49). In quoting the cause of death "accident with a gun," Petry highlights its provisional, unaccepted status in Lutie's eyes. Overwhelmed by Jonathan Chandler's decision, but more shocked by how easily his death can be changed, Lutie listens to one side of Mrs. Chandler's telephone call: "Lutie overheard the tail-end of the conversation, 'Now you get it fixed up. Oh, yes, you can. He was cleaning a gun'" (TS 49). Economic power plus a telephone call to the right person equals a change to the very words on a death certificate, an action that both frightens and intrigues Lutie.

For Lutie and the unnamed Wheeling narrator, telephone calls at first offer reliable modes for conveying life narratives, since they transmit a private version of a family tragedy among two people; yet, these calls are very much contingent, since they reveal the unofficial—later, public—version in progress, as one side of a conversation. By ascribing both transparency and partiality to telephone conversations, Petry suggests that skillful use of the telephone requires attention to the audiences listening (eavesdroppers, included) and an understanding that these conversations hold a great deal of potential revisionary power in articulating versions of a death. While the Wheeling narrator enjoys her questionable privacy behind a book, she puts down the book only to

realize just how constructed privacy can be, as she listens to her mother's telephone discussion with Sarah Forbes.

By the time she is twelve, the Wheeling narrator is skilled not only as a reader but also as a writer, informed by her growing awareness of her racial identity. In "Miss Muriel," Petry's narrator is constantly recording others' lives, as she revises and calls into question the sentences she has just written. Not simply a meta-fictional stand-in for Petry's voice, this narrator reflects on what she writes and what she does not, especially regarding her family. Holladay emphasizes the Wheeling narrator as a "diarist" in "Miss Muriel," with writing that "gives the story a compelling immediacy and accommodates the speaker's struggle to understand the nuances of her story."²⁷ In representing her struggle, Petry's narrator does not draw attention only to dating and recording the immediacy of her experiences when she writes about writing, but focuses more upon her writing process and choices, which she acknowledges as strange.

These passages occur towards the middle of "Miss Muriel," when she pays attention initially to a gap in her writing and then to an omission she makes. First, after a break in the story, the narrator considers: "Shortly after I wrote that, I stopped puzzling about Mr. Bemish because summer officially started—at least for me" ("MM" 30). This structural break is also a seasonal one. By establishing a distance for herself, from the paragraph above, this narrator takes on a more careful attitude towards her writing process, as time passes. Second, this narrator-writer is able to reflect upon passages as she writes (and reads) them: "I have just reread what I have written here, and I find that I've left out the reason why I am writing so much about Dottle" ("MM" 31). She does not explain why she devotes two paragraphs to Dottle when she does, but anticipates a

question her readers might ask (“Why so much about Dottle?”) and then attempts to answer it. In passages like these, Petry’s narrator is strengthening her writing as she reads over it, modeling the good in teaching her to write. Reading and writing are not simply her chosen childhood activities when the drugstore is not busy, they are her strategy for survival and guide for growing, as she composes a life narrative out of moments that change her perceptions of herself and her family.

Like the Wheeling narrator, Lutie is first introduced as a reader (of address labels) and soon after as a writer, in a flashback to her memories of working for the Chandlers. She recalls not just getting the job or her first day at work, but the writing process and social support she seeks in order to present a strong application. Lutie’s application letter demands much of her: marketing herself, seeking assistance, and understanding what is not written in the advertisement itself. Since it seeks only “an unusual young woman” (*TS* 30) to live with the Chandlers, without mentioning desirable and undesirable races, Lutie understands that the applicant need not be white. Lutie then publicizes her race in the first sentence of the letter, realizing that she need not keep it private. What is unwritten in the advertisement is written out explicitly in Lutie’s letter. Responding also to “Seventy-five dollars a month. Modern house. Own room and bath. Small child,” Lutie begins to list her qualifications as “an excellent cook” and “an efficient housekeeper” (*TS* 30-31). As she matches her skills with the desired qualifications, she turns her limited experience only within her private home into a more marketable public asset, suggesting her awareness that carefully considered written explanations can support her bid for the job, since she lacks the cultivated experience she knows that the job demands.²⁸

Lutie's letter evidences her skill as a careful reader of the job advertisement and thus writer of the application letter. Indeed, she knows how the process works. She notes, "It was a good letter...holding it in her hand a little way off from her as she studied it—nice, neat writing, no misspelled words, careful margins, pretty good English" (*TS* 31). Until she studies and approves of her letter, she has felt constrained by her need to respond carefully to the advertisement's desires. Now, she shifts her attention from the content of the advertisement to the format and public presentation of her own letter and appreciates it.

While Lutie's memories of the writing process in her job application take place in a "small private world which shut out the people tightly packed around her" on the train (*TS* 28), the Wheeling narrator's writing is at first very much aware of a reading audience, but the narrator makes fewer and fewer comments about her writing process, as "Miss Muriel" continues. Like the unnamed narrator writing in a schoolhouse at the beginning of *Country* and the competition between Jim and an unnamed narrator in writing about *Ántonia* in the "Introduction" to *My Ántonia*, such reflexive modes of life writing frequently frame the opening pages of regionalist fiction, but fade away as the narrator becomes increasingly involved in the surrounding community. Learning to read their communities more proficiently and critically replaces the reflective attention to their writing processes in the beginnings. If "Miss Muriel" is more about the mistakes that a young girl makes, in shifting from reading practices with books to even more consequential ones with real people, "The New Mirror" features the various technologies that the narrator chooses, shapes, and learns from, in order to construct a life narrative of a single day in her family's drugstore.

Wheeling, Uncovered and Covered, in “The New Mirror” and “The Witness”

When Petry recalls her own childhood memories of New England in her autobiographical essay, she draws upon recurring visual vocabularies to convey the distance she experiences as a child in an all-white community, an approach that also informs the social geography of her decade-long vision of Wheeling. To the artistic metaphors for writing regionalism’s lives—like Jewett’s human documents and Cather’s jar metaphor for describing *Antonia*—Petry adds her “picture-postcard kind of town,” but quickly acknowledges it as fit and unfit for a postcard (“AP” 254). “When I began this piece I referred to this town in which I was born as a picture-postcard kind of town, the typical New England town that shows up on the calendars. The reality is something different,” she writes (“AP” 256). A picture-postcard vision of New England can easily gloss over representations of African American lives, Petry argues, specifically that of “Rose Jackson, ‘a colored woman’” buried in Old Saybrook’s cemetery (“AP” 256). Petry emphasizes the distance between Rose Jackson’s gravestone and all others in the cemetery, which would certainly not appear on any picture-postcard. Petry terms this commemoration of a woman’s life “the nineteenth-century equivalent of the back of the bus” (“AP” 256), suggesting that the positioning of Rose Jackson’s gravestone belies a fuller version of her life in Old Saybrook, which goes untold. By juxtaposing a picture-postcard with an isolated gravestone turned away from all others, Petry defines the work that regionalism has yet to do: in compiling and composing life narratives that have been distanced and reduced to the most cursory, engraved words. “The New Mirror” and “The

Witness” view the same street from its two sides, which, taken together, show how yet another street inspires this critical vision of survival in a New England town, decades after *The Street*.

In “The New Mirror,” this narrator appears far more critical, even resentful, of these boundaries her family relies upon to define themselves at home, in the drugstore, and among Wheeling residents. She carefully distinguishes herself from the rest of her family, when she considers: “He [the narrator’s father] and my mother and my aunts kept their private lives and their thoughts about people inside the family circle, deliberately separating the life of the family from the life of the drugstore” (“TNM” 60). This policy, notably, does not include any mention of her influence on or frustrations in the family circle. As the only child among an immediate family of adults, she abides by their carefully demarcated prescriptions for behavior, but is beginning to question the reasons for the practices and the daily effects they have upon her, as a teenager. Once she describes her drugstore-centric life, she admits: “I liked the store, and I liked working in it on Saturdays and after school, but it often seemed to me a monstrous, mindless, sightless force that shaped our lives into any old pattern it chose, and it chose the patterns at random” (“TNM” 60). She evaluates the drugstore with a much edgier, impatient tone in “The New Mirror,” replacing more child-sounding musings like “I wonder how old I will be before I can ask questions of an adult and receive honest answers” in “Miss Muriel” with her more frustrated sense that the drugstore has too much control over her (“MM” 7).²⁹

Three years older, in “The New Mirror,” she knowingly discerns the dangers her family faces, when the private and public parts of their lives are confused. Petry

continues her interest in the exchange and circulation of life narratives, begun in *The Street*, when she surrounds her Wheeling narrator with an array of self-representational technologies in “The New Mirror,” each one adding dangers and possibilities to the representation of her family: Wheeling’s “only admittedly black family.” These technologies can cover or uncover details, silences and fictions in life narratives, which Petry foregrounds throughout “The New Mirror,” as a skilled reader of books becomes a reader of the boundaries her family constructs.

As an astute observer of her family’s carefully cultivated privacy, Petry’s Wheeling narrator voices (and even theorizes) the fraught public and private boundaries of her home: “This delicious food and this sunny room in which we had eaten were pleasant segments of the private part of our life, totally separated from the drugstore, which was the public part” (“TNM” 62). Published during pivotal twentieth-century debates over privacy rights in the United States, “The New Mirror” depicts such explicit public and private boundaries among the narrator’s family—including her parents, Samuel and Martha Layen and her Aunt Sophronia—in order to challenge the lines her family draws and to show how the lines actually divide the family members from one another, even more than from drugstore customers and surrounding Wheeling residents. By the mid-twentieth century, the materials of privacy, rather than its more abstract, invisible boundaries, informed an approach which Deborah Nelson details in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*: “Moving beyond the fantasy of a spatial privacy—the container that must be sealed tightly at all costs—suggests a new and paradoxical model of privacy in the era of generalized exposure.”³⁰ While Nelson’s argument focuses upon the confessional practices and intersections of both law and poetry of the 1960s, Mark

Whalan suggests that these ambiguities in privacy date back even further, when Jewett and Cather were writing: “Early-twentieth-century privacy was therefore simultaneously defined and threatened by new media and technology,” emphasizing the influence of photographs and newspapers.³¹ For the Wheeling narrator, the interplay among such technologies of self-representation proves such spatial privacies to be more permeable than permanent, when she realizes that “the private part of our life had suddenly and noisily entered the public part—or perhaps it was the other way around” (“TNM” 79).

While the Wheeling narrator first notes clear-cut spatial divisions between public and private, within the Layens’ home and outside of it, Petry crafts a new and paradoxical model of privacy for her narrator, relating the coverage of this family, via newspapers, the radio, and telephone inside the drugstore with the far more corrosive consequences for the relationships *within* the narrator’s family. All the possible good in teaching *this* unnamed narrator to write emerges in her efforts to rehearse and represent the interplay of her family’s life narratives as measures of privacy to replace fixed spatial definitions with fragmented telephone conversations, radio broadcasts and newspaper clippings that more accurately convey the anxieties she responds to and models for self-representation she turns to.³²

At the beginning of the story, the narrator stands in front of the new mirror, marking the boundary between the family’s home and their drugstore. With this new mirror, Mrs. Layen hopes to promote even more efficiency in moving across that boundary, but the story explores instead the unexpected disappearance of her father, who “did everything at exactly the same time every day” (“TNM” 69), just one day after the new mirror has been installed. When he finally returns home at the end of the story, he

has a simple explanation for his absence: he was finally getting false teeth, after seeing his ghastly mouth, in dire need of dental work, under the all-visible light of the new mirror that morning. Mr. Layen's decision to disrupt his carefully constructed routine practices emphasizes how the family members frequently cover their fears and aspirations from one another in the name of preserving privacy in Wheeling.

When the narrator's family realizes he is missing, their concern is first for his safety, but they soon decide to avoid the criticism they might face, as a black family with a missing person. Indeed, their search for Mr. Layen can only proceed as frighteningly "indirect" ("TNM" 81), which surprises the narrator most of all: her family must consider their self-image, even when there are far more direct ways of searching for her father. As the family ponders which narrative of Mr. Layen's disappearance should be circulated in Wheeling, they consider how they should convey the known and unknown parts of his day.

When the narrator's Aunt Sophronia suggests that the newspaper could easily help them find Mr. Layen, Mrs. Layen's response is an abrupt "'No,' harshly" ("TNM" 74). She does not protest, based on the help that such a newspaper announcement might offer, since she worries instead about the potential readers who would respond almost immediately and violently. Panicked, Mrs. Layen realizes that her husband's family "all read the Buffalo *Recorder* and they would be down from Buffalo before we could turn around twice. Sometimes I think they use some form of astral projection. No. We won't put anything in the newspapers, not even if..." ("TNM" 74). She ends there. The narrator knows that "he is dead" would complete her mother's unfinished sentence "not even if..." A brief newspaper mention would offer an uncontrollable resource for customers of

the drugstore and the other readers that Mrs. Layen tries to keep away. While the private and public divisions in their lives seek to divert the eyes of the white Wheeling community, Mrs. Layen associates a newspaper announcement with the black Buffalo community that would only make things worse, in her eyes. Newspaper publicity would not preserve her privacy, it would pique the curiosity of drugstore customers, not to mention an unwanted arrival from Buffalo.

Once they decide not to include Mr. Layen's disappearance in the newspaper, they gather around the radio, anticipating the bad news that it could broadcast. Merely turning on the radio violates Mr. Layen's belief that: "only certain kinds of decaying drugstores had radios blating in them, and that the owners turned them on hoping to distract the customers' attention away from the leaks in the roof, the holes in the floor, the flyblown packages, and the smell of cat" ("TNM" 77-78). The narrator, however, is not content to await the worst. As she listens, she begins to think of all possible headlines for the news reports: "I practiced different versions of the story. 'Young woman finds short, thick-bodied, unidentified black man.' 'School children find colored druggist in the river.' Negro pharmacist lost in mountains.' 'Black man shot by white man in love duel.' Colored druggist. Negro pharmacist. Black man. My father?" ("TNM" 78) Though she is relieved to hear none of these, she collects these possible identities that her father could be given, at the end of her list. If the newspaper would provide too much information to family members outside Wheeling, these imagined radio broadcasts do not offer enough, since they reduce Mr. Layen to shocking headlines. In this exercise of seeing her father through the eyes (and ears) of the white community, she imagines life narratives that reporters could use to make sense of a missing black man.

Petry's representations of the radio's negative influence begins in *The Street*, when Lutie imagines her building's threatening super as an avid listener. She makes an explicit connection between not reading and choosing instead to listen to the radio: "Don't kid yourself, she thought, he probably can't read, or if he can, he probably doesn't spend any time at it. Well—listen to the radio. That was it, he probably wanted to hear his favorite program and she had thought he was filled with the desire to leap upon her" (TS 15). Petry is drawing a clear line between him as a radio listener (and not reader) and Lutie, who reads, rather than listens. But Lutie later becomes an inadvertent radio listener when she learns that her son has been arrested; she cries as she walks down her building's empty hallway, with no voices to be heard except those from:

radios on full blast in order to drown out this familiar, frightening, unbearable sound. But even under the radios they could hear it, for they had started crying with her when the sound first assailed their ears. And now it had become a perpetual weeping that flowed through them, carrying pain and a shrinking from pain, so that the music and the voices coming from the radio couldn't possibly shut it out, for it was inside them. (TS 390)

The radio threatens, since it does not cover the pain, but instead uncovers it. The pain intensifies and makes Lutie believe that everyone else is covered from her pain, behind their apartment walls, behind the voices on their radios. But Lutie misreads these radios, since Petry makes clear that everyone is hearing Lutie's pain "inside," even if she cannot see and hear them, over the sound of their radios. Their inability to drown it out becomes even more insufferable and Lutie's misery is heard, in the same frequency of radio noise.

While Petry's Wheeling narrator does not share her made-up headlines with her worried mother and aunt, since they would likely experience some version of the pain that Petry associates with the radio in *The Street*, these headlines attest to her awareness that the packaging of family life narratives matters. Her headlines are intended to be sensational, but she realizes that her family has no control over the coverage circulating throughout Wheeling on the radio, coverage with no regard for their public drugstore and private home. Petry asks her readers to imagine how a radio broadcast—and, presumably, a newspaper announcement—will cover a black man/colored druggist/Negro pharmacist for Wheeling listeners and readers.

Growing even more anxious, Sophronia and Mrs. Layen leave for the police station, without putting a notice in the newspaper, after hearing no news on the radio, so the narrator gets to witness her father's return, "uncovered" in the drugstore for the first time, since there is no druggist available ("TNM" 81). As she asks him concerned questions—"Are you all right?", "But why didn't you tell Mother you were going?", "What made you finally get false teeth?"—the Wheeling narrator slowly grows angrier at him, closely tracking her silence, the way she did as a twelve-year-old in "Miss Muriel" ("TNM" 84-85). She wonders: "If he hadn't seen his mouth wide open like that in the new mirror under that new light...I thought, But the congregation couldn't possibly see the inside of his mouth—he's in the choir loft when he sings, and he's much too far away from them. But I didn't say this" ("TNM" 86). But she does not tell him how angry she is at him, since she immediately makes a phone call to one Officer O'Toole at the police station to pass along the news of his return to her mother and aunt.

Petry displaces her narrator's anger at her father's absence into the necessary phone call to white police officers; a potential argument between father and daughter, inside their home, is condensed and channeled into a telephone call, intended to preserve the family's privacy. Though the narrator has imagined possible approaches for how her family's life narratives might appear in print or aloud, she has to cover and uncover her family's life narratives, by crafting the coverage of her family in a carefully-worded telephone call to the police station.

Earlier in the day, she simply repeats the same explanation of her father's whereabouts to survive the many questions from customers via telephone: "He isn't here right now. We expect him, we expect him. When? Later. We expect him later" ("TNM" 77). But she is no longer responding to questions, since she is communicating a message of her own—one that has to provide just enough information to convey her father's safety to her mother and aunt, just enough information not to pique the interests of the police officers. This is the final scene of the story; while she is doodling on the notepad, she delivers this message: "This is Mr. Layen's daughter, at Layen's Drugstore in Wheeling. Mrs. Layen and her sister, Miss Bart, are on their way over there. Will you tell them that Mr. Layen found his watch—" ("TNM" 88). The narrator has internalized codes of behavior that signal to her mother and aunt that all is well and signal to the police officers that a watch has been recovered ("TNM" 87). Unlike the telephone conversation she simply overhears as a nine-year-old, this telephone provides her a resource for using her storytelling skills to cover and uncover her family's life narratives according to a shared network of secrets, their protocol for preserving privacies in a predominantly white community.

