

"NOT IN THE LEAST AMERICAN":
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
LITERARY REGIONALISM

Judith Fetterley

My title comes from a book called *Deephaven* published in 1877 by a writer named Sarah Orne Jewett. In this book Jewett describes the experiences two young women have when they choose to spend the summer in a little town in Maine rather than remaining in Boston or traveling with friends or family. The summer in *Deephaven* becomes the occasion for a pause in the lives of Kate and Helen before the presumptively inevitable plunge into marriage and motherhood, irreversible adulthood. Yet for one of the women, Helen (the narrator), the pause provides the opportunity to interrogate, however indirectly, conventional wisdom on the subjects of marriage and motherhood, the definition of adulthood, and the value of the characteristics associated with it. For Jewett, who chose not to marry, who chose in one crucial sense not to grow up as her culture defined this process for women, writing *Deephaven* may have helped her acknowledge and understand this difference and may have enabled her four years later to enter into a life-long relationship with Annie Adams Fields, widow of James T. Fields, the man who made the *Atlantic Monthly*, founded Ticknor and Fields, and for twenty years served as the arbiter of what would be called American literature. Was Jewett's choice unAmerican? Is her book unAmerican?

Deephaven, Jewett's narrator declares, "was not in the least American. There was no excitement about anything; there were no manufactories; nobody seemed in the least hurry. The only foreigners were a few standard sailors. I do not know

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when a house or a new building of any kind had been built” (84). I take this text as my starting point in proposing the term “unAmerican” as a way of thinking about a particular body of nineteenth-century texts and as a way of describing a particular critical stance, for when Jewett refers to the town of Deephaven as “not in the least American” I read her as thus marking the difference of her own text from what even in the 1870s could be considered American literature. In this context we might note the choice of another writer, Henry James, who appropriated the term “American” for the novel he published in 1877, the same year Jewett published *Deephaven*, and who thus signaled his ambition to write a specifically American novel, perhaps even “the great American novel” (see Spengemann 98–114).

While the term “unAmerican,” like all terms constructed in opposition, is problematic by virtue of its connection to the very thing it opposes, it has the advantage of foregrounding the degree to which the term “American” in the context of American literature has always referred to certain thematic content and to the values associated with that content—has, in this sense, always been political. Thinking of texts as unAmerican has the added advantage of moving the question of the canon beyond tokenism, for it suggests that the controversy over what we teach cannot be resolved by merely adding a woman and/or a minority male writer to our syllabi, since not all texts by women or minority males challenge the values currently associated with the term “American” in the context of American literature. Although adding texts by women and minority males to our courses and syllabi is necessary political work, it is not sufficient, for we may well ask how much has been gained if black men establish personhood through invoking sexism or if white women establish personhood through invoking racism. It is, for example, no accident that I have sought to recover the tradition of American literary regionalism as opposed to, say, the body of anti-Tom texts written by white Southern women in the years following the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and preceding the Civil War. For in the texts of literary regionalism I find the values that lead me to critique the canon in the first place; that is, in regionalism I find a literature that models a subjectivity attained by standing up for others, not on them. Invoking the concept of “unAmerican” thus helps focus attention on the significance of which texts by minority males and women we choose to include. Finally, figuring one’s critical stance as unAmerican provides a way of thinking about one’s activity that does justice to its political intent and recognizes the dangers which attend it.

In this essay, I wish to model what Paul Lauter has labeled canonical criticism, a criticism that focuses on “how we construct our syllabi and anthologies, on the roots of our systems of valuation, and on how we decide what is important for us to teach and for our students to learn” (134), and specifically that form of canonical criticism which, in the words of Lillian Robinson, takes treason as its

text. Canon critique, a term I prefer to canonical criticism, which can perhaps be misread as traditional interpretation of the current canon, has been from the outset overtly political, concerned with issues of power and aligned with certain values. As an overtly political criticism, canon critique has sought to expose the political nature of the processes of canon formation and literary valuation, asking such questions as: by what specific historical processes have certain texts become canonical, what politics have informed these processes, and what politics inform the definitions of aesthetic value that accompany such processes?—questions given still greater urgency from a context of increasing pressure to “get back to basics” and to create a set body of texts that will define what is American and who is literate. Indeed, as Paul Lauter comments, “it would not be too much to say that canonical criticism constitutes a part of a broader effort to reconstruct our society, and particularly our educational institutions, on a more democratic and equitable basis” (144–45).

In the field of American literature, canon critique has sought to expose how the term “American” has been used to create a literary canon so hegemonic in the privileging of certain subjectivities as to make the term unAmerican not simply politically useful but actually meaningful.¹ The equation of American literature with a handful of texts written by white men, primarily of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity and middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds, with formal and thematic coherence sufficient to enable a theory of the “Americanness” of American literature, began in the early decades of the nineteenth century (see Baym, “Early Histories,” and Brodhead, *Hawthorne* 48–66). Paul Lauter, Nina Baym, and Elizabeth Renker, however, have focused our attention on the middle decades of the twentieth century, when American literature became fully institutionalized as a field of study in colleges and universities, as the period which produced the map of American literature still operative today. Nina Baym has aptly labeled the canon established during these decades “melodramas of beset manhood” and has demonstrated how this paradigm ensures “that stories about women could not contain the essence of American culture” and thus “that the matter of American experience is inherently male” (“Melodramas” 130). Elizabeth Renker, in tracing how the First and Second World Wars created a context in which American literature could be read as engendering masculinity, has provided an additional context for understanding our current situation and in particular for understanding the connection between what we currently identify as American literature and certain formulations of our national interest.