Though it is Petry who introduces her autobiographical essay with “Having been born black and female, I regard myself as a survivor and a gambler,” these could be the words of either Lutie Johnson or this Wheeling narrator, since they share these complementary motivations for composing life narratives, as both a gamble and a strategy for survival (“AP” 253). The narrator has learned first to consider many possible versions (from those she imagines in the newspaper and on the radio) and then to choose an account of the Layen family’s life to represent in her telephone call: the version that will most preserve and least threaten her family’s social position in Wheeling. Despite this narrator’s success, Petry addresses its costs: why does a teenager need to learn how to gamble with a life narrative that she makes up in order to survive the possible threats to her family’s privacy? Her telephone message works, only because her mother and Aunt Sophronia have not arrived at the police station when she calls; had they already told the police about Mr. Layen’s disappearance, she would surely face more scrutiny. The Wheeling narrator is consistently aware of the price of privacy at a young age, but learns to secure her family’s position in a small town where invisibility can become dangerously visible far more quickly than they would like it to.

With this strategic telephone call, “The New Mirror” culminates Petry’s representations of an unnamed Wheeling narrator who remembers herself in bits and bundles—like Jewett’s *Country* narrator’s impressions of Mrs. Fosdick, Jim Burden’s versions of *Ántonia* from his remembered returns to Black Hawk. Petry does not fill in the blanks among the four ages of her narrator, content to portray the many portraits (like her own “human documents”) of Wheeling, the Layen family, and her narrator’s growth through the various technologies for self-representation, written and spoken, through

which she observes her racialized reflection, imagines radio headlines, and delivers a telephone message.

Together, these three Wheeling stories suggest that Petry's regionalist fiction shares concerns with Jewett's and Cather's, but turns to a narrator who is an avid reader and is becoming a writer of Wheeling. Petry blends the funny anecdotes and embarrassments of a young girl's coming-of-age saga with the racial and racist realities shaping her life both inside and outside the drugstore.³³ However, Petry publishes another story set in Wheeling, without the Layen family: her 1971 story "The Witness." This move differs sharply from Jewett's and Cather's regional communities—can we imagine the *Country* narrator's Dunnet Landing without Mrs. Todd, Jim Burden's Black Hawk without *Ántonia*? There are no Layens, no familiar Wheeling residents along Wheeling's snow-covered streets, when "The Witness" begins. Unlike the summery beginnings of "Miss Muriel," the Wheeling of "The Witness" is "under a thick blanket of snow."³⁴

Petry places an unfamiliar character in a familiar setting, with a media-inspired imagination of his own. Standing on a Wheeling street, high school English teacher Charles Woodruff imagines a radio broadcast, featuring his current whereabouts, with special emphasis on himself as the black man at large in Wheeling:

Attention all cruisers, attention all cruisers, a black man, repeat, a black man is standing in front of the Congregational church in Wheeling, New York; description follows, description follows, thinnish, tallish black man, clipped moustache, expensive (extravagantly expensive, outrageously expensive, unjustifiably expensive) overcoat, felt hat like a Homburg, eyeglasses glittering in

the moonlight, feet stamping in the moonlight, mouth muttering in the moonlight.

Light of the moon we danced. Glimpses of the moon revisited. (“W” 213)

Woodruff’s imagined bulletin ends abruptly when he realizes just how alone he is that evening. Like Petry’s unnamed Wheeling narrator in “The New Mirror,” he understands himself and his relationship to Wheeling through sensationalized headlines he imagines on the radio. While the Wheeling narrator focuses on the public and private parts of her home, Woodruff turns to another boundary he has set up to cover himself from the community: his overcoat. His imagined voice emphasizes the overcoat rather than his features of thinness and tallness. The overcoat is too much, since the mechanized voice, begins to fixate upon it—even speaking parenthetically, as Petry puts it. His overcoat both covers and uncovers his racialized identity on the radio, making him even less of a fit in Wheeling, separated also by his attire and education.³⁵

In Wheeling, Petry presents a social geography of attempted integration between a black teacher and white students that does not happen in “The Witness.” With the purchase of his overcoat to “dress more elegantly” (“W” 212) than those in his classroom, he does well at first teaching seniors at Wheeling High School, but other teachers warn him that he has trouble to come, since “the freshmen and the sophomores were ‘a bunch of hoodlums’—‘a whole new ball game—’” (“W” 214). These broken-up clips from their warnings make Woodruff realize that his current ease cannot last. But he volunteers to work with the community’s “delinquent boys” at the Congregational church program because he acknowledges that Wheeling has not been completely hostile to him; he “felt he should make some kind of contribution to the life of this small town which had treated him with genuine friendliness” (“W” 214).

“The Witness” gives an alternate version to the unnamed narrator’s covered, sheltered home at the drugstore, to the very real dangers that a black man (like Mr. Layen) could face, uncovered on the streets of this town: the coincidences, traps and dangers that he might witness. On the same night that Woodruff stands in front of the church, imagining radio headlines, he becomes an unwilling witness to the delinquent boys from his class raping Nellie, another Wheeling teenager. Unable to see without his glasses, unable to move, restrained by the boys in his expensive overcoat, Woodruff realizes he has to leave Wheeling, since he could easily be implicated as her rapist, though he was forced to be a witness. As one of the boys puts it: “He’s here and yet he ain’t here” (“W” 225). Woodruff has no doubt about the answer to the question that weighs upon him: “Whose story would be believed?” (“W” 230). After Woodruff relates symptoms he reads in textbook to a doctor (“W” 230), who recognizes them as obviously textbook angina symptoms, he gives himself a plausible explanation for his sudden departure from Wheeling.

Though Woodruff is remarkably skilled at conveying specific symptoms to a doctor, Petry is careful to show that Woodruff, curiously enough, overlooks key pieces of paper directing him to her earlier, safer versions of Wheeling: “He scarcely listened to the detailed instructions he was to follow, did not even glance at the three prescriptions he was handed, for he was eager to be on his way” (“W” 231). Certainly, Woodruff has no reason to be concerned with the treatment for his simulated illness. But a convenient place in Wheeling to fill the prescription would be the Layen drugstore: Petry’s focus in so many other Wheeling stories. It is mentioned and then forgotten. On his way out of town, his path could intersect with the Layens’ drugstore. It is especially tantalizing that

Petry suggests this missed encounter between the Layens and Woodruff, between the family in a drugstore and a man standing in front of the Congregational Church.

In “The New Mirror” and “The Witness,” Petry’s picture-postcard perspective specifically relates drugstore with church to show their clear opposition and shocking proximity: “The Congregational Church is still diagonally across the street from the building that houses the drugstore, a picture-postcard of a church, painted white, New England architecture in its purest and most elegant form” (“AP” 255).³⁶ There is a danger, she suggests in looking only at a picture-postcard version of New England, just as there is danger in looking at Wheeling from only one side of the street or the other. From the drugstore’s side, the picture-postcard town is a stable home, with neatly demarcated public and private spaces for an unnamed narrator and her family. From the Congregational Church’s side, Woodruff can hardly see himself, let alone the rest of Wheeling, in a snow-covered town. The church’s beauty belies the terror Woodruff feels when he confronts the teenagers he has just taught inside the church, behind the church in its parking lot.

Both the Layens and Woodruff are aware that technologies for self-representation, especially the radio, can easily distort and publicize too much of their own life narratives, for the rest of the town to hear. Though the unnamed narrator briefly imagines the fictionalized possible headlines that a radio broadcaster could choose from, in delivering the news of her father’s disappearance, Woodruff’s awareness of the radio’s power and limitations frames the entirety of “The Witness,” in his imagined broadcast at the beginning and his desperate search for a radio station as he leaves Wheeling at the end, for “any kind of music, thinking it would distract him” (“W” 234). His imagined

broadcast is for a Wheeling audience; the music at the end, the “ho-daddy” refrain that the boys used to mock him, seems targeted at him, making him one among many: “another poor scared black bastard who was a witness” (“W” 234).

While the Wheeling narrator finds her voice in an uncovered drugstore, Petry’s Wheeling is consistently covered—often “snow-covered” (“W” 212)—for Woodruff.³⁷ He is covered in his coat, covered in the fear he feels driving away from Wheeling. Covering and uncovering are the attitudes and survival techniques which measure the varying degrees of too much publicity and not enough privacy along a Wheeling street, where the church and drugstore face one another, a picture-postcard that is hardly picturesque.

For Petry, writing these regionalist stories was not a passing phase, but something she consistently struggled and engaged with: a source of creative tension throughout her life. Beginning with her childhood reading of writers like Alcott and Jewett, Petry articulates a position that sees, lives and responds differently, following the tradition of Wilson: in surviving and gambling through her writing. Her regionalism is necessarily a comparative one, informed by movement, migration among places and visitors, beginning with the contact between streets of Harlem and Lyme in *The Street* and persisting into her invented Wheeling, where visitors and inhabitants shape the town’s geography. Chances are good that Petry’s tendency to compare regions, rather than describe them singularly, begins in Harlem, when she takes a creative writing class with Mabel Louse Robinson—to whom she dedicates *The Narrows*. In her chapters “Description” and “The Character Sketch” in *The Art of Writing Prose*, Robinson’s samples draw a great deal from Cather’s writing, showing that creative writing was one

place where passages from *My Antonia* and “Paul’s Case” can frame Petry’s practices of description.³⁸ Even later in her life, Petry’s daughter recalls her mother’s ongoing friendship with Edward Clark, Professor of English at Suffolk University, and admiration for his “extensive collection of literature by African Americans with a connection to New England that he created and has continued to maintain” (*AHI* 172).³⁹ Throughout her career, regionalism is less a singular identity or label she considers and more an ongoing tension that allows her to articulate the challenges of authorship: her desires for privacy, her interest in Clark’s bibliography, and her sense of regionalism as a critical perspective, rather than a literary label.

Clipping and Covering: Petry’s Wheeling Narrator and the Practices of Black Feminism

Because Petry’s engagement with regionalism relies upon words and images that she adds to an overly-pristine picture-postcard perspective, she transforms abstract notions of privacy into the materials that her characters use to represent their daily struggles. From her side of the street, Petry’s Wheeling narrator encounters an array of options for representing her family’s life narratives: listening carefully behind a book, writing and revising her impressions of Dottle Smith, overhearing a telephone conversation, and imagining radio headlines, to name a few. When the family deliberates over them in “The New Mirror,” these technologies rarely inspire agreement on how to preserve their privacies. Though Sophronia’s suggestion about a newspaper announcement seems promising, it sparks Mrs. Layen’s fear of her husband’s family; turning the radio on makes them think of Mr. Layen’s insistence on no radio din in the drugstore. While each idea aspires to promote connections between them and Wheeling,

they also accentuate the underlying tensions among family members—their fears that usually go unspoken. But the Wheeling narrator finds ways to communicate with her family members through the newspapers that come into the drugstore—in crafting messages from their stories and headlines and circulating them to her father, mother or aunt, whoever would find them relevant.

Responding to technologies of self-representation with messages of her own certainly follows from the narrator's daily reading practices, inspiring her to create and preserve a collection of clippings, as she peruses the daily newspaper, the *Buffalo News*. In it she notices:

a picture of a man, obviously an actor, wearing a straw hat. I wanted the picture because of his tooth-revealing grin, and I reminded myself to cut it out. The newspapers that didn't sell were returned for credit. Quite often I snipped out items that interested me. I always hunted for articles that dealt with the importance of chewing food thoroughly, and for pictures of men with no teeth, and for pictures of very handsome men exposing a great many teeth. I intended to leave this particular picture on the prescription counter, where my father would be sure to see it. ("TNM" 65)

With this newspaper, and many others, she continues her practice of clipping and collecting, with only relevant articles and pictures making the cut, as her chosen visual vocabularies.⁴⁰ Hoping to inspire her father to get his teeth fixed, she displays this newspaper article in a feature spread of her own on the counter. Hers is a collage-like model of self-representation, mirroring the incomplete capacities of a newspaper announcement, radio broadcast and telephone message to represent the Layen family

fully. In cutting out and rearranging public newspaper stories and advertisements to speak to her family's private concerns, the narrator not only takes prescription orders, but she also makes prescriptions to her family, in the life narratives she collages for them, with many sources.

Petry also casts her other main Wheeling character as a clipper figure, since Woodruff too has assembled documents for his retirement plans that do not happen; after his wife Addie's death, he needs to "organize his clippings—a "wealth of material in those clippings"—and notes into "a grammar to be used in first-year English classes" ("W" 213). Even when Woodruff is driving out of Wheeling, he is thinking of these materials—"the car was loaded for flight—books and cartons on the seats, foot locker on the floor" ("W" 233)—and is relieved that the boys, who pass by him as he drives away, cannot see these containers, clear evidence of his departure. Despite these common collections, the narrator's clippings differ from Woodruff's, since she readily uncovers readers for these clippings. She is more likely to leave them around for others to find, rather than slipping them into a hidden collection for a future project, like Woodruff's. Petry transforms these readers and writers into figures who clip figures out of paper to incorporate them into their life narratives, advice for family members, a retirement project, out of their context in the original papers.

In negotiating their private worlds in Wheeling, they rework newspaper clippings to recirculate as documents of their own. Rather than adhering to the regionalist caricatures and types, Petry's clipping figures offer an alternative to the fixed, overly publicized stereotypes that they both fear: those of "toothless Uncle Tom, and my old black mammy with her head rag" ("TNM" 87) for the narrator when she thinks of her

father's decision to get false teeth, those of one more "poor scared black bastard who was a witness" ("W" 234) in the refrain on the radio and on Woodruff's mind as he leaves Wheeling. Reading across this Wheeling street, from a narrator at a drugstore counter to a teacher standing in front of a church, casts Petry's revisions to regionalism into the languages of visual vocabularies: considering that the publicized picture-postcard visions of the town often conceal the powerful technologies of self-representation, which can preserve and pressure the private worlds its residents so carefully arrange, among clippings.

When Elisabeth Petry introduces her edited collection and narrative of family letters, she notes that Bertha James Lane (her grandmother and Petry's mother) chooses "an ice cream cone tin from our family's drugstore" to preserve all the family letters before and during their lives in Wheeling. Petry eventually moves this tin to her home, accumulating her own writing on top of those family's letters exchanged over decades: "At two feet tall with a flat top, it [the tin] was a perfect spot for one of the many piles of magazines, newspapers, books, and other tools of a writer's trade that found their way onto every flat surface in the house" (*Anything* xxiv). Petry too clips paper and creates collections, since Elisabeth Petry notes that her mother "supplemented her library with clippings from magazines and newspapers, chiefly the *Times*, which filled the equivalent of three four-drawer file cabinets, plus loose folders scattered on her desks, my bed and desk (after I moved out), the chest outside her bedroom, and the small building behind our house" (*AHI* 10). Petry's massive collections of papers—family letters and her writing-in-progress—date back to sources from her childhood, in books like *Little*

Women and the legacy of the “little women” (“TNM” 88), Mrs. Layen and Aunt Sophronia in her stories, her mother and aunts in her childhood.

Now that Petry’s private collections, detailed in her daughter’s biography, are part of public circulation, it is even more clear that her growing concerns for biographical privacy contribute to her many fictional constructions and transgressions of privacy, in overheard telephone conversations, imagined radio soundbytes, and public newspapers rendered into private clippings. Between *The Street* and her Wheeling stories, the precarious boundaries between public and private structure many of her stories later collected in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*. In them, life narratives, not surprisingly, show up also in fragments: newspaperman and photographers instigate a scandal in a “private chapel” when they mix up the bones of “the laundress and the countess” in “The Bones of Louella Brown;” Alice Knight feels herself “behind a screen” when she cannot bring herself to begin “The Necessary Knocking on the Door” when the boundaries that should only be spatial are also racial.⁴¹ The *Country Place* druggist archives prescriptions in his private scrapbook (*CP* 96), while Kid Jones hears in his “Solo on the Drums” the rhythms of his own life on a Broadway stage: “This is the story of my love, this is the story of my hate, this is all there is left of me.”⁴² Indeed, with more access to Petry’s own life narrative, in both a biography and a collection of letters, the more carefully we can historicize her Wheeling stories in her career, since she is exchanging privacy’s spatial metaphors for the technologies that portray privacy as something to hear, read and write.

It is especially compelling that Petry’s stories were collected for the first time in 1971, a pivotal moment in black feminist criticism, a decade featuring the publication of

key anthologies and critical essays. As Arlene R. Keizer acknowledges: “the year 1970 was a high-water mark in the publication history of African American women’s critical and creative work. Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Maya Angelou’s memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Cade’s anthology *The Black Woman* were all published in this year.”⁴³ Petry’s writing has not been placed in this context, because Lutie Johnson has been so carefully situated alongside Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, for better or worse. On the one hand, Bernard W. Bell has argued that such comparisons ensure that her work “has been overshadowed and her talent misrepresented,” just as Margaret B. McDowell has argued that comparisons with Wright have obscured interest in Petry’s “achievements with short stories or her two historical novels with female protagonists.”⁴⁴ In order to complicate the comparisons to Wright, critics have positioned Lutie Johnson as an anticipatory figure of “a later generation of women like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor,” as Nellie McKay has detailed; Heather Hicks has considered how “there is good to be gained by once more placing Petry’s first novel in relationship to the work of Wright and Ellison,” a move to “underscore further the degree to which she was an innovator, breaking new ground for the black feminist writers who have come after her.”⁴⁵

Though Hicks does not specify which black feminist writers Petry most influences, both hers and McKay’s reading suggest that there is a gap between reading Petry’s initial—and most canonical—positioning in an earlier masculine protest tradition and her role in anticipating and influencing later black feminist traditions. By reading the unnamed Wheeling narrator as a character clearly distinct from Lutie—but continuing her propensity for reading and writing, both her own life and the lives of others—Petry’s

engagement with regionalism locates her Wheeling narrator among the theories of black women's fiction and life writing emerging soon after this Wheeling narrator is collected into a single volume for the first time.

Petry's Wheeling narrator clearly responds to the concerns of emerging black feminist criticism, in gathering, detailing and classifying the lives of women characters. In 1977, Mary Helen Washington publishes a brief essay, reflecting upon the many women characters in her edited collection of short stories, *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975), such as "Jean Wheeler Smith, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Louise Meriwether, Paule Marshall and Gwendolyn Brooks."⁴⁶ Towards the end of her essay, she recalls an interview she has conducted with Alice Walker and a classifying scheme that Walker has suggested for reading and teaching black women characters, as "a series of movements from a woman totally victimized by society and by men to a growing, developing woman whose consciousness allows her to have some control over her life" (22). The three stages include the Suspended Woman, the Assimilated Woman, and the Emergent Woman; Washington admits that they "involve some oversimplification," since the characters she includes in her list are not meant to be comprehensive, more illustrative (23).

As an adult in "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?," Petry's Wheeling narrator would certainly lean closer to the Emergent Woman category, but her appearances as a child and teenager also show how the pressures of the Suspended and Assimilated categories shape her decisions to make a strategic phone call at the end of "The New Mirror," to consider her place in Wheeling as the work of "making the first tentative steps into an uncharted region," which is how Washington describes an Emerging Woman

(23). Petry's Wheeling narrator collects, rather than chooses among these categories, since she finds herself suspended between assimilating and emerging in Wheeling. In Petry's fiction, these cycles of women are not necessarily linear, but instead compose the pressures that the narrator feels in revealing too much and too little of herself and her family's life narratives to the Wheeling community.

This ambiguity inspires her to preserve her privacy through practices of covering and clipping life narratives: a model of selfhood that is strong enough to sustain, malleable enough to measure. While Petry's Wheeling fiction portrays the fictional tensions facing the women characters discussed in Washington's essay, her fiction also anticipates the concerns that arise in discussions of women's life writing, especially in a 1989 special issue of *Signs*, with a focus on "Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women's Lives" in order to illuminate the materials expressing the writings, thoughts and emotions, especially of African American women. In this issue, Elsa Barkley Brown's essay turns to the language of quilting in order to foster a sensitivity and awareness of lives that are woven "in multiple directions at once" just as the quilt is constantly made, constantly in motion:

If we analyze these people and actions by linear models, we will create dichotomies, ambiguities, cognitive dissonances, disorientation, and confusion in places where none exist. If, however, we follow the cultural guides which African-American women have left us, we can allow the way in which they saw and constructed their own lives to provide the analytical framework by which we attempt to understand their experiences and their world and to provide the structural framework by which we attempt to teach this to others.⁴⁷

Because the Wheeling narrator shifts from reading the differences between public and private spaces to the crafting the materials and technologies that can create and deny privacy, hers is such a cultural guide that can shape our understanding of Petry's "other," lesser-known Wheeling narrator whose reading and writing is but the beginning for the coverage and clippings that she needs to assemble her life.

Petry features a narrator who both covers and uncovers her life, to protect herself and her family. In that same 1989 issue of *Signs*, Darlene Clark Hine emphasizes how black women "developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma."⁴⁸ Surrounded by so much covering and uncovering in a drugstore that appears so impervious to outside influences, the narrator realizes that such coverage is both necessary and threatening. By learning to both represent and respond to the coverage her family chooses to define their lives, the Wheeling narrator learns how to cover up and to clip out her life for display; her life negotiates the pressures to suspend, assimilate and emerge, when she turns to the technologies that circulate life narratives into and out of the Layens' pharmacy.

As a young black woman, Petry's Wheeling narrator struggles with her own frustrations in a small town, showing that Lutie Johnson's attempts at writing on a train window continue and concern Petry all the more. The Wheeling narrator writes in order to express more intensely the strength and vulnerability of the words that she reads and speaks. Her experiences include the limiting cycles of black womanhood that Washington identifies, but her responses to her family's definitions of privacy reveal her creativity in

clipping and covering her life with care, reflecting the approaches for studying “women’s lives” in *Signs*. Petry’s engagement with regionalism in her Wheeling stories portrays her rich vision of and interest in representing the lives of black women, in the collage-like practices of clipping and covering.

In their shared doodling postures, Lutie and the Wheeling narrator uncover a language of possibility, as they ponder their positions within communities that limit their abilities to utter, write and read words that matter. Separately, these characters could hardly be more different: a mother struggling to raise her son in Harlem and a middle-class teenager growing up in a successful Wheeling family. Yet the “private worlds” on Lutie’s Harlem train anticipate the many definitions of privacy constructed in Wheeling, beginning with the materials, media and motives of reading. Though earlier traditions of regionalism rarely feature such an in-depth investment in reading, Petry’s short stories contribute unprecedented representations of reading to literary regionalism, where technologies for self-representation define publicity and privacy, rendering Wheeling a picturesque place as well as a place to be read with care. Beginning in *The Street* and intensifying by the end of “The New Mirror,” Petry’s recurring doodling and clipping figures uncover possible life narratives, within communities limiting women’s abilities to utter, write and read words that matter. Though a barrage of paper scraps surrounds Lutie Johnson, pieces of unread newspapers provide Petry’s Wheeling narrator the visual vocabularies for responding with her own representations, to be read among the rich moment of post-war black feminism that interrogates the lives of women with purpose and passion. In place of picture-postcards, in a suddenly uncovered family pharmacy, Petry’s unnamed narrator prescribes life narratives—cut out from newspapers, inspired

by radio headlines and spoken over the telephone—uncovering all the possible good, when this unnamed narrator recollects the publicity and privacy at stake in composing life narratives, bit by bit, for herself.

Petry's Wheeling narrator often finds her inspiration from Dottle Smith, a summer visitor to the Layens. She frequently writes about his influence upon her—"I was imitating Smith, my favorite person in all the world. Dottle tells the most wonderful stories and he can act and recite poetry" ("MM" 3)—and her pride in how he knows "all the great speeches from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, and he can recite the sonnets" ("MM" 31). But Smith's engagement with poetry becomes a liability, rendering him unable to be read through more traditional narratives of masculinity. Mr. Layen attacks Smith's masculinity and his poetry in a sudden tirade against all the men lingering around the drugstore, portraying Smith as "that poet or whatever he is, all he needs are some starched petticoats and a bonnet and he'd make a woman—he's practically one now—and he's tee-heein' around, and if they were all put together in one piece, it still wouldn't make a man" ("MM" 47).

Smith's poetry and attire do not allow him to add up to an entire man, since Mr. Layen attributes his shortcomings to poetry, fashion, and posturing.⁴⁹ Between Smith and her unnamed Wheeling narrator—two characters known for their writing—Petry places this ephemeral woman poet, deeply gendered, but not racialized. Smith comes, in short, dangerously close to resembling a stereotypical, overly feminized poetess: a figure at the center of my concluding chapter. Her appearance in Petry's work is but one instance of poetesses featured in regionalism to open up further discussions of women writers. These

characters frequently inspire and then inform conversations about authorship in regionalist fiction, a genre where conversations about the daily lives of women writers can take place.

¹ Petry, *The Street* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 1. Future references will be cited parenthetically as *TS*.

² My emphasis on this final question of *The Street* furthers the work of recent critics who have challenged the conventional readings of the novel's ending as hopeless and limiting. William Scott's article begins with a summary of the conditions shaping the ending—"Lutie Johnson kills the jazz musician Boots Smith, who is about to rape her, and flees New York for Chicago, abandoning her son to the care of a reform school"—but turns to Lutie's tracings on the window at the end of his article, suggesting that her tracings as "a reinscription and linkage of individual holes into a network" in "Material Resistance and the Agency of the Body in Ann Petry's *The Street*," *American Literature* 78.1 (March 2006): 89, 112. Meg Wesling's essay follows a similar logic, with an initial focus on Lutie's "dismal future" suggested at the end of *The Street*, emphasizing the novel's investment in "reworking Franklin's autobiographical narrative" in order to place *The Street* in literary legacies of African American novels foregrounding motherhood; her conclusion turns also to Lutie's final question to foreground "the historical centrality of writing" as Petry's "most innovative intervention in the novel" in "The Opacity of Everyday Life: Segregation and the Iconicity of Uplift in *The Street*," *American Literature* 78.1 (March 2006): 117, 132, 135. My reading differs from theirs, since I focus on *The Street*'s limiting ending for Lutie as a key beginning in Petry's career, since she continues to think about writing's power (and lack thereof) in her Wheeling stories.

³ Petry's Wheeling stories, featuring this narrator and her family, include "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean," "Miss Muriel," and "The New Mirror."

⁴ Their drugstore provides a backdrop for moments of self-realization like Janie's experiences in the Eatonville store in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 54. It also anticipates the capitalized setting "the Store" in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), 16. Each of these stores underscores the importance of racialized consumer cultures at mid-century; Paul Mullins argues that "consumption was an African-American sociopolitical statement of civil aspirations, material desires, and resistance to monolithic racist caricatures" in his *Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 18.

⁵ Petry, "The New Mirror," *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, [1971] 2008), 87-88. Future references will be cited parenthetically as "TNM."

⁶ Barbara Smith, "A Familiar Street" (1987), *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005), 10. Petry envisions both continuity and contrast between Lutie Johnson's fervent, frustrated tracings on the train window and the flourishing painting on the Wheeling drugstore's window: "On each window my father had painted his name in white letters with the most wonderful curlicues and flourishes, and under it the word 'Druggist'" ("TNM" 92).

⁷ Bruce Robbins also chooses the term "scale" to express the ambiguities of competing publics in his entry "Public" in *Critical Terms for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 186.

⁸ Petry was certainly aware of the risks during this time, since her daughter recalls this anecdote, taking place just before the Wheeling stories were published: “Mother had gone to Hollywood in 1958 to write the screenplay of *Hill Girl* for Columbia Pictures. Not long after she arrived at the studio, one of the executives summoned her to his office and said rather accusingly, ‘You worked for *The People’s Voice*.’ He indicated that they might have to fire her because of it. Mother was furious,” Elisabeth Petry, *At Home Inside: A Daughter’s Tribute to Ann Petry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 62. Though Petry did not end up losing this job, she certainly experienced firsthand the changing definitions of privacy in the 1950s.

⁹ John Charles, “The Home and the Street: The Dialectics of Racial Privacy in Ann Petry’s Early Career,” *Revising the Blueprint: Ann Petry and the Literary Left*, ed. Alex Lubin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 97.

¹⁰ Hazel Arnett Ervin and Hilary Holladay, eds, *Ann Petry’s Short Fiction: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); Elisabeth Petry, *Can Anything Beat White? A Black Family’s Letters* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

¹¹ Later in this essay, she recalls reading Charles Dickens and Robert Frost in school (263), along with Henry David Thoreau (267). And in explaining her approach in *The Narrows*, she quotes James Baldwin: “The reason that some readers refuse to accept the idea that this was truly a love affair is simply that racism, especially as it manifests itself in reactions to miscegenation is ‘so deeply imbedded in American society, in its laws, in its social structures’ (James Baldwin) that it is impossible for most readers, reviewers, critics to look at Link Williams squarely, forthrightly, head on, and recognize him for the three-dimensional, fully-realized, compelling figure that he is and to recognize the reality and the validity of his love affair with Camilo” (266). And in an interview with Mark K. Wilson, she adds Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, William Faulkner, and Bernard Malamud to her list of influential writers in “A *MELUS* Interview: Ann Petry – the New England Connection” *MELUS* 15.2 (Summer, 1988): 74.

¹² Petry, “Ann Petry,” *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series, Vol. 6*, ed. Adele Sarkissian (Detroit: Gale Research, 1988), 254. Future references will be cited parenthetically as “AP.”

¹³ *Country* has only two other “modern” mentions in Chapter XX “Along Shore,” when the narrator visits Elijah Tilley, in distinguishing “any slender modern dart” from “the good serviceable harpoon of a seventeenth century woodcut” (115) and when the narrator sees his home “which looked strangely modern for its owner” (119). Jewett includes other references to the “outside” world—but these are the only other instances of “modern knowledge,” like Mrs. Fosdick’s, in the novel.

¹⁴ This back cover is a reprinted edition of Petry’s *Country Place* (New York: Signet, 1957). Its original publication is 1947. Future references will be cited parenthetically as *CP*.

¹⁵ Its most recent expression is in Fetterley and Pryse’s work, but dates back to earlier Jewett criticism, such as Marsha McClintock Folsom’s “‘Tact is a Kind of Mind-Reading’: Empathetic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 66-78.

¹⁶ Sybil Weir, “*The Narrows*: A Black New England Novel” (1987), *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005), 143. This essay is the only one to critique Petry’s fiction in a regionalist tradition at length, arguing that this novel is responsive to writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James, and Emily Dickinson.

¹⁷ Fleissner, 279.

¹⁸ In spite of Wheeling’s complexities, Elisabeth Petry acknowledges that her mother “admitted that Wheeling, New York, and Lennox, Connecticut, were Old Saybrook” in *At Home Inside*, 10.

¹⁹ Petry, “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?”, *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 90. Future references will be cited parenthetically as “Anybody.”

²⁰ Petry, “Miss Muriel,” *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 14. Future references will be cited parenthetically as “MM.”

²¹ Alice Childress also portrays her heroine Mildred seeking a “speakin’ place” from her position as a domestic worker in a white family’s kitchen—by frequently considering stories from newspapers and radios that help her understand the social geographies of domestic work—in *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 194. Mildred also decries the lack of books about Harriet Tubman, which Petry addresses in her children’s book about Harriet Tubman’s life (206).

²² Lindon Barrett, “(Further) Figures of Violence: ‘The Street’ in the American Landscape,” *Cultural Critique* 25 (Autumn, 1993): 207.

²³ Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place*, 352.

²⁴ Holladay, “The Wheeling Stories: Prejudice as a Matter of Perspective,” *Ann Petry*, 93-111.

²⁵ Paul Wiebe also points out the importance of the short stories Petry published, while she worked on her children’s books—*Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Crowell, 1955) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (New York: Crowell, 1964)—when he argues: “Along with another short story, ‘Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?’ (1958), ‘Miss Muriel’ was the only work Petry published during the years when she was occupied primarily with her books for young adults. . . ‘Miss Muriel’ can be seen as another side of Petry’s continuing interest in adolescents during this period,” *Ann Petry’s Short Fiction*, 59.

²⁶ Michele Crescenzo, “Reading and Social Critique in Ann Petry’s *The Street*,” *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 232.

²⁷ Holladay, *Ann Petry*, 95.

²⁸ Rachel Peterson compares Lutie’s experiences with the “enervating isolation of domestic service” at the Chandlers with other domestic workers in Petry’s novels in “Invisible Hands at Work: Domestic Service and Meritocracy in Ann Petry’s Novels,” *Revising the Blueprint*, 72.

²⁹ As much as the Layens’ home is surrounded by secrecy for non-family members, Petry emphasizes how it would be an ideal home for Pedro, the “twelve-year-old Portuguese boy” who also works at the drugstore part-time. Though Pedro wishes to “stay in the store all the time,” he does “manage to spend most of his waking hours” among the Layens (“TNM” 66-67). Pedro is privy to family discussions, included among the discussions at the drugstore, so his presence emphasizes how the family is generous to this employee—as a more flexible version of the family’s code of privacy that Petry’s narrator tends to downplay.

³⁰ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xviii.

³¹ Mark Whalan, “The Majesty of the Moment: Sociality and Privacy in the Street Photography of Paul Strand,” *American Art* 25.2 (2011): 49. His emphasis on the ambiguities of street photography engage emerging questions of privacy: “People cared intensely about privacy without being able to say exactly what it was, how it could be protected in law, or how it related to new technologies” (43).

³² My use of the term “life narrative” (as detailed in my introduction) builds upon Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s definition—“a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2010), 4. At stake in their definition is the influence of an assortment of media, which I argue informs the plots of regionalist fiction, when characters seek out information about the lives of other women characters.

³³ Introducing the recent reprint of *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, Edwidge Danticat considers “The New Mirror”: “Not all the stories are tragic, however. ‘The New Mirror’ delivers a good laugh as well as a great example of a family’s defense of its pride,” “Introduction,” *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, ix.

³⁴ Petry, “The Witness,” *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 211. Future references will be cited parenthetically as “W.”

³⁵ Petry first links teachers, coats, and education in *The Street*, when the children, rather than the teacher, are known for their noticeable coats, in the classroom of Lutie’s son Bub, a sharp contrast to Mr. Woodruff’s signature coat, which serves first to mark his status, and later to hold him captive as a witness. Miss Rinner, Bub’s teacher, consistently focuses upon the coats as:

shabby, ragged, with gaping holes in the elbows. None of them fit properly. They were either much too big or much too small. Bits of shedding cat fur formed the collars of the little girls’ coats; the hems were coming out. The instant she looked at them, she felt as though she were suffocating, because any contact with their rubbishy garments was unbearable. (TS 329)

These coats have accumulated the streets, homes and dust and onto them—their smells overwhelm Miss Rinner, so she creates a fixed line between their lives outside the classroom (conveyed by the coats) and the meaningless tasks—“errands” and other “ingenious ways of keeping them occupied”—that they perform each day in her classroom (TS 331). Until the children leave her classroom, the coats remain separate from them. Petry suggests that such coats exemplify the boundaries between teachers and students, students and other students, that go unexamined.

³⁶ In *Country Place*, Petry’s Lennox features the same streetscape: “the Congregational Church on one side, the drugstore across the street from it; and the big expanse of lawn in between” (16). There is also a mirror on the drugstore counter (190).

³⁷ Petry’s coverage of Wheeling is intense in “The Witness.” Blizzard-like conditions explain much of the layered language that opens the story: “under a thick blanket of snow” (211), “ducked his head down” from the “swirled” snow (212)—the term “swirled” echoes the language opening *The Street*, with paper swirling (2)—and “It was so still it would be easy to believe that the entire population had died and lay buried under the snow” (213),

³⁸ Roger Sherman Loomis, Helen R. Hull, and Mabel Louse Robinson, *The Art of Writing Prose: Revised Edition* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc, 1936), 389-437, 438-468.

³⁹ His bibliography is *Black Writers in New England: A Bibliography, with Biographical Notes, of Books By and About Afro-American Writers Associated with New England in the Collection of Afro-American Literature* (Boston: National Park Service, 1985) and his Petry entry includes a half-page photograph of her, a list of her publications and credentials: “novelist, short story writer, writer of books for young people. Born and has lived most of life in Old Saybrook, Conn.; graduate, Connecticut College of Pharmacy, 1931; registered pharmacist Old Saybrook and Old Lyme, 1931-1938” (51-52).

⁴⁰ In “The Witness,” Woodruff’s late wife Addie offers another model of clipping, in her paper dolls “cut all at once, exactly alike” (“W” 220). Woodruff recalls how her “skilled hands” could “take paper and fold it and go snip, snip, snip with the scissors and she’d have a string of paper dolls, all fat, or all thin, or all bent over, or all wearing top hats or all bearded Santas or all Cheshire cats” (“W” 220). Woodruff’s memory of Addie’s precision at cutting out paper dolls points to his admiration of her “arts and crafts” work in “the teacher-training courses for elementary-school teachers at Virginia College” (“W” 220), but acknowledges her paper dolls while he is thinking about conformity among the boys in Wheeling.

⁴¹ Petry, “The Bones of Louella Brown,” *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 163, 169; Petry, “The Necessary Knocking on the Door,” *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 249.

⁴² Petry, “Solo on the Drums,” *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 241.

⁴³ Arlene R. Keizer, “Black Feminist Criticism,” *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 155. Cheryl Wall also describes how this fiction of the early 1970s was “set in small towns and rural backwaters, this writing focused on conflicts between black men and women as well as between blacks and whites. And it told its stories in language that was often a wonder,” in “1970: Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker,” *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 968.

⁴⁴ Bernard W. Bell, “Ann Petry’s Demythologizing of American Culture and Afro-American Character” (1985), *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, 68; Margaret B. McDowell, “The Narrows: A Fuller View of Ann Petry” (1980), *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, 131.

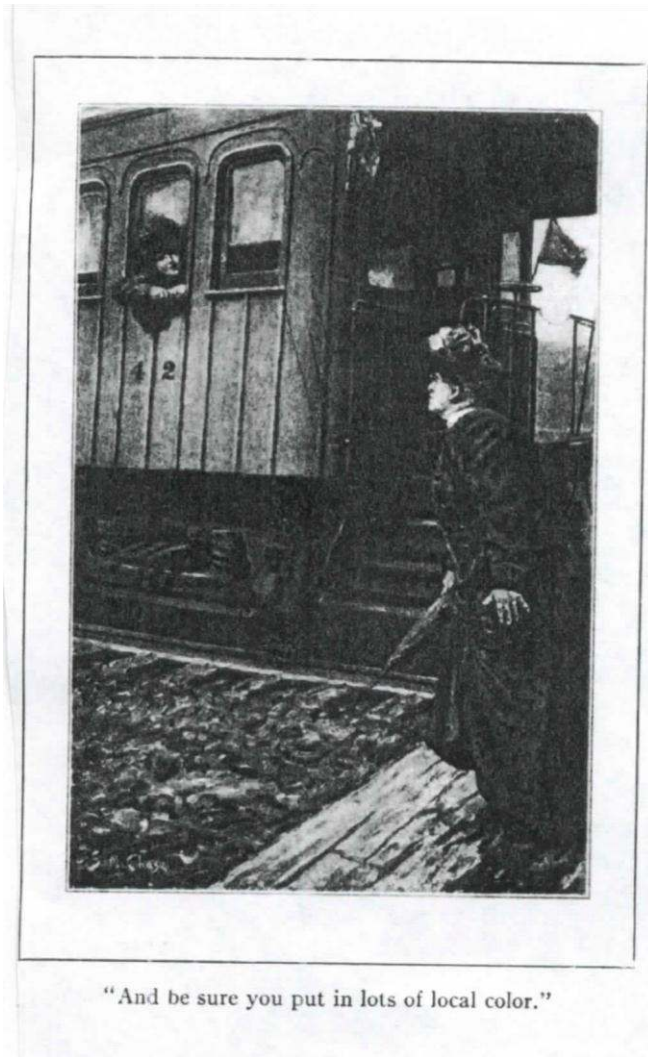
⁴⁵ Nellie McKay, “Ann Petry’s The Street and The Narrows: A Study of the Influences of Class, Race, and Gender on Afro-American Women’s Lives” (1990), *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, 157; Heather J. Hicks “‘This Strange Communion’: Surveillance and Spectatorship in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (2003),” *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, 309. Calvin C. Hernton also argues: “That *The Street* is a pioneer work of womanist/feminist protest is unmistakable. But it does not go beyond protest,” in “The Significance of Ann Petry,” *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*, 115.

⁴⁶ Mary Helen Washington, “Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers,” *Black American Literature Forum* 11.1 (Spring, 1977): 20.

⁴⁷ Elsa Barkley Brown, “African-American Women’s Quilting” *Signs* 14.4 (Summer, 1989): 929.

⁴⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14.4 (Summer 1989): 915. While Petry’s “A New Mirror” makes light of Samuel Layen’s disappearance, it offers only one side to a Wheeling picture-postcard in which Nellie’s and Woodruff’s horrific evening begins just across the street, behind a church. While Woodruff and the Wheeling narrator are linked in their clipping practices, Nellie and the Wheeling narrator also mirror one another, as young women who attend high school with students like Rambler and his friends. While the narrator acknowledges that she and her friend Ruth “are very much alike,” but are “not alike in one respect. She is white and I am black” (“MM” 1), the narrator is incredibly sheltered from the danger that Nellie faces, but is still positioned just across the street from it.

⁴⁹ Keith Clark’s “‘From a Thousand Different Points of View’: The Multiple Masculinities of Ann Petry’s ‘Miss Muriel’” reads the tirade as showing “how masculinity is contested, his [Samuel Layen’s] language revealing a fragmented, amorphous manhood that renders ‘wholeness’ illusive. Moreover, the word ‘piece’ clearly connotes a sort of sexual inadequacy, further exposing modern masculinity as tenuous and phallic” in *Ann Petry’s Short Fiction: Critical Essays*, 85.



"And be sure you put in lots of local color."

Figure 4: This frontispiece to Annie Trumbull Slosson's "A Local Colorist" portrays a fleeting encounter between two friends at a train station and the evasive definitions of the local color genre for beginning writers. Whatever this local color may be, a well-read woman advises her friend that the more local color the better, for success in the literary marketplace of her day.

Chapter 4: “Some Kind of a Writin’ Person:” Regionalism’s Unfinished Women Writers

Whether a summer visitor to Dunnet Landing, a childhood friend sharing a train ride with Jim Burden, or a teenaged drugstore clerk in Wheeling, these unnamed narrators—also women writers—are adding up. Jewett, Cather, and Petry contribute to an atmosphere of both uncertainty and opportunity for representing women writers fictionally during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These nameless writers begin, but do not complete their writing projects: the *Country* narrator rushes to write under deadline in a schoolhouse (but readers never see her publication completed), Cather’s unnamed narrator (who vanishes after the introduction to *My Ántonia*) never gets beyond her assorted notes in writing an account of Ántonia’s life, and Petry’s Wheeling narrator begins to write down her daily experiences in “Miss Muriel,” but this habit is no longer discussed in her adulthood. All of these unnamed women narrators are presumably writers of prose—the *Country* narrator’s deadline does not seem conducive to poetry writing, both the introductory writer in *My Ántonia* and the Wheeling narrator aspire to some form of life writing. Because these writers lack names and their writing lacks finish, we can wonder: why present a woman writer, only to render her unnamed; why make her writing present, only to leave it incomplete?

When these women are writing or are about to write, they all come in contact with masculine traditions of poetry reading and recitation: Captain Littlepage’s books for maritime reading, Jim Burden’s days spent reading (classical poetry or boys’ adventure stories) and, of course, Dottle Smith’s elocution that fascinates Petry’s unnamed narrator, while she writes. Defining each of these masculine poetic traditions—a Miltonic, Shakespearean captain, a Virgilian student, an elocution instructor/Shakespearean

performer—is a haunting figure that only Mr. Layen imagines aloud: a poet dressed in petticoats and a bonnet. These three unnamed women writers converse with named—even storied—male readers and reciters of poetry, reflecting the intensely gendered reactions to regionalism, in the critical stories frequently told about its influence on later writers.¹ Since Jewett, Cather and Petry feature women writers, unnamed and unfinished, this chapter concludes my dissertation by specifying their shared interest in the life narratives of women writers, placing their work alongside other regionalists committed to interrogating the literary value of women writers.

Unnamed women writers working among masculine literary traditions continue the work of earlier regionalists in representing writers, especially the stereotypical nineteenth-century poetesses, the focus of this chapter: figures frequently caricatured for their sweetly sentimental, perfectly rhyming poetry for a number of public events ranging from funerals to celebrations. Poetesses have been gaining a great deal of critical interest and even influence, in recent years.² The current *OED* entry for “poetess” reads: “A female poet; a woman who composes poetry”; and then, in smaller font, “The gender-neutral *poet* is now often preferred.”³ The definition itself is seemingly straightforward, but the smaller-font explanation below it challenges the term’s continued usage and emphasizes the varying scales through which the poetess is defined, against masculine traditions and among the roles available for women writers in the literary marketplace.⁴

In the late nineteenth century, American regionalists—surrounded by a number of these practicing poetesses—place them in their prose and also in contact with a variety of literary traditions; from these fictionalized conversations, readers can think more carefully about the differences articulated among writers in different genres, including

questions of cultural inferiority and the gendered expectations of authorship for the women writers that Jewett, Cather and Petry do not name.⁵ Indeed, the recurring presence of poetesses in regionalist fiction confirms Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins's limiting and relational definition of the poetess as "an increasingly empty figure," but "a medium for cultural exchange, a common name upon which much depends."⁶ This concluding chapter contributes to such discussions of capacity and dearth, fullness and emptiness in recent rereadings of poetess poetry, by focusing upon regionalist writers who include fuller versions of poetesses: to understand how writers adapt and invent them fictionally. In this regionalist archive, writers portray conflict and collaboration, discussions and debates, silences and support—revising the stereotypical representations of an inspired genius poetess writing her verses in solitude into her role among gatherings of women writers seeking interested audiences and constructive responses for their work.⁷ Fictionalized poetesses spark discussions of literary value, surrounding a woman writer with conversations, silences, other writers and other genres.

Poetesses are not simply writers of poetry; they are also characters in regionalism. Their life narratives cast regionalism as a genre where both unprecedented and necessary conversations among writers take place, to voice the promising and limiting labels of authorship. Because poetesses do not always present an individualized "I" in their poetry, I believe that regionalist fiction provides an invaluable resource for us to consider the cultural project of interrogating writers at work, in their daily lives among other women writers, named and unnamed.⁸

Though these women writers remain unnamed for Jewett, Cather and Petry, they respond to a legacy of regionalist writers who do name the current tensions surrounding poetesses and other writers: like novelists, reporters and local color writers. When Huckleberry Finn stands in the room of Emmeline Grangerford, a deceased poetess, surrounded only by her scrapbooks and pictures, he can only imagine what her life was and what her writing could have been like, suggesting that Mark Twain's well-known prose encounter with an isolated poetess is but one story to tell.⁹ The first three sections of this chapter shift our attention from such solitary, mythologized, and even deceased poetesses to the daily lives of women writers who experience different relationships with the traditions of poetesses: first, the silences and conversations between practicing poetesses and other writers in Jewett's and Mary Wilkins Freeman's short fiction; second, reporters' awkward encounters with Julia A. Moore, the "Sweet Singer of Michigan;" and third, an aspiring woman writer who is choosing between writing poetry or local color as an "authoress" in Annie Trumbull Slosson's "A Local Colorist."¹⁰

Because Jewett and Freeman publish their fiction in the 1890s, the interviews with Moore take place in 1878 and 1910, and Slosson's story considers the array of options available to women writers in 1912, the nineteenth-century poetess figure continues to influence and provide sources for self-definition for women writers of the early twentieth century.¹¹ This is not only a fictional legacy, since—as my next section shows—Annie Fields relies upon visual vocabularies, when she prefaces her edited epistolary collections to commemorate the lives of her friends Celia Thaxter, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Jewett. As a writer writing about other writers, Fields suggests that portraits offer but one face for depicting the lives of women writers, since she calls for

biographical writing that records their daily lives with attention to their more social, conversational faces.

While I have shown in other chapters how Jewett, Cather and Petry advocate visual vocabularies for framing the lives of others fictionally, this chapter includes their unnamed, unfinished women writers among the overlooked traditions of literary regionalism as a genre where conversations about authorship take place. Writers engage with poetesses not to exclude them, but to make room for discussions of writers in many genres and the tensions among them.¹² By considering the overlap between poetess poetry and regionalist fiction, these two “minor” traditions—long associated with languages of deprivation and distance from elite literary cultures—instead name more collective representations of writing characters and writing practices in American literary history.

Practicing Poetesses: Jewett’s Mary Anna, Freeman’s Betsey Dole

“...and then appeared a poetess...” – Jewett’s *Country*

Jewett and Freeman, two of the most well-known regionalists, feature poetesses in regionalism, in order to portray their relationships with other practicing writers, offering readers representations of poetesses that do not begin with the endings of their lives, relying less upon memories or elegies appearing soon after her death. Even so, Edith Wharton seeks to distance herself from their regionalist tradition, turning to a visual metaphor: “For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-colored spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins [Freeman] and Sarah Orne Jewett.”¹³ When Jewett and Freeman look at

poetesses, however, their rose-colored spectacles are at least bifocals, since they focus upon the rosy perceptions and rigid practices defining poetesses, as writers appraised both for their public appearances and their unspoken histories known only to a few listeners.

Jewett's unnamed *Country* narrator listens to such a poetess at the Bowden family reunion—at what was the original ending to the novel, as it was serialized in the *Atlantic*. Jewett positions her poetess into a clear hierarchy, reading after the ministers and the historian. The narrator notes: “then appeared a poetess, whom Mrs. Todd regarded with wistful compassion and indulgence, and when the long faded garland of verses came to an appealing end, she turned to me with words of praise” (109). The narrator acknowledges “the long faded garland of verses” the poetess recites, without citing any of them—knowing that such a poetess’s words need not be quoted to be recognized as a genre. Mrs. Todd then fills in the blanks of this poetess’s life and mentions her name aloud: Mary Anna. I quote Mrs. Todd’s paragraph-length memories in full:

‘Sounded pretty,’ said the generous listener [Mrs. Todd]. ‘Yes, I thought she did very well. We went to school together, an’ Mary Anna had a very hard time; trouble was, her mother thought she’d given birth to a genius, an’ Mary Anna’s come to believe it herself. There, I don’t know what we should have done without her; there ain’t nobody else that can write poetry between here and ‘way up towards Rockland; it adds a great deal at such a time. When she speaks o’ those that are gone, she feels it all, and so does everybody else, but she harps too much. I’d laid half of that away for next time, if I was Mary Anna. There comes

mother to speak to her, an' old Mr. Gilbraith's sister; now she'll be heartened right up. Mother'll say just the right thing. (109)

Mrs. Todd and Mary Anna have learned in the same schoolroom (like the one the unnamed narrator has rented for writing that summer), but have found different modes of expression for supporting their lives: Mary Anna's verses and Mrs. Todd's herbs. As she crams Mary Anna's life into the briefest of descriptions to the narrator, readers get the rare sense that Mrs. Todd is cringing at the performance. Mary Anna is one of the few characters that the narrator does not get to meet directly, once she has had Mrs. Todd's pre-introduction; even Mrs. Todd's story of Joanna inspires the narrator to take a boat to see her home on Shell-Heap Island. Mrs. Todd seems especially relieved that her mother, rather than she herself, will speak to Mary Anna. While the narrator has come to know Mrs. Todd as a woman who facilitates, rather than hinders, relationships among Dunnet Landing and the Bowden family, she also witnesses Mrs. Todd's critique of Mary Anna's poetry and life.

Of course, Mrs. Todd praises Mary Anna's initial words, but then begins to measure the proportions of Mary Anna's genius— in “it adds a great deal,” “she feels it all,” “she harps too much,” and “I'd laid half of that away for next time, if I was Mary Anna.” She apportions Mary Anna's contributions to the reunion into what she should give now and what might best be kept back for another time. Even though Mary Anna has much to say, Mrs. Todd—and presumably many others in the audience—knows how much is too much. Unlike Mrs. Todd, whose critique struggles to be sensitive to Mary Anna's upbringing and effort, her mother will know how to speak proportionately, to respond to the gathering's poetess, “just right.”

As the Bowden family begins leaving, the narrator experiences a moment of connection: “I came near to feeling like a true Bowden, and parted from certain new friends as if they were old friends; we were rich with the treasure of a new remembrance” (110). This connection is not forged out of any contact between Mary Anna and the unnamed narrator, also a writer. Jewett pointedly makes “leave-takings” (109) the focus directly after the poetess. Third in line to speak—the final public voice—Mary Anna’s words mark endings, rather than beginnings. It would be fascinating for Jewett to have staged a conversation between this poetess and the unnamed narrator (rather than just Mrs. Todd’s mother who already knows her and what to say), but perhaps its absence tells us more than any conversation could. This gathering marks a silence between a Boston writer who works for a deadline, without mention of her family or talents, and a poetess defined by her mother’s personality, who can afford to take as long as she needs to in reading her poetry. What would they say to one another? Can Jewett imagine the conversation? Can we? Jewett leaves these questions unanswered, at this conclusion to her serialized novel, suggesting that the *Country* narrator is not quite at home among the Bowdens as she believes, unable to find the words to talk to the only poetry writer of the entire region.

Though the narrator keeps her distance from Mary Anna, she is not so withdrawn in her praise of another woman she meets, just before Mary Anna’s reading. This woman is in charge of making the “elaborate reading matter” on the desserts, which so impresses the narrator that she comments “it is joyful to be reassured at a Bowden reunion that invention has not yet failed” (108). At first, the narrator’s words seem condescending, but she immediately acknowledges that “the decorations went beyond all my former

experience: dates and names were wrought in lines of pastry and frosting on the tops” (108), suggesting that the frosted words at the reunion, besides the poetess’s, can get the narrator’s attention. She listens to the woman who is “the maker of the gingerbread” (108), describing the project: “ ‘It wasn’t all I expected it would be,’ she said sadly, as many an artist had said before her of his work” (109). To this woman, and not to Mary Anna, the narrator attributes the status of an artist, but she is one among men, rather than other women artists.

Mary Anna and this gingerbread baker are, indeed, both artists, who likely know one another, but the narrator creates a division between them, based on her treatment and appreciation of their art. Despite all her ease at the Bowden family reunion, the *Country* narrator falls short at making a substantive connection with another writer. Jewett’s briefest mention of a poetess, quick background from Mrs. Todd, and silence from the *Country* narrator both differentiates Mary Anna from the rest of the gathering and defines her among other artists (the gingerbread maker and the narrator), speakers (ministers and the historian), and friends (Mrs. Todd and her mother). This constellation of relationships permits Jewett to comment upon Mary Anna’s isolation and to show how easy it is for the pair of women writers at a family gathering to avoid conversation.

Jewett represents Mary Anna as a practicing poetess, suggesting that we can do better than studying the lives of poetesses only after they have died. When Jewett describes her reasons for writing regionalism, she is careful to refer to her role as a writer, and not just an inhabitant of Maine, in her 1893 preface to her novel *Deephaven*: “The young writer of these *Deephaven* sketches was possessed by a dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one another, or learn to profit by their new

relationship.”¹⁴ When she considers her beliefs as a younger writer, she is putting herself into contact with another version of herself as a writer—one younger, one current—which she includes among the townspeople and country people. Writers become, as Jewett advocates, “others” to one another in regionalism with attention to the minutiae of what is written and not written, in inventing and including the daily practices taking place between their careers’ beginnings and endings.

The life narratives of deceased poetesses like Emmeline Grangerford can be pursued with care and concern for their roles among other writers of their day, offering more filling accounts than what poetry is left in her bedroom, paying attention to the ways in which she positions herself among relationships—to her writing, in the daily practices of being a poetess and working in solitude; and to her publics, in her words, silences and responses to supportive and hostile audiences. Regionalist fiction records both of these life narratives, revealing to readers that measuring both the influences and struggles of poetesses is far more complicated than we might expect.

In her 1891 story “A Poetess,” Freeman details how a lifelong practicing poetess suddenly receives a diminishing review of her literary talent—in direct contrast to Mary Anna, who is oblivious to commentary like Mrs. Todd’s. Freeman’s poetess Betsey Dole is at once a youthful and aged writer, fifty years old with “streaky light hair in curls like a young girl.”¹⁵ However, her girlish age is measured more accurately in the “lines of grief” that appear along her face, when she expresses her sorrow in writing verses to memorialize the death of Mrs. Caxton’s Willie. Her lines are both poetic and facial, suggesting that Betsey is someone not afraid to wear her heart on her sleeve (or, in her case, lines on her face). Poetry, it seems, evidences the lines in her face, as her earnest

commitment to the ones that she is willing to write. By showing that her professional activity makes her less child-like, but seemingly more dependent on the needs of others, Betsey's lines are ones that individualize her skill at memorializing others, but inextricably connect her to her neighbor Mrs. Caxton and the community around her.

Mrs. Caxton plays an important role in broadening Betsey's imagined readerly public, when she tearfully relates her plan for wider circulation of the elegiac poetry Betsey will write for Willie. Mrs. Caxton plans to preserve it as "some lines printed on some sheets of white paper with a neat black border. I'd like to send some to my folks, and one to the Perkinses in Brigham, and there's a good many others I thought would value 'em" (144). For the first time, Betsey's verses have social, circulatory value, based upon new imagined readers, rather than listeners at a funeral or in newspaper verse. Mrs. Caxton's desire to circulate the poetry reminds Betsey that grief-stricken lines on her face, in full display when she reads her lines at funerals, will not complement the poems. Her poetry has to create lines of connection among imagined readers, rather than relying upon a single, more performative reading at a funeral.

Yet her excitement for new readership goes away, once she begins writing. She becomes less concerned with the time it takes her to write and more aware of her "solemn intonation" (146) she gives to her verses as she writes them. Just when readers might think that Betsey can transcend the stereotyped vision of an Emmeline Grangerford, surrounded by her lovely lines, Freeman too turns to Betsey's surroundings and finds nothing different to tell:

Betsey in this room, bending over her portfolio, looked like the very genius of gentle, old-fashioned, sentimental poetry. It seemed as if one, given the premises of herself and the room, could easily deduce what she would write and read without seeing those lines wherein flowers rhymed sweetly with vernal bowers, home with beyond the tomb, and heaven with even. (146-147)

Freeman abbreviates Betsey's writing, which confirms what readers already assume about a tired and oft-evoked portrait of the poetess hard at work. Once she begins describing Betsey's surroundings, Freeman realizes that her readers can fill in the blanks, between the rhyming lines, to surmise for themselves Betsey's room and her writing.

Freeman limits the role that Betsey can play in furthering stereotypes of feminine genius, but suggests that Mrs. Caxton's promised readers bring something even more promising to the discussion, once her poetry circulates into parlors and tables of houses other than Betsey's. Caricaturing the poetess's writing practices, Freeman depicts Betsey's posture as holding "her handkerchief in her lap with her portfolio" (147). The handkerchief is just as important to her writing process as "an old black portfolio and pen and ink" (146) is, suggesting that the poetess's poetry must first move the poetess to tears, before anyone else.

For all the practice Betsey has had in assuming the postures and practices of a poetess, her materials are not nearly as abundant as listeners like Mrs. Caxton may suspect. For this poetess, a paper-bound volume can collect the many pieces of her chosen craft "backs of old letters and odd scraps of paper" (148) into a more lasting document to be passed around her community. Even though Betsey carefully fills her day with the food allotted during writing and the schedule of chores to be accomplished

as she writes, writing materials themselves are scarce. Indeed, Freeman carefully notes that this shortage affects Betsey's ability to sustain any larger project, since she tends to think about her poetry as an assembly of whatever papers are currently available to her. Her excessively feminine, overly ornate, poetry is the product of materials in short supply.

Eventually, Betsey turns a poem made of scraps into a rolled-up copy that she can present to Mrs. Caxton, a transformation that enlarges the poem and its anticipated circles of readership. Once Mrs. Caxton cries, after reading the poetry, Betsey daydreams: "It was to her as if her poem had been approved and accepted by one of the great magazines" (150). If Betsey can inspire another reader to reach for a handkerchief, her poetry has accomplished her goal. Once Mrs. Caxton confirms that "two dozen" copies will be printed, Betsey has another publication fantasy: "It was to Betsey like a large edition of a book. She had written obituary poems before but never one had been printed in this sumptuous fashion" (151). Very quickly, scraps of paper become rolled paper, suitable for acceptance in a magazine and then for inclusion in a book. Betsey's poetry also has a new place in her home, outside her writing desk and portfolio: "Betsey kept the poem pinned on the wall under the looking-glass; if any one came in, she tried with delicate hints to call attention to it" (152). As Freeman focuses more upon the ever-growing dimensions of Betsey's publications inside her home, and imagined by the writer, she also reveals how little her neighbors still know of this poetess's daily life, besides her now-publicized lines: "Nobody knew how frugal Betsey Dole's suppers and breakfasts and dinners were" (151).

Unfortunately, Betsey's aspirations are soon crushed, when she receives an indirect review of that circulated, framed poetry from one minister who has published poetry in one of the prominent magazines that Betsey is surely imagining during her conversation with Mrs. Caxton. When Mrs. Caxton relates this news, she tries to motivate her friend to send her poetry to magazines in order to disprove the minister's evaluation (153). She stands up for Betsey, not suggesting that her work needs improvement in private, but that she too needs to make her poetry public for the same evaluation that the minister has received. Betsey is so taken aback by this unexpected commentary that she does not pursue what could be a telling appraisal on the literary market, for better or for worse. Most likely, Betsey's work will be rejected—as Freeman's assessment suggests—but Mrs. Caxton encourages Betsey to take the next step and seek that evaluation, to see where her poetry is and is not appreciated. Nowhere does Mrs. Caxton suggest that she shares the dismissive evaluation of the minister; if anything, Betsey needs to think about even wider audiences for her poetry.

After her unfavorable review, Betsey quickly becomes sick; soon she knows that she will die. Once she calls the minister to her bedside—the same one who has published his poetry and dismisses hers—she makes a dying request that leaves him both full and empty of emotion: “colored” by her compliments and esteem for his poetry and then “pale with bewilderment and sympathy” (158-9): he is to write the lines memorializing her. Though her poetry has been devalued, she burns it, since she believes “I've been thinkin' that—mebbe my—dyin' was goin' to make me—a good subject for—poetry, if I never wrote none” (159). Her request implies just how much his review has diminished the value of her writing, since she believes that she can only afford good

elegiac poetry, if none of her bad poetry for others exists. Or has she found the perfect revenge for his comments, in making him realize that he is not comfortable—or able—to write a meaningful elegy, which she has written for others throughout her life? Even though the minister has published elsewhere, her seemingly simple request flusters him. Her request also suggests that there isn't a clear legacy of poetesses—think of Mary Anna, as the only one in the area— and that other published poets are not suited to take on the social roles that the poetess has been limited to, throughout her life, roles that are still especially desirable, outside the pages of literary magazines. What will the minister's obituary poetry have to say about a poetess who no longer claims her writing? Will it be obituary poetry at all? What sorts of innovations or imitations will he offer?

Freeman engages the poetess caricature only to redefine it in the communities of writers and readers surrounding her. Mrs. Caxton is a promising, supportive reader for Betsey, who is still asked to leave the room by the end of the story (157), while the minister is tasked with preserving her legacy, once his critique destroys the one that Betsey has already written for herself. Since a poetess is grasping at her handkerchief and portfolio to churn out verses on demand, appearing at funerals to recite those verses for mourning communities, Freeman suggests that public critique can challenge the ways that a poetess appears to herself; Betsey dies grasping to make sense of her legacy as a writer whose lines are no longer written or read. Both Jewett and Freeman suggest that the poetess's public performances and private evaluations do not add up, creating tension in her daily practices of writing.

Because regionalists' engagement with a poetess is not necessarily an endorsement of her, they cast her among an assortment of writers and readers, creating a

much-needed, extended dialogue like the one that Sarah Burns has identified between visual artists and their self-representations in mass media: “artists as actors who are acted upon, representing themselves and being represented.”¹⁶ By including conversations about writing, among writers, regionalism provides an overlooked site for witnessing the transformative energies surrounding the lives of women writers, both young and old, modeling the changing relationships between them and their public spheres. Paula Bernat Bennett terms these nineteenth-century transitions in authorship an “evolution, that is through piecemeal changes unremarkable in themselves”; Mary Loeffelholz defines the transitioning roles and opportunities for women writers in terms of two different settings: “a shift from reading, reciting, writing, and publishing poetry in the didactic context of primary and secondary schooling to reading, reciting, and publishing poetry in the emergent later nineteenth-century venues of autonomous high culture, like the salon.”¹⁷ While Bennett and Loeffelholz rely upon a wide sampling of women’s poetry at separate moments in the nineteenth century, regionalism provides dialogue among writers as they experience the success and struggles that come with these new models of public spheres—new readers, critics, and ways of receiving criticism and praise. By surrounding poetesses with other writers, artists and public figures, Jewett and Freeman portray—with great clarity—the communities influencing the daily lives of poetesses before her room is empty, her life memorialized.

Reporters Meet the Sweet Singer of Michigan

Perhaps you've read the papers
Containing my interview;
I hope you kind good people
Will not believe it true.

-- Julia A. Moore's "To My Friends and Critics"¹⁸

Regionalists are not the only writers portraying poetesses. Reporters frequently travel to meet poetesses and incorporate their experiences into their interviews, as feature stories that read a lot like regionalist fiction. While regionalists might not be seeking to crush the dreams of poetesses, a pair of interviews with Julia A. Moore, known as the "Sweet Singer of Michigan" capture the conversations between writers, showing that journalists and regionalists were especially intrigued by poetesses. While the interviews are presumably about the poetess, the reporter still records her reactions to the poetess, placing these two writers into contact, much in the way that Jewett and Freeman do. Known for her regional poetry "Early Days of Rockford," "The Author's Early Life" and "Grand Rapids," Moore receives reporters at her home in Michigan and their simple question-and-answer format between two writers contribute, like Jewett's and Freeman's writers, to an emerging genre of poetess stories.

In these frequently non-urban settings, the poetess figure becomes more limiting and less legible, alongside reporters. While reporters certainly seek to play up stereotypical characteristics of a poetess, there are moments where her story seems to be cut off, in favor of their interests. In "A Poetess," it is not a reporter, but another writer and reader who calibrate the confidence that Betsey Dole has in herself and her poetry. But her story—writing poetry on an as-needed basis, until she finds out that someone thinks it is not good—is hardly unique in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Moore

finds herself the subject of such a poetess story in a pair of interviews from 1878 and in 1910 included in *Mortal Refrains: The Complete Collected Poetry, Prose, and Songs of Julia A. Moore, The Sweet Singer of Michigan*. Between the publications of these interviews, the poetess who finds her work warmly received and then ridiculed has become a popular trope and an overdetermined aspect in the life narrative of her career, almost expected from her audience, but less predictable to her, since she is plotted as most surprised at the news.

On January 12, 1878, E. A. Stowe published an interview with Moore, adhering to the conventions of poetesses portrayed in regionalism, but opening up a position for her to challenge those representations. Seeking the home of the “famous poetess,” Stowe leaves the railroad station and pauses along the road to remember her poetry, as though it leads directly to her home. His arrangement of the interview tightly interweaves quotations from her poetry with a story about arriving in Edgerton, Michigan, to interview her. He dwells initially upon her physical appearance—acknowledging that she is, at last, “a myth no longer” for him (220)—to reveal how she embodies both full and sparse stereotypes of women writers, from her “abundance” of hair, “large, winsome eyes” to her posture: “slight in figure, decidedly inelegant in appearance, and about five feet in height” (220). For him, these characteristics render her more real and less mythic to him, but his recorded questions continually condescend to her, in ways that cast her as unaware of his tactics: “Can you sit down and write anytime, or does this wonderful gift come by inspiration?” (221) and “Which one of your poems do you consider your masterpiece?” (222). To this second question, Moore responds “My what?” and Stowe realizes that she does not even think of her poetry in the language of masterpieces at all,

so he rephrases, thinking she simply does not know what a masterpiece is: “Which one of your poems do you think is the best one?” (222) Because he has to ask again, his interview emphasizes how much Moore is seemingly distanced from—but still always defined against and outside of— current literary practices.

Even when he asks her “which of the great poets do you most admire?” (224), her answer isolates her, making her work seem far more uninformed and detached: “Well, I can’t say, for I never read any of ‘em. I like my ‘Sentimental Song Book’ the best for all I know” (224). Her answer is more ambiguous than Stowe gives her credit for. Since she is unfamiliar with the “great” poets, she cannot compare their poetry with her own—or even choose one to discuss. Her response, however, does not address any other not-great poets she might have read or listened to, as she acknowledges. A general question about her reading habits might have provoked a more interesting response, but Stowe plays up his attempts (and undoubtedly failures) to locate her within traditional narratives of literary history. While Stowe moves on breezily to ask about her vacation plans (she has none), she does not have the opportunity to discuss any other tradition of poetry besides the great one, which her answer demonstrates that she simply cannot discuss (224). The distance between Chicago conventions and Edgerton’s limitations is Stowe’s chosen technique for parodying all that Moore lacks, placing her outside current traditions.

The most explicit commentary upon poetesses’ literary value comes towards the final part of the interview, when Stowe asks “have you ever been interviewed before?” (225) Acknowledging Stowe as “the first man that’s ever been here this way,” Moore notes that “I’ve seen lots of interviews in the papers, but they were all lies—none of ‘em true” (225). Her inexperience with the interviewer and his techniques belies her sharp

ability to read the interviews and coverage of her in the newspapers—and to realize the constructed qualities of the genre. Her only interview, which gives away her novice status in the literary world, comes after reading many others—which do not present her satisfactorily. Though she does not have reporters visiting her, she does acknowledge contact and correspondence among “a good many people come here to see me, and if I answered all the letters I get it would take all my time. I get from six to eleven letters a day, from all over the country, asking for my autograph. A good many are from people who have tried to write poetry, and who haven’t succeeded very well” (221). Another reporter might ask to take a look at the letters or ask a follow-up question about how she responds to them, but Stowe leaves those questions unasked, content to let these words stand for themselves. Moore’s letter-writing practice has opened up another opportunity for her self-representation and efforts at communicating with other writers, but we are left to wonder what sorts of advice Moore’s letters and responses offer them.

As Stowe begins to leave, he realizes that “the sweet singer would have talked all day, but train time was near at hand, and I tore myself away” (225). Paced by the train and not his conversation with Moore, Stowe departs. Indeed, it is the punctuality of the train itself that begins and concludes his observations of Moore among Edgerton. His story mirrors the techniques of descriptive abundance and literary lack to portray a poetess who adheres to his presumptions, but deters from common conventions that he is familiar with, as a reporter for a Chicago newspaper. Regionalist storytelling, then, informs his model for conveying a poetess who talks too much, but lacks the experience and savvy to answer his questions in ways that he expects. Like Betsey Dole’s

conversation with the minister, Moore's conversation with Stowe signals her outsider status in order to make her life legible in regionalist conventions.

Though the pitfalls of her first interview might be chalked up to Moore's inexperience and Stowe's inept questions, a later interview plants her even more firmly into the poetess category. Mary E. Remington reports on Moore, more than thirty years after Stowe's interview, for the *Grand Rapids Press* on February 4, 1910. The headline "Julia A. Moore, The Sweet Singer, Mellowed by Years" suggests that it has a wider scope even among her narrow setting: "where the wide gray rim of horizon closes in the snow clad country from all the rest of the world" (226). Remington is fascinated by the contrast between "the blithe young poetess and writer of 'Sentimental Songs,'" and her current role as "a portly, motherly looking woman of sixty or more who long ago awakened from the enticing illusion that she was a great poet" (226). The greatest transition in her life is not simply the publication of her collection, but is instead—as Remington's headline puts it—"Then the Awakening Came"—when parody and mockery replace what she considered the positive initial reception of her poetry, "thus leading the unsuspecting young poetess to believe that she was a great genius" (226). Remington, unlike Stowe, at least imagines a career for Moore that might have happened were her surroundings different:

Even now in her old age, when ambitions lie far back in the past, and the shortening days of the future are closing in about her Julia A. Moore impresses as a woman of strong, rugged personality, a woman of undoubted originality who, had she been given the early advantages of education and the contact with broader

life, might have achieved a worthy and permanent work in some department of activity. (232)

Julia A. Moore is not a name defined by her lack of skill; instead Remington attributes Moore's "awakening" to the scale of her social contacts surrounding her, suggesting that Moore alone cannot be blamed for Moore's poetry. Of course, Remington suggests that such influences might have inspired the poetess to pursue, more generally, "some department of activity"—which sounds like she is encouraging a path besides poetry-writing. Remington's interview portrays a poetess's awakening as less a failure of individual talent, more a product of a circle of readers and critics who do the poetess's future a disservice, as her poetry receives acclaim and then disdain.

This awakening recipe-like formula for poetesses—first, a dash of exuberant, initial praise, then a pound of criticism—describes Betsey Dole's experiences, though hers is on a much smaller scale, from elation over publication to disappointment over reception. Remington renders Moore's current home in Edgerton a consequence of her literary downfall, from "the glittering delusion of literary success" and "all the pomp and pride of authorship" to the "specter of disappointment and darker shadow of humiliation" (227). While Remington is seeking a formula for mapping the downfall of a poetess's life after the peak of her celebrity, her "awakening" formula establishes authority for Remington, to reflect upon the common milestones of a poetess, which are far from those that Remington would expect to encounter in her reporting career. Importantly, this downfall is not a reversible one for Moore, since Remington notes how "these shadows have never left her, but have haunted her night and day ever since" (227). In moving from supposedly celebrated to undeniably notorious fame, Moore gains self-awareness of

her poetry's reception, but loses her desire to address friends *and* critics as her readers; instead, she relies more upon the discriminating, careful eyes of her friendly readers, whom she hopes will view her poetry less critically.

While Stowe and Remington present Moore's life narrative conventionally, making their interviews resemble regionalism, their roles in each article suggest just how "other" to one another that a reporter and poetess can be. Moore channels her initial frustration with inaccurate newspaper articles (and reporters) into her poem "To My Friends and Critics," leaving room for more productive questions—and maybe even answers—between reporters and poetesses:

The papers have ridiculed me
A year and a half or more.
Such slander as the interview
I never read before.
Some reporters and editors
Are versed in telling lies
Others it seems are willing
To let industry rise. (115)

By separating some reporters and editors from others, Moore suggests that not all hope is lost for poetesses in newspapers. Instead, she encourages "the people of good judgment" to "read the papers through" (115). She relies upon the strength of her friendships and the skills of her readers to respond to slander with support. For Julia A. Moore, public life narratives, recorded in newspaper articles, emphasize first her distanced home and daily practices, then her awakening and disappointment as a poetess. While many narratives of

poetesses rely upon her death as the beginning of her life in prose, these reporters suggest that the far more interesting material is in the daily practices and construction of a literary career, for a poetess whose picture remains ever-youthful in her collections (223).

Authorizing an Authoress

“Sing’lar, I says to myself, to speak o’ writin’ ’s if ‘twas different colors.”

—Annie Trumbull Slosson’s “A Local Colorist”¹⁹

By the early twentieth century, the unspoken, but always present, tensions between the Sweet Singer of Michigan and the reporters visiting her home are just as relevant as the poetess’s poetry, in depicting the poetess’s life to readers. Mary Anna is clearly legible within a tradition of poetesses, Betsey Dole and Julia A. Moore grow disillusioned (or become awakened) by the tradition’s limits, but Abigail Jane Kidder in Annie Trumbull Slosson’s 1912 short story “A Local Colorist” considers being a poetess, but aspires to be a regional authoress of New Hampshire. Her decision echoes the many women who read poetry or aspire to careers as poets in regionalist fiction.²⁰ Though Kidder decides not to write poetry, her engagement with the poetess tradition at the beginning of the story suggests just how intertwined the poetess figure is in shaping an alternative path for an aspiring authoress. Unlike Moore’s “awakening” narrative, there is no accepted narrative for this writer at first unnamed to follow, as an authoress. “A Local Colorist” charts the attempts and conversations that Abigail Jane Kidder encounters, when she decides to begin writing. Slosson, who exchanged letters with Jewett and established herself as a writer in many genres (especially local color) from Connecticut, locates traditions of women’s poetry alongside the research of an aspiring local colorist.²¹

The practices of both note-taking and conversation-making count for the preparation of writers like Kidder, for both prose and poetry.²²

For almost the entire story, this narrator has no full name, which places her among the unnamed women writers from the fiction of Jewett, Cather and Petry. This story—and the same-titled collection it appears in—was not received well, since it was “faulted for shallow character development and excessive use of dialect.”²³ But undeveloped characters certainly support the point about local color writing that Slosson is making. Her parody of current literary genres—particularly local color—shows that meaningful conversations among writers are lacking, unless there is more of a commitment to discussing writing, rather than trying to transform one another into sources of local color. This narrator’s name appears only at the end of the story, once she has assembled a sharper definition of the social dimensions of authorship, besides simply deciding that May 28th will be her designated starting date as a writer (33). Because her name is given just before she is ready to give up her aspirations of author(ess)ship, Slosson suggests that Kidder may actually be ready to begin making a name for herself, should she choose to continue writing. Now that she has carefully considered (for the first time) the many literary genres available to her, the advice of her friends, and the ethics of her treatment of another writer, the local colorist of the title is not necessarily the desired final product in the story, but is instead a caricatured writer around which Kidder can define herself.

“A Local Colorist” begins with a frontispiece of two women at a train station; one is Kidder, watching the train’s departure, the other is her friend Mary Dowd, a passenger on the train (see Figure 4). Their conversation about current literary trends has been cut short with the train’s arrival, so Dowd leans out of the train window and calls

out “And be sure you put in lots of local color.” Kidder is leaning forward, straining to make sense of the “local color” her friend speaks of. Though this moment does not take place until eight pages into the story, its picture captures the distance between these two friends: one who is an avid reader and the other who is an aspiring writer. As Kidder leans forward, readers can see not only a horizontal distance between them—underscoring how Kidder stays in one place, but her friend who is knowledgeable of current literary trends has more mobility—but a vertical, more hierarchical one. Her friend’s elevated pose on the train is a more casual, relaxed one, as she leaves town on the train, while Kidder’s lower, more tense posture conveys her earnestness and her desire to learn more about becoming a writer. Kidder’s body is barely within the frame of the picture, nearly cut off from both her friend and her local color suggestions. At such a train station, connections can be made and averted: an unnamed *Country* narrator can take a train-ride to a well-needed weekend in Dunnet Landing, Jim Burden can meet a childhood friend who is now a writer, and Dottle Smith can arrive at Wheeling. The train station setting offers a short pause for two friends to converse, but Dowd’s advice becomes muffled and curtailed, as she rides away.

To become a writer, Kidder has to turn away from some genres and towards others, just as she turns towards her friend on the train for advice. Becoming some kind of writer has been a lifelong desire, since she remembers herself as a child telling adults: “Sometimes I’d make it more partic’lar and say a poet or a story-writer, or again I’d have it a editor or some kind of newspaper-maker, but most gen’rally ‘twas just a plain author, no partic’lar sort” (3). But when she starts to consider the particularities of that general decision, she is less particular, knowing only that she wants to write in some capacity.

Eventually, she realizes that she has to decide upon her first piece because “I never once thought what kind of writin’ I should begin with; verses or prose pieces, narr’tives or what-all, I hadn’t decided on any of ’em” (5). Because Slosson frames Kidder’s indecision as a matter of content, it is easy to overlook how Kidder relies upon her social relationships to writers and readers of each genre in order to make her decision.

As a wife and mother, she acknowledges that she has not pursued her childhood dream of writing, but has never stopped thinking it might be something to consider: “But I kep’ on lottin’ on doin’ it some day, knowin’ I should manage it somehow” (4). She aspires to be a “great, a dreadful great, authoress” (3), aiming to write on May 28th, between spring cleaning and her housework. But Kidder is also turning to writing at a key transition in her own life narrative, as she acknowledges: “It wa’n’t till I was left all alone by myself two year ago that I felt I could really begin” (4). Kidder’s life does not follow that of a youthful prodigy poetess, but she addresses her desire to be a writer as a task that she wants to incorporate with both skill and precision. Though she cannot decide what sorts of stories she will write as an authoress, she enjoys imagining the newspaper accounts that will review her work and cover her life. They are certainly more favorable than Moore’s: “‘It was only a few years ago, on the 28th of May, that this interestin’—or ‘thrillin’ or ‘beautiful,’ or somethin’, as the case might be—‘authoress begun her first and perchance her greatest book’” (5). To earn these accounts, she decides that poetry writing is not for her, nor are biographies or adventure stories: “I was dreadful fond of story-books, and I never cared no great for poetry or lives of folks or travellin’ adventur’s” (5). Beginning as an authoress means sorting through the genres that do not interest her; the poetess tradition will not include Abigail Jane Kidder. But, in

dismissing poetry, how will she compose herself as an authoress? What sorts of writing will inspire those beautiful newspaper reviews she seeks?

She turns first to a series of friends, as her preliminary sources for determining the kind of writer she should be. She is disappointed by their comments. The first is Dowd, her friend at the train station, who seems to be the most promising contact: “She is real smart, you know—had the Dayville School three terms, and is a great book-reader, so I wanted her advice” (6). For all her knowledge and commentary on dialect, Dowd is portrayed as someone who is encumbered by her knowledge, rather than able to carry it and explain it carefully to Kidder. As Dowd discusses dialect, Slosson portrays Dowd’s discomfort settling onto the train—“she went into the car, and tripped on the sill so’s she most fell over”—rendering her clumsy, since she is carrying too much: “bag in one hand and umbrella in the other and a book under each arm, so’t she couldn’t help stepping on her skirt in front every step” (7). She falters as she moves onto the train, juggling bag and book, suggesting that the conversation with Abigail does not have her full attention, as she struggles to gather her belongings and her composure. While Kidder has admired Dowd as a focused, thoughtful reader and teacher, she gets a more confusing conversation, as Dowd’s departure does not go smoothly.

But Dowd does make good on elaborating on her yelled advice to “put in lots of local color,” sending Kidder a more detailed letter later—“a whole sheetful of explainin’s” (8)—since the train’s noise drowns out Dowd’s first explanation. Slosson continues to emphasize the distance between Dowd, who is far more fluent in current literary trends, and Kidder, who mistakes “dialect” for “derelict,” when Dowd first mentions it (9). The exchanges between them do not provide the full support that Kidder

desires. The more that Kidder asks for writing advice, the more she feels that Dowd wants only to know more about the Kidder secrets for a perfect rhubarb pie. The unevenness of this exchange frustrates Kidder, since it dominates both their conversation at the train station and a great deal of the letter that Dowd sends her (6, 8). What Kidder wants is a long conversation about the principles of local color and dialect writing. What she gets is a quick conversation, muffled by Dowd's departing train, and an ensuing letter defining local color as both "right 'round you or further away" (9). Though Kidder had hoped for straightforward advice to take home and add to her writing—as "a necessary ingredient" (8)—she receives Dowd's more uncertain call to take up dialect writing, since it is "the only thing that takes these days" (6). While Kidder is frustrated by Dowd's advice, she does understand that seeking a project and submitting it for publication will require her to negotiate her surroundings both around her and further away, in Dowd's words. So far, Kidder's plan had included sitting down on May 28th and writing down either verses and narratives, but Dowd's advice inspires her to think more socially about writing—in trends and expectations, in collecting dialect and local color from others.

Soon, Kidder believes that she will have to look elsewhere for local color, if she is to begin writing on May 28. She travels from her home in New Hampshire to Massachusetts; there, she stays with Mrs. Harris Spooner, the cousin of her husband's first wife—where she learns much more about this first wife than ever before. While she simply attributes this difference to gender—"Anyway, men folks never seem to talk about things as well as women, do they? Leave out the little trimmin's that set it off so and stick to main facts, the last thing we care about" (17)—she is learning to read a life narrative more carefully, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses of her cousin's narrative

as a potential local color narrative: “The whole narr’ tive was spoke in as good plain talk as any I could have put it in myself, down to the very end, Viletty’s dyin’ words, the layin’ out, the wreaths and crowns and pillers from the neighbors, and the funeral exercises” (17). Though Kidder considers how the authoress voice of Abigail Jane Kidder would tell it, she pays most attention to the lengthy details of the funeral—a moment which links her self-understanding as an authoress to that of a poetess, who would be even more apt to appear at a funeral.

As she starts to think of how a life narrative like Mrs. Spooner’s would be informed by her pursuit of local color, she meets another friend, Abby Matthews, on the train ride home. Their longer conversation alleviates her earlier anxiety that Dowd “looked most sorry for me” (6), as she explains the current trends of dialect writing. So glad to see a familiar face at the train station, Kidder experiences her relief as both an emptying and an outpouring of emotion: “I was so glad to see her, and so filled up with all I’d been through and wanted to go through, that I spilled over and emptied out my whole heart” (18). While Dowd has provided the ingredients for writing—along with a dose of condescension and pleas for pie recipes—Kidder seeks a connection with Matthews where she can measure out her anxieties, too much inside herself, but still not having enough confidence to begin writing. Matthews looks to be precisely the support that Kidder seeks, since Matthews first “said ‘twould be a great thing for Francony and for Grafton County—in fact, for the whole state o’ New Hampshire—to have an authoress of their own” (19). Like Mrs. Caxton’s support of Betsey Dole, Matthews’s encouragement inspires Kidder to define the geographical boundaries she would

represent as a noted Authoress. Matthews is less versed in recognizing dialect, which she admits, but seconds Dowd's sense that it is indeed everywhere (19).

But Matthews differs from Dowd in her distaste for local color, since she advises: "Tell your story plain and straight, and put everything down in black and white and steer clear o' any other colors, local or be-they-who-may-be" (19). Now that Kidder has received different advice regarding local color, she is left to consider its influence on her, since Matthews soon leaves the train. Reflecting upon the more positive conversation, Kidder realizes that something is missing: "Well, Abby ain't been of much use in one way,' thinks I, 'but she gave me sympathy and 'twas a sight of comfort to talk things over with her. And, after all, sympathy's worth more'n dialect in the long run, and sometimes seems 's if 'twas nigh about as scurse'" (20). Kidder begins to measure the influences of her friends on her upcoming writing project, realizing that Mary Dowd's dialect and Abby Matthews's sympathy can be allocated into different quantities of support. But which is worth more to an aspiring writer? Kidder, in these initial encounters with other readers, values their varying support differently, suggesting how it can be exchanged among readers and writers in a more intricate network of responses and information about dialect than she expects. One part dialect (from Dowd), one part life narratives (Mrs. Spooner), one part sympathy (from Matthews): these ingredients for writing allow her to define writing competitively and collaboratively, by consulting her friends.

Still frustrated by Dowd's call for adding local color and Matthews's call to use it sparingly, Kidder returns home, only to meet "a summer boarder": someone clearly reminiscent of Jewett's summer boarder/*Country* narrator (21). Convinced that she cannot find any sources of local color around her, Kidder encounters this Miss

Mandeville, who is indeed the stereotypical tourist: “ ’Twas a young lady, real nice-lookin’, and I guessed she must be an early summer boarder” (21). Kidder, however, mistakes her upper class educational knowledge and speech patterns for the sort of local color she seeks; Kidder wants to make Miss Mandeville her source of dialect in the pages she hopes to begin on May 28th.

Kidder first recognizes Miss Mandeville’s potential, once she realizes that Miss Mandeville does not separate her modes of talk: “one for speakin’ and the other for writin’ and readin’. Talk-talk and book-talk, as you might put it” (22). Miss Mandeville’s speaking patterns confuse Kidder because “you couldn’t see any difference here; any of it might have been read off from a book or a paper” (22). In the rest of the story, Slosson considers how preposterous, yet completely plausible, it would be for this Miss Mandeville to be considered a source of desired dialect. Kidder and Mandeville fail miserably in their attempts to understand and record the necessary details to compose life narratives of one another. Often, their misunderstandings concern artistic vocabularies; consider Miss Mandeville’s condescension when she responds to Kidder’s description of “potterin’ ‘round” with: “Potterin’! Such a delightful term!” (23) Not even the language of art can translate their speech clearly for one another, since Kidder understands Miss Mandeville’s enthusiasm for ceramics (her delight in Kidder’s potterin’ term) as “Keerammix whoever he was—and the plastic art Potterin’!” (24)

While “potterin’” accentuates Miss Mandeville’s knowledge of art and Kidder’s use of the term as a daily “verb” to describe her movement, the language of art also translates their exchanges into a more expansive geography informing the regionalist project of collecting local color. When Kidder points out her “chiny posy holder...just a

common one, had belonged to ma” (24-25), Miss Mandeville immediately assigns it a variety of names, including—as Kidder hears them—an “antic,” an “airloom” or “varze” (25). When Miss Mandeville realizes that none of these terms can fully describe the object, she listens a bit more carefully and then truly confuses Kidder, when she exclaims: “Posy-holder—how dear!” and then recites a proper definition of “posy”: “”the quaint old word of the poets, Old English” (25). The posy holder contains poesie and connotes a receptacle for not only flowers, but also words. Kidder corrects her, revealing that the posy-holder “ ‘twas Chinee, I guessed, fetched over by ma’s brother, Uncle Elam, who follered the sea” (25). The posy holder contains Old English poetic traditions and has likely traveled the sea from China, before it is displayed in Kidder’s window. Since its journeys are in poetry and miles, Miss Mandeville and Kidder enrich its origins and circulation by ascribing histories to it that play with words and seek paths to New Hampshire. In their exchanges, a posy-holder acts much in the way that regionalism does: in holding the careers of poetesses up to readers.

Despite all their misunderstandings and mispronunciations—of both words and posy-holders— they never declare to one another that they are both aspiring writers, much like the conversation that does not happen between Mary Anna and the unnamed *Country* narrator at the Bowden family reunion. Instead, the unspoken goals of local color projects get between them, as they take notes on one another for that necessary dialect. What would have happened, had Kidder listened to her friends’ advice and started writing, before her encounter with Miss Mandeville? Or, if her conversations with Miss Mandeville had involved more questions and less covert note-taking? Instead of trying to commit one another to paper, could Miss Mandeville and Kidder even

commit to conversations among themselves? These would-be local colorists—aspiring and practicing—face the costs of feeling as though they are exploiting their subjects, but Slosson makes clear that the many exchanges between them do offer the opportunity for both of them to learn about the woman’s life informing her presumed dialect.

Only after Miss Mandeville has left, does Kidder learn that this summer boarder is indeed “some kind of a writin’ person,” (34) collecting material for her own project. Chances look good, then, that Abigail Jane Kidder has become the subject for Miss Mandeville’s writing, rather than the writer of her own. But Kidder’s study of Miss Mandeville’s speech patterns, evidenced in her notes, have sharpened her ability to piece words together and to take them apart, gathering the words that the two of them exchange into a written mosaic of misunderstanding (between them) and recognition (by Slosson’s readers). When Kidder imagines herself as a writer, she simply considers “just how ‘twould feel when my own makin’s-up was printed out and read all over the airth” (3). When she begins to gather words for her requisite dialect and local color, she looks at words differently, when she hears “such queer, long stretched-out words, some of ‘em span new to me” (22), pauses between words—“long enough for a swaller, or a stutter, or a gap, or a hiccup” (23)—and words that are the “out-o’-the-wayest” she has ever encountered. While the misunderstandings point to the distinctions in their class, educational and regional backgrounds, Kidder’s notes permit her to “make up” words—broken, spread apart, twisted, scattered— more than she has ever done before. Between Miss Mandeville and Abigail Kidder swirls an economy of exchanged words that are not yet translated into understanding for either of them. The richness of their encounter is not

simply in Miss Mandeville's book or Abigail Kidder's notes, but in their discussions, questions and evasions.

While Slosson never portrays Kidder as a practicing writer, Kidder gains a far sharper self-awareness of literary practices, since she has assembled a working definition of local color, after her contact with friends—Mary Dowd, Mrs. Spooner, Abby Matthews—and a writer: Miss Mandeville. To her, local color will require a great deal of texture: “I’ve heard of blue laws and blue books and yellow newspapers, red letters and black lists. But I never knew anything till lately of this local colorin’ matter to stories, and I just haven’t got an idee how to put it on, just plain and thick all over, or strimmered about and different in spots” (30). While she seems attentive to the layers that local color can convey—from Matthews’ brand of minimal coverage to Dowd’s desire to add as much as possible—her definition reflects the additive quality of her conversations with Miss Mandeville, always looking for one more word, phrase or curious gesture, strange enough to warrant mention in her notes. Had she considered a more fluid relationship between the objects of their conversation and the objects they mispronounce, the textures of local color would likely be more uneven than smooth, more splotchy than strimmered.

On May 28th, Abigail surrounds herself with ingredients to write—lists of dialect, like ingredients for her pies. Though she is ready to combine her notes on Miss Mandeville with “weather and scenery” of local color (31), she stops writing, when she starts thinking about how she collected the life narrative and words of Miss Mandeville, at the center of her project: “And how had I acted to her? I had drawed her out, spied on her, took notice of her mistakes, set down on paper her dialections, rejoicin’ over her stumblin’ speech that I might set it out in print for the world to laugh over. And all that I,

Abigail Jane Kidder, might be a great authoress” (32). Slosson reveals the full name of this aspiring authoress only when Kidder does not approve of the way that she has done her research on Miss Mandeville’s life narrative; her local color story comes to a stop, before it has even begun. Although local color and life writing are so intertwined in Kidder’s mind—she records herself as “full o’ my story” (31)—the morning she begins writing, this process of collecting local color and representing someone else’s life troubles even a novice. Slosson suggests that experienced writers ought to be even more careful when they seek life narratives out of dialect and local color. Though Kidder replaces verses with narrative—considering herself more authoress than poetess—she still experiences the trends of local color and dialect writing as limiting alternatives to the poetess tradition. Life narratives, like the words exchanged between Kidder and Mandeville, act as ingredients for writing projects—chopped up and carefully blended, so that it makes local color a genre that “runs or fades” (31) on paper.

The title “A Local Colorist” encourages readers to consider, by its end, who acquires the name in the story. Miss Mandeville? Abigail Jane Kidder? Both? Slosson leaves this name ambiguous, since no one refers to herself as one. Since they approach one another only as possible material for their writing, the local colorist offers more an attitude than a clearly defined character for them to consider as they encounter one another. Kidder understands Miss Mandeville not as a well-known published writer, but as “some kind of a writin’ person,” measured with both ambiguity and precision, just like the unnamed women writers that Jewett, Cather and Petry portray.

Visual Vocabularies for Writing the Lives of Women Writers

“What image of poetic endeavor is now most universally despised? The woman with three names who muses piously on love, flowers, and the deaths of mothers and babies? That’s clearly it. Yes, the poetess, the sentimental one. What image could be more embarrassing to any self-respecting contemporary poet?”
-- Annie Finch’s “Confessions of a Postmodern Poetess”²⁴

With these poetesses in prose, regionalism brings writers together, keeps them apart, and permits its readers to understand how cultural definitions of women writers do not result from smooth transitions, between authoresses and poetesses to New Women. Regionalism models a less certain and more productive geography for writers to draw unexpected lines between themselves and other writers. Encountering and engaging the poetess tradition, as Finch does, can establish more fully the variety of names for women writers—by including these women writers who, despite their widespread popularity, are frequently unnamed out of literary history, relegated into the category of poetess. While many influential recoveries of individual poetesses have turned, logically enough, to her overlooked poetry, there needs to be added attention to the numerous ways—some favorable, some not—that regionalists and, more broadly, other writers portray the traditions and careers of these women writers. Although the suffix “-ess” can be a marker of excess and inferiority for a woman poet, the prefix “re—” — in critical attempts at recovery, reviving, revising, re-evaluating poetess poetry itself—has not provided suitable methodologies for reading poetesses among the realities of her daily life, her encounters with audiences and with other writers.²⁵ In the pages of regionalism, the life narratives of women writers take shape—from their childhoods and early careers to their frustrations at reviews and their deaths—when writing takes place for some writers and does not for others.²⁶

Because so much writing about poetesses takes place after their deaths, these accounts underscore all that goes unrecorded about the daily lives of poetesses, how they measure out writing and domestic duties, with time for themselves among others and their work. When regionalists include representations of both poetesses and women writers, they respond to a broader cultural interest in recording more carefully the lives of American women writers, beginning in the late nineteenth century: from *singular* accounts of a poetess's life after her death, like the scrapbooks and portraits conveying the life of poetess Emmeline Grangerford to Huckleberry Finn, to the more *collective* accounts of women writers, exemplified in Annie Fields's accounts of the lives of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Celia Thaxter, and Jewett.²⁷

Regionalist fiction articulates struggles and silences, practices and presentations of poetesses as alternatives to the limiting figures of deceased poetesses—suggesting that women writers be living models for one another, since the narratives of deceased poetesses do not offer enough. Examples of such living models emerge in Annie Fields's commentary surrounding her edited collections of letters from three nineteenth-century New England writers, whom she memorializes with her essays and reminiscences. While Fields's biographical essays for her three friends take many forms—with a preface for one, interspersed commentary in others—her perspectives have not been considered together as a trilogy experimenting with possible approaches for memorializing women writers (particularly regionalists) in the late nineteenth century, though her insights have been most useful for individual biographical studies of Stowe, Thaxter, and Jewett.²⁸ Fields's commentary shifts our focus from the personal characteristics of these writers in isolation (like dying poetesses) and draws more attention—since her focus is, after all, on

letters—to the relationships that we need to read more closely, the gatherings of women writers to discern the lives of each one more fully. Fields asks her readers not simply to consider each woman’s friendships and social circles in greater detail; she asks us to *see* them in order to read the life of each writer, when she too turns to visual vocabularies as metaphors for connecting more fully with the lives of women writers. In one of Fields’s own poems, “Upon a Mask of an Unknown Woman’s Face,” she points to “the features of her face, / Where the living story stands,” which aptly describe Fields’s memorial tributes to her friends, narratives filled with the faces of portraits, where readers begin to see and place a woman writer’s story in literary history.²⁹ In Fields’s memorial essays, she seeks to surround the women writers featured within portraits with the many voices contributing to their living stories.

Fields accounts for women writers who relate to their surrounding readers, writers and critics with visual vocabularies for self-representation—much like Jewett, Cather and Petry do. In Fields’s introductory essay to *Letters of Celia Thaxter*, she compares Thaxter’s regional acumen—for looking carefully at both Appledore and Star Island—to a camera: “How clearly these scenes were photographed on the sensitive plate of her mind!”³⁰ The camera’s plate seems at first an internal one, preserved carefully by Thaxter alone, a writer known both for her narrative *Among the Isles of Shores* and poetry, beginning with her first magazine publication “Land-Locked,” celebrating “life too full of joy for uttered words,” a poem which Fields includes in its entirety in her introduction (xiv). But the camera permits Thaxter only to create the plates; the many gatherings of friends about her translate the visual plates into vocal parts. Fields surrounds Thaxter with a growing audience, whether in her parlor or in a nearby prison:

“Night after night she has held her sway, with tears and smiles from her responsive little audiences, which seemed to gain new courage and light from what she gave them” (xxvii). Hers is a voice carrying “the fullness of suggestion,” moderated enough to be “sufficient, too, although not too loud or striking, to fill and satisfy the ear of the listener” (xxxviii). By pairing the camera technology with Thaxter’s captivating persona among friends—moving from the dark plates of her mind to the light of her audience—Fields accentuates different versions of Thaxter and portrays her as a writer responsive to the plates inside and the perspectives outside.

Three years later, Fields edited *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* and concluded her chapter on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with an assessment of Stowe’s history, among her varying writerly personae: “We look back upon the dreaming child, we follow the eager girl, unconscious of incessant labor, conscious only of aspiration and endeavor; we watch the tender mother; and then we see her, forever the same, a tiny figure standing forgetful of herself against the dark vast background of her country’s life.”³¹ Though she asks readers to remember Stowe “forever the same,” Fields suggests that Stowe’s life can only be known by viewing the temporal shifts among child, girl, and mother together. But Fields’s commentary soon shifts to consider how Stowe’s life must be read also among her friendships, captured in photography and gatherings.

To consider Stowe alongside George Sand and George Eliot—“the three women of genius of that era”—Fields turns to the language of portraiture not to reflect upon their appearances, but to convey their “strange similarity of character” to readers (206). Fields uses portraiture not to discuss their physical appearances, but instead to look at the

personalities of these writers that do not seem particularly appealing, which I quote in full:

At such times a strange heaviness, a lack-lustre visage, was common to the three, and the portraits taken in such moments (the photographs seem especially possessed by this demon of absence) are painful, untrue, plain sometimes beyond words. Their faces become almost like stone masks, not etherealized as in death, but weighted with the heavier tasks of life. (206)

While Fields seeks to praise Stowe among these prominent writers of her time, she begins by acknowledging the limits and somber quality of the photographs. Like the photographic plates in Thaxter's mind, these stone masks belie the qualities of these women that they are better known for.

But Fields quickly replaces these stony faces with this observation: "The wonderful contrast produced by the reawakening in society when animated by conversation made them appear like different persons, and when true artists took these subjects in hand they presented them, of course with the light of life in their faces" (206). By reading Stowe's face in photographs and in conversations, Fields suggests that Stowe's conversational face comes alive when she is listening to other stories in groups, which viewers of Stowe's stony portraits cannot see. Stowe's ease within social circles influences her writing and vice versa:

She [Stowe] loved to gather a small circle of friends around a fireside, when she easily took the lead in fun and story telling. This was her own ground, and upon it she was not to be outdone. 'Let me put my feet upon the fender,' she would say, 'and I can talk till all is blue.' It appeared to those who listened most

frequently to her conversation that a large part of the charm of her tales was often lost in the writing down; yet with all her unusual powers she was an excellent listener herself. (376)

To know Stowe, then, is to know her storytelling powers in such a circle and to know her work as a version of her conversational faces. In this small circle, Stowe is also a listener, which suggests that women writers cannot simply be the subjects of portraits. Preserving Stowe the listener, suggests Fields, is as much a priority as preserving her portraits.

While Fields has ample opportunity to think through the genres of a memorial essay—more creative ways to intersperse her commentary into the letters of Thaxter and Stowe—her final edited collection *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* certainly asks more of her, since theirs was a bond that sustained both of them and one of literary history's most famous salons, at 148 Charles Street. While critics have acknowledged how Fields exercised restraint in editing the Jewett-Fields letters, Heather Love has more recently read the still present “longings and anxieties” between Fields and Jewett, acknowledging the “tonal difference” between them.³² While Love focuses upon the content of Jewett's letters, Fields's introductory essay to Jewett's letters concludes an epistolary lifetime between them, with more letters included from Fields than in her combined letters in the Thaxter and Stowe collections. Fields amplifies Jewett's comments upon the technologies of connecting, of building friendships and working to sustain them, declaring that Jewett's letters “shall be given freely in the following pages, in order to show her life as in a mirror, while the days sped on. They will show, above all, the portrait of a friend and the power that lies in a friendship to sustain the giver as well as

the receiver.”³³ Fields relies upon a portrait to convey “those floods of sympathy to be unsealed in the most unpromising and dusty natures” (10) characterizing Jewett’s writing, but quietly gesturing to the power of her relationship with Jewett.

While Fields relies upon the language of portraits and their power to convey the authenticity of Jewett’s letters and emotions, Jewett imagines new technologies for overcoming their shortcomings in her letters: “If somebody would only invent a little speaking-attachment to such pictures, a nicer sort of phonograph” (166). Fields’s portraits promise to convey Jewett fully, while Jewett suggests that they, like her “human documents,” can only do so much. Instead, Jewett imagines improvements to portraits in order to reinvent relationships among two women, giving a fuller sense of the capacities of women writers to rethink the difficulties and tensions inherent in their writing practices. As much as Fields takes care to frame her introductory comments carefully to commemorate her friend’s life in a portrait, Jewett’s language of technology takes the power of Fields’s portraits one step further: in imagining speaking attachments for portraits to be both seen and heard.

Fields’s memorial essays evidence this growing cultural interest at the height of regionalism’s popularity—in reading the lives of women writers more fully than looking only at separated, silent portraits (like those on the walls of Emmeline Grangerford’s bedroom), by considering how relationships with other writers can detail their life narratives in technologies of both words and portraits, and revising the portraits of women writers frequently separated from their roles as listeners or among gatherings.³⁴ Fields’s memorial essays suggest that living expressions and daily practices need to be preserved and written about alongside the faces of portraits—both in print and along

walls. Fields writes about her friends both as a memoirist and as a writer of a number of poet poems. Her collective visual vocabularies for women writers in these memorial essays revise her many poetic representations of an isolated male poet responding to his surroundings. This poet is alone and “hidden” in Fields’s “The Singing Shepherd: To a Poet’s Memory,” another poet is “clothed with solitude” in “The Poet’s Choice,” and still another is always searching for material in “a garden unmeasured, a sweetness unlearned, a music unframed” in “To the Dwellers in Houses,” hoping to find “the might of a verse.”³⁵ To find the feminized figure of poesy, Fields’s male poet must track “the shadowy coverts” and “dusty paths of life” in “The Haunts of Poesy,” working from the agonizing “quiet” along a beach in “The Soul of the Poet and the “absence everywhere” in “The Poet’s House.”³⁶ Replacing the stifling shadows and quiet surrounding the male poets featured in her poetry, Fields’s memorial essays contribute to and actively shape a louder and noisier literary atmosphere for recording the lives of women writers, from solitary writers to collective gatherings, by portraying the daily practices—the silences and misunderstandings, conversations and joy—we can miss, if a poetess’s life is written only after her death.

Literary Aspirations of Writing People

“ ‘Woman’ poet—no. What I like to be called now is poetress. I was at a friend’s house here the other day and he introduced me to a Brazilian lady. He murmured to her in Portuguese that this was the American poet, etc., and the lady, determined to show off her English, shook my hand enthusiastically and said, ‘You are the famous American poetress?’ So I allowed I was. I think it’s a nice mixture of poet and mistress.”

– Elizabeth Bishop, December 2, 1956 letter to Robert Lowell³⁷

“Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America”

– Sylvia Plath, March 1958³⁸

“Selina!”
“What?”
“What does your father want you to be?”
“He never said I had to be anything.”
“Doesn’t he care?”
“Of course he cares,” she shouted.
“Maybe he’ll let you be a poet.”
“A poetess.”

– a conversation between Beryl and Selina in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)³⁹

By the time Petry published her first Wheeling story, another constellation of poetesses appears in the mid-1950s in the letters, journals and fiction of women writers, proving—as Abigail Jane Kidder puts it—how this “language is real catchin’, and we never know what little word o’ ourn, dropped in season, as they say, may spring up and bear fruit—yea, a hundredfold” (35). Less concerned with dying and elegies, these mentions of poetesses mark a beginning for women committed to writing poetry, for living outside the narratives of sadness and downfall, in the label of poetess.⁴⁰ Instead, Bishop, Plath, and Marshall portray women writers living alongside poetesses, rather than dying to become them. All of their brief mentions emerge from conversations and suggest that a poetess is not a label that marks an ending, but offers a beginning for women writers to reflect upon the varieties of writing practices and personae available to them, past, present and future. Before Betty Friedan seeks the sources of “the problem that has no name” in *The Feminine Mystique*, before Alice Walker publishes “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” women writers of the 1950s named poetesses in their prose, anticipating second wave feminists who think through and seek out the lives of mothers. For Bishop, Plath and Marshall, poetesses are both familiar and obscure figures in the

archives of literary history; by mentioning them, they aspire to read and write them more carefully into viable, living models.⁴¹

These encounters with poetesses offer, far more than poetess poetry does, a compendium of practical strategies for current writers to take up or to avoid. Always leave your room as you wish others to see it, preferably with your writing scattered about; someone will inevitably stop by. When people are whispering during your public readings, find out what they have to say. Surround yourself with friends who will support you and challenge you; never underestimate them. Answer a summer boarder's questions with care; you never know if your words will end up in her book. Value conversations with other writers and seek out opportunities to meet them. Regionalist writers mention poetesses and their traditions to measure the distances and influence among writers; considering poetesses affords them an opportunity to think about the literary representations of writers historically, in the conversations that are had and avoided when they meet in the pages of regionalism.

Engagement with poetess traditions—Jewett's presentation of Mary Anna, Cather's interest in Louise Imogen Guiney's poetry, and Petry's research on Sarah Josepha Hale—does not lead these writers to emulate Emmeline Grangerford's verses in "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd," since they too have turned to these nineteenth-century poetesses to invigorate, rather than limit, the conversations among even the most unlikely of writers, calling for representations of women writers that draw upon and deviate from the poetess tradition.⁴² Unnamed women writers and their unfinished writing projects certainly differ from the carefully finished poetry of poetesses, but these traditions come into productive contact with one another in conversations about

authorship taking place in regionalism—where Betsey Dole’s framed elegiac poetry and Abigail Jane Kidder’s piles of notes contribute to the work of women writers. In recent discussions of poetess poetry, the language of measurement usefully frames questions about canonical definitions of its literary value, but genres other than poetess poetry have not been considered as units of measurement for the changing representations of women writers; regionalists question the prevailing stereotypes of women writers by staging new conversations to voice their concerns.⁴³ I have measured the representations of women writers in regionalist fiction within their communities of influence—critics, friends, writers and readers—to suggest that these fictional portrayals can tell us more about the imagined and experienced social practices, silences and tensions surrounding a woman writer than can attention only to her work. These conversations with other writers portray community as a source of fullness—in its support and encouragement—while misunderstandings and frustrations with that same community reveal the feelings of emptiness and isolation that writers can also experience, as they each aspire to be some kind of a writing person. To regionalism’s rich archive of women writers, Jewett, Cather and Petry contribute three women writers whose unnamings and unfinishedness make them writing people.

By reading regionalism through the life narratives of its writing characters—whether poetesses, reporters, local colorists—we can redefine a genre known for its formulaic, nostalgic sketches of particular places as a more transitional, experimental location, where writers discuss the materials and practices of authorship through their characters’ conversations. Regionalism documents both places and life narratives through the scattered cultural clippings of visual vocabularies—of photographs (whether Jewett’s human documents or Cather’s collections), newspapers, even a posy (or poetry)-holder. While the visual vocabularies of sketches—as unfinished, merely local color—have long denied regionalism canonical value, my dissertation shows how regionalist writers offer more collective models for literary value in their work: by writing lives visually, from a wide variety of perspectives to foreground the processes of gathering, arranging and exchanging the material to make these life narratives. When Jewett writes her letter to Cather, telling her to write her “best selves,” her advice both addresses Cather and anticipates the legacies of regionalism in the twentieth century: as a project invested in mapping selfhood as well as places. Regional writers archive the growing interest in reading the lives of women, by presenting their readers with an array of techniques for writing life narratives, as the plots of their fiction.

If we continue to gather the life narratives throughout this genre, we can read more comparatively across the genders, races, and cultures of American regionalism, carefully historicizing the many characters who exchange nothing less than their lives with one another. Though Jewett writes *Dunnet Landing*, Cather *Black Hawk*, and Petry *Wheeling*, they also place *Sylvia* in a frame of human documents, *Ántonia* among a

growing collection of tintypes and an unnamed Wheeling narrator at a drugstore counter cutting out newspaper clippings. In a genre where maps meet memoirs, where portraits relate places and people, visual vocabularies document the lives of literary regionalism.

¹ Cecelia Tichi argues for regionalism's anticipatory quality, particularly in the fiction of Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman: "the new woman occupies an incipient, covert place in their careers and writings, which have subversive thematic implications," "Women Writers and the New Woman," 590. Their women characters are relevant because, if we look carefully, we find resistance to the patriarchal cultural norms of small town New England, evidence that alternative modes of life are possible and desirable: like the unnamed *Country* narrator who writes in Boston, the unnamed *My Antonia* narrator who has writing projects of her own in New York. Donna Campbell describes how versions of naturalism react to the outpouring of women's regionalist writing in order to define naturalism against—and above—an overly feminized genre: "Responding to the tradition of local color 'authoresses,'" such as Rose Terry Cooke, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Sarah Orne Jewett, a loosely defined generational cohort of naturalistic writers such as Crane, Frederic, Norris, London, and Wharton did not hesitate to critique, to rewrite, and ultimately to reject local color's self-imposed limitations of style, form, and subject, and with them the 'feminine' values at the heart of the movement," *Resisting Regionalism*, 7. In Tichi's and Campbell's accounts, regionalism anticipates fuller versions of women characters and its immediate legacy includes writers who seek distance from it, rather than expressing admiration. But, considering the proximity between masculine poetic traditions and the proliferation of women writers in regionalism, these responses are already happening *during*, not simply after, its peak. Jennifer Fleissner has suggested that the responses to regionalism are far more complementary and present in regionalism than we might expect, when she details "the twinned work of 1890s regionalist and naturalist fiction," *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 122.

² Critics have consistently evoked the poetess tradition in recent discussions of women's poetry, reading it as a necessary and contested category. Anna Leahy persuasively details the risks of studying the lives of writers labeled poetesses—"The danger of terms such as *poetess* and *women's poetry* is that they can lead to a mistaken focus on the emotional and personal lives of the poets so that the poems are not taken as seriously as words, linguistic maneuvers, metaphors and *literary voices*"—in "Is *Women's Poetry* Passé? A Call for Conversation," *Legacy* 25.2 (2008): 319. In no way do I seek to diminish the importance of studying poetess poetry, but I argue that we can add to our understanding of her poetic voice, by considering the work that she does in the regionalist genre.

³ "poetess, n," *Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition* <www.oed.com>, Accessed 17 April 2011.

⁴ The current *OED* definition offers sample usages of the term, ranging from Benjamin Franklin's "I went to see the black Poetess [Phillis Wheatley] and offer'd her any Services I could do her" and a textbook description of Greek poetry—"Among the ancients Sappho enjoyed a unique renown. She was called 'the poetess,' as Homer was called 'the poet.'"—to a more recent mention from Maya Angelou: "She must resist considering herself as lesser version of her male counterpart. She is not a sculptress, poetess, authoress, Jewess, Negress, or even (now rare) in university parlance a rectoress." All of these excerpts suggest that poetess is a limiting, divisive label for a woman writer, inspiring some kind of resistance, such as the 1748 entry from Lady Luxborough: "I am no Poetess; which reproachful name I would avoid, even if I were capable of acquiring it."

⁵ In Ann Packer's more recent novel *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, Carrie Bell asks her new friend Lane, "Are you a poetess? A poet?" and learns that Lane works for an "elderly writer" Miss Wolf, who meets the qualifications of "a young, frail sapphist poetess" (New York: Vintage, 2002), 195. Not only does Carrie then receive a copy of Lane's chapbook, but she also starts to think of her friends' artistic aspirations more carefully and eventually pursues studies in fashion design (195-196). Echoing the voices of poetesses in regionalism, this poetess mention inspires further thought about her role among other artists and leads to more conversation between Carrie and Lane.

⁶ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "Lyrical Studies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999): 523. Furthermore, they have identified the frustrations in trying to learn about poetesses themselves by turning to their poetry only: "One reason for the perpetual disappearance and reappearance of the Poetess is that she is not the content of her own generic representation: not a speaker, not an 'I,' not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self," "Lyrical Studies," *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999): 523.

⁷ For more commentary on the versions of genius surrounding women writers, see Anne E. Boyd's argument—"Women, therefore, were supposed to possess their own brand of genius, which excelled at the sentimental and the quotidian but went no farther"—in *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 132. See also Annie Finch's "The Sentimental Poetess in the World: Metaphor and Subjectivity in Lydia Sigourney's Nature Poetry" *Legacy* 5.2 (Fall 1988) for a discussion of how poetesses differ from familiar models of subjectivity; about the project of these poetesses, she argues "Their poetry rarely projects the self into metaphorical readings of the world; it does not effuse from a 'poet' in the traditional sense of a seer or 'priest' for whom nature is important only insofar as it reflects the individual poetic soul. Instead, it is structured to allow the natural world an independent identity, no less privileged than the poetic self" (5).

⁸ While criticism of poetess poetry has stressed the need to take these poems far more seriously and carefully, Kirsten Silva Gruesz's essay on Maria Gowen Brooks reminds readers that "nineteenth century women wrote around, rather than strictly into or out of, the Poetess convention; some merrily made sport of it," showing that "around" can be a more flexible approach for studying the poetess's influence upon literary culture—rather than simply classifying writers inside or outside the poetess tradition in "Maria Gowen Brooks, In and Out of the Poe Circle," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 54.8 (2008): 100. For such a conventional figure as a poetess, conventional approaches to nineteenth-century women's poetry cannot address all complexities of a poetess's life by turning only the poetry she performs and publishes, which Elsa Greene details in "Emily Dickinson Was a Poetess," *College English* 34.1 (Oct. 1972): 64.

⁹ Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: An Authoritative Text, Contexts and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Thomas Cooley (New York: Norton, [1885] 1999), 121-124. "By and by" is the futurity that Huck considers for Emmeline Grangerford, as he stands in her bedroom, staring at her pictures and paging through her scrapbook; he thinks about the verses that are not allotted to her, due to her death (123).

¹⁰ Poetesses themselves also foreground women writers; see Kirsten Silva Gruesz's discussion of Maria Gowen Brooks's *Idomen* (1838) in "Maria Gowen Brooks, In and Out of the Poe Circle" and Wendy Dasler Johnson's discussion of Lydia Huntley Sigourney's *Lucy Howard's Journal* (1860). Virginia Jackson also provides a compelling reading of "the refrain of the Poetess" in Helen Hunt Jackson's "The Story of Boon" in "'The Story of Boon'; or, The Poetess," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 54.1-4 (2008): 262.

¹¹ Marion Thain encourages us to see the lives of women writers in a more productive relationship with their poetry when she details the cultural circumstances of Victorian women writers and earlier poetesses—"I think women poets, even New Women poets, do continue to engage with the role of the poetess, and measure themselves against it (even if only to mark their distance from it) through to the end of the century. The development of the poetess genre toward the end of the century needs to be as much a part of the critical exploration of this area as is the recognition of other, alternative, personas available to women poets at this time"—in "What Kind of Critical Category is 'Women's Poetry?,'" *Victorian Poetry* 41.4 (Winter 2003): 579.

¹² Charlotte Rich emphasizes the importance of the nineteenth-century—" 'Old' or True Woman of the Victorian Era," constructions of the New Woman, but focuses more upon the roles of ethnicity in reading her "as less a monolithic and more a protean figure" in *Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 2, 19. Jewett, Cather and Petry surround their women writers with New Woman figures—like economically independent Mrs. Todd and Jim Burden's wife, Genevieve Whitney, but also with Frances Harling (whom Cather's unnamed narrator likely knew growing up), "her father's [Mr. Harling] chief clerk" who is especially skilled at holding people "in her mind as if they were characters in a book or a play," *My Ántonia*, 113-114. Though Petry's Wheeling narrator claims "I do not know very much about Aunt Sophronia," Sophronia Bart, an avid reader, tells the narrator about her pharmacy education and is responsible for recording and tracking prescriptions, *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, 7, 11-12. Their recording practices suggest new modes of New Woman writing, suggesting that recording tracks their emerging business and social relationships, replacing a monolithic model of the New Woman, with a more collective focus on the influences around her. For an even wider range of New Woman writing, see Carolyn Christensen Nelson, ed. *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s* (Orchard Park, New York: Broadview Press, 2001).

¹³ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 293.

¹⁴ Jewett, "Preface," *Deephaven* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), 3.

¹⁵ Mary Wilkins Freeman, *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (Ridgewood, NJ: The Gregg Press, 1967), 143. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

¹⁶ Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 2.

¹⁷ Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 134; Mary Loeffelholz, *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁸ Julia A. Moore. *Mortal Refrains: The Complete Collected Poetry, Prose, and Songs of Julia A. Moore, The Sweet Singer of Michigan*, ed. Thomas Riedlinger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 115. Riedlinger provides an introduction to a collection of Moore's work, along with two interviews, included near the end. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

¹⁹ Annie Trumbull Slosson, "A Local Colorist," *A Local Colorist* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1912), 30. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

²⁰ In Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Cousin William," teenaged Mary "kept an album to write her thoughts in, and was in a constant habit of cutting out all the pretty poetry from the corners of the newspapers, besides drying forget-me-nots and rosebuds, in memory of different particular friends, with a number of other little sentimental practices to which young ladies of sixteen and thereabout are addicted" in Stowe's collection *The Mayflower and Miscellaneous Writings* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1855), 186. In the same collection, Stowe also introduces her story "The Seamstress" with an epigraph from L. E. L., a prominent British poetess. Kate Chopin's story "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" features a narrator who finds Stock's story among her "scraps and bits of writing in bad prose and impossible verse"; in "Charlie," the title heroine "had a way, when strongly moved, of expressing herself in verse," known for "the writing of a lengthy ode upon the occasion of her Grandmother's seventieth birthday"; both stories appear in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin Volume II*, Edited and with an Introduction by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 586, 641. In Sui Sin Far's "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" and "The Inferior Woman," Mrs. Spring Fragrance is consistently acquiring new words from reading and reciting her "American poetry books" and seeks an audience—"As she walked along she mediated upon a book which she had some notion of writing. Many American women wrote books. Why should not a Chinese? She would write a book about Americans for her Chinese women friends" in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White Parks (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 28.

²¹ Rebecca Tolley-Stokes, "Annie Trumbull Slosson," *Early American Nature Writers: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. Daniel Patterson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 321, 324.

²² Brander Matthews also features a conversation between a novelist in search of New York local color for "a series of New York stories for the *Metropolis*" and a man who works at the University Settlement in his story "In Search of Local Color," *Vignettes of Manhattan* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1894), 68. This search for local color suggests that it is still a more elusive pursuit than a conventional practice.

²³ Tolley-Stokes, "Annie Trumbull Slosson," 325.

²⁴ Annie Finch, "Confessions of a Postmodern Poetess," *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, ed. Molly McQuade (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2000), 213.

²⁵ For this "re-" approach to reading poetesses, see Nina Baym's call for revising that critical story in which "the mere mention of Sigourney's name suffices to invoke a caricature: a mildly comic figure who exemplifies the worst aspects of domestic sentimentalism" in "Reinventing Lydia Huntley Sigourney" *American Literature* 62.3 (Sep 1990): 387. More than ten years later, Wendy Dasler Johnson's "Reviving Lydia Huntley Sigourney" begins with "It is time to revive, not merely to reinvent, the *ethos* or subject supported by Lydia Huntley Sigourney's own texts" in *Romanticism on the Net* 29-30 (February-March 2003) <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n29-30/007722ar.html>> in a special issue titled "The Transatlantic Poetess" (Accessed 25 September 2011). Sigourney has been the case study for a number of more expansive definitions of poetess. See especially Patricia Okker's definition—"While socially revered, the poetess is bound by expectations of modesty, unassertiveness, and melancholy emotionalism. Denied ambition and rational thought, she is expected to produce poetry spontaneously and to strive for 'light' verse" in "Sarah Josepha Hale, Lydia Sigourney, and the Poetic Tradition in Two Nineteenth-Century Women's Magazines," *American Periodicals* 3 (1993): 33. Elizabeth Petrino has called for more attention to the conversations between Sigourney's poetry and prevailing representations of mourning—"Funerary verse, like Sigourney's, grew increasingly artificial in its representation of scenes of mourning, and that these postures of grieving appeared in a range of artistic media—novels, paintings, lithographs, and embroidery, as well as poems—suggests that such conventions were culturally determined and widely accepted" in "'Feet so Precious Charged': Dickinson, Sigourney, and the Child Elegy," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 13.2 (Autumn 1994): 326. Melissa Ladd Todd documents Sigourney's uncertain posturing, since "Sigourney's vulnerability was overmatched by her ever-increasing confidence in her capacity to negotiate the literary marketplace" in "A Passion for Distinction: Lydia Huntley Sigourney and the Creation of a Literary Reputation," *The New England Quarterly* 77.1 (Mar. 2004): 52.

²⁶ Lucy Hooper's early nineteenth-century poem "Last Hours of a Young Poetess" is a good example of a poetess reflecting upon the lives of poetesses that go unwritten, *Poetical Remains of the Late Lucy Hooper, Collected and Arranged with a Memoir by John Keese* (New York: Samuel Colman, 1842), 114-121. She worries especially about the forms of life writing ill-suited to preserve her legacy for future generations:

Men will say
This is an early death, and they will write
The record of her few and changeful years
With wonder on the marble, and then turn
Away with thoughtful brows from the green sod. (114-115)

²⁷ Decades after Emmeline Grangerford's appearance, Robert Frost's poem "A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books" portrays Clara Robinson, another poetess whose room is transformed into a museum-like display after her death, where a pair of male readers peruse her poetry books. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), 215. Karen Kilcup emphasizes the erotics of this exchange, of the shared, homosocial moment of reading, between two men, since "Clara Robinson's sexuality and her textuality are conflated and utterly appropriated" in *Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 162.

²⁸ For readings of Fields's role as a biographer for each of these writers, see Rita K. Gollin's *Annie Adams Fields: Woman of Letters* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 149.

²⁹ Annie Fields, *The Singing Shepherd and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 145.

³⁰ Celia Thaxter, *Letters of Celia Thaxter*, ed. A. F. (Annie Fields) and R. L. (Rose Lamb). (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), vii. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

³¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 161. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

³² Heather Love, "Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 55.3-4 (2009): 326.

³³ Sarah Orne Jewett, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 11. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

³⁴ Recent essays on a blind authoress and a blind poetess have focused a great deal on the technologies of reading and writing. James Emmett Ryan discusses De Kroyft's discussion of herself surrounded by "a foundation of books" within "the rapidly evolving technologies and institutional practices that could lead to improved education and literacy for the blind" in "The Blind Authoress of New York: Helen De Kroyft and the Uses of Disability in Antebellum America," *American Quarterly* 51.2 (June 1999), 397, 394. Heather Tilley reads portraiture's potential for "connecting the act of writing a life with creating a visual record of a life" in "Frances Browne, the 'Blind Poetess': Toward a Poetics of Blind Writing," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009): 154. Consider also how Augusta Rohrbach's introduction to a recent special issue of *ESQ* reads nineteenth-century poetry as "situated in the explosion of print media—in a wide variety of forms, from books to magazines, newspapers to broadsides—that also characterized the times," "Introduction: 'A Blast that Whirls the Dust': Nineteenth-Century American Poetry and Critical Discontents," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 54.1-4 (2008): 3.

³⁵ Annie Fields, *The Singing Shepherd and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 1, 40, 84, 85.

³⁶ Fields, *The Singing Shepherd and Other Poems*, 109, 113, 132.

³⁷ *Words In Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 190.

³⁸ After Plath deems Ted Hughes “The Poet of England and her dominions,” she considers the Poetess of America position more closely: “Who rivals? Well in history—Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell & Marianne Moore, the ageing giantesses & poetic godmothers. Phyllis McGinley is out – light verse—she’s sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabella Gardner, & most close, Adrienne Cecile Rich—who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems: I am eager, chafing, sure of my gift, wanting only to train & teach it—I’ll count the magazines & money I break open by these best eight poems from now on. We’ll see,” *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 360.

³⁹ Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1981), 60.

⁴⁰ In a 1954 review of *Maud Martha*, Henry F. Winslow writes: “There is every indication in *Maud Martha* that poetess Gwendolyn Brooks is capable of well-rounded characterizations of which her heroine Maud is a fine-spun, fractional specimen,” in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*, ed. Stephen Caldwell Wright (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 16. Winslow turns to her poetic legacies, with an Emily Dickinson comparison: “Writing with the quiet charm and sparkling delicacy of tone which brought Emily Dickinson’s bird down the walk to drink a dew, Miss Brooks has begat a kind of beauty upon ugliness by lighting up the humanity of her creation against the background of a Chicago slum area” (16).

⁴¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), 11; Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, [1974] 1983), 231-243.

⁴² Cheryl Walker records Cather’s reading of Guiney in her “Introduction” to *American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), xxxvi; Cather also chooses Guiney’s lines as her preface’s epigraph in her edited Jewett collection: “But give to thine own story / Simplicity with glory,” “Preface,” 6. Elisabeth Petry notes her mother’s emerging research interests in Hale’s work towards the end of her life in *At Home Inside*, 113. Petry focuses upon Abbie Crunch’s poetry in her 1953 novel *The Narrows*. Abbie Crunch conceals her writing even though she takes up more daily occasions for writing besides the poetess tradition of obituary poems written on demand for public presentation: “Having written them down, she couldn’t bear to throw them away; and so she hid them, in bureau drawers, behind the sheets in the linen closet.” (Chatham, New Jersey: The Chatham Bookseller, 1953), 13. Camilo Treadway, a poetry-reading fashion-writer also in *The Narrows*, remembers resisting an Emmeline influence of her own in school, Emmaline Rosa May Carruthers who “has the face of a Boticelli angel and the tongue of an asp, to let you know exactly how awful you look” (130).

⁴³ The language of value, proportion and measurement has become widely influential in recent studies of Victorian poetesses; Thain notes that “absence—or the abandoned Sapphic woman—has become recognized as a crucial part of poetess poetics” in “What Kind of a Critical Category is ‘Women’s Poetry?’,” 581. Susan Brown refers to “the continuing devaluation of the Victorian poetess,” when she argues “Few scholars would now dispute the historical and sociological interest of the poetess as a significant phenomenon in the early nineteenth century. But critics remain divided on questions of literary value” in “The Victorian Poetess,” *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 198. Linda H. Peterson’s “Rewriting *A History of the Lyre*: Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the (Re)Construction of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet” emphasizes the imprecise measurement of a poetess’s life—“In its [the poetess myth] emphasis on the poetess’s natural genius and her youthful, sometimes even infantile poetic effusions, it tended to restrict the poetess to a youthful, immature stage of development and to mitigate against more mature, serious writing”—and Tricia Lootens’s “Hemans and Her American Heirs: Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry and National Identity” reads “affinities [that] also emerge where the ‘poetess’ tradition’s polarization of feminine and national or economic interests breaks down”; both essays are collected in *Women’s Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 120, 243. My argument casts this language in an American context, especially when regionalist writers assess poetesses in prose, alongside many other versions of writers.

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