If the analyses of Baym, Lauter, and Renker are correct—that what we currently accept as American literature implicitly and explicitly defines as American only certain persons and only the stories that serve the interests of those persons—then those of us who challenge the value of those texts and seek to disrupt the hegemony of the canon by recovering texts with different definitions

and different stories are engaging in a process that could itself be described as unAmerican. And if the fictions we recognize as American serve the interests of those who also represent the state, then the feminist critique of the American literary canon can be seen as a form of treason—a connection that explains the not-so-strange career of Lynne Cheney, perhaps the most politically motivated appointment in the history of the NEH, whose goal was to delegitimize, if she could not eradicate, the unAmerican activity of feminist canon critique. To put it another way, one can reasonably argue that American education at every level is currently organized to serve the needs of “boys” (here understood as a synecdoche for Baym’s “beset manhood”) and that through what is taught and how it is taught our educational system ratifies boys’ sense of agency and primacy, their sense of themselves as subjects, particularly as defined against their sense of girls as objects. Thus those of us who seek to place the needs of girls first—in our classroom practices, in our determination of course content, in our criticism—can be considered to be acting in an unAmerican, even treasonous fashion. For those of us who engage in feminist canon critique do so from a complex set of assumptions about the relation of identity to reading and writing practices. To put it simply, we assume a connection between the self-concept of a reader and the self imagined by and in a literary text. Thus, extrapolating again from Baym’s argument and from my own argument in *The Resisting Reader*, the classic tradition of American literature, by excluding women from the definition of American, constructs the girl reading this tradition as herself unAmerican. To the degree, then, that our literature cannot imagine the American as other than male, to that degree we who are women are already unAmerican, so indeed let treason be our text.

I wish to use as my example of the “unAmerican,” and as my basis for exploring the political utility of this term, a body of texts produced in the United States primarily by women writing during the second half of the nineteenth century constituting what Marjorie Pryse and I call literary regionalism. (Pryse and I have gathered together works by fourteen such “unAmerican” writers in *American Women Regionalists, 1850–1910*. The obligatory use of the term “American” to describe this anthology for marketing purposes in itself provides a rich context for thinking about the difficulties and even contradictions of our enterprise.) While some of the writers in this tradition may be familiar to readers—Kate Chopin, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett—most are marginal to, if not absent from, current American literary history. Absent as well from that history is any concept of the tradition of nineteenth-century regionalist writing as we understand it. Though some of the writers and texts included in our anthology come into the field of American literature through the rubric of “regional realism” or “local color,” understood as subsets of “realism” (see, for example, Berthoff 90–102 and Sundquist), these categories derive from a history of American literature based on

the writing of men, one which privileges their work as the source of its definitions. Indeed certain recent texts have sought to establish the specifically masculinist nature of realism, the dominant term in virtually all writing about American literature after the Civil War (see, for example, Habegger and Bell). Although in the case of Michael Bell in *The Problem of American Realism* this identification has the effect of allowing him to ask “what Jewett made of American realism” (179), and thus of positioning Jewett as a potential alternative to the values of realism, he reads her only within the context of her entanglement with what he calls “realist thinking.” Thus he concludes, not surprisingly, that the ambitious Nan Prince of *A Country Doctor* (1884) is “free” to defy tradition only by embracing it and that once Jewett left behind the ambition projected into the story of Nan Prince “she would appear to have left herself with no clear rationale or counter-rationale to put in its place, and after *The Country of the Pointed Firs* there was no obvious direction for her career to go” (204). Hence the fall in 1902 which effectively ended her life as a writer was for Bell “fortunate.” Bell fails to recognize that Jewett’s work derives from a tradition of women’s writing that goes back at least as far as the end of the eighteenth century and Maria Edgeworth, a tradition developed through the first half of the nineteenth century by writers such as Mary Russell Mitford, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alice Cary, and Rose Terry Cooke, and practiced by Jewett’s contemporaries and acquaintances such as Celia Thaxter, Mary Noialles Murfree, and Mary Wilkins Freeman. In Bell’s version of American literary history Jewett appears as an isolated individual struggling to create an alternative to oppose to the dominant discourse of realism and failing precisely because of her isolation and because realism is finally the only game in town. In a different version of American literary history, but perhaps not called that, Jewett might appear as a particularly talented practitioner of a long-established tradition, seeking to critique the self-consciously masculine “new” realism from a larger historical perspective.

The elegiac tone Michael Bell adopts for his discussion of Jewett finds an echo in Eric Sundquist’s chapter in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Sundquist subsumes regionalism under the rubric of local color and identifies it as “a literature of memory” (508), a memory, he observes, “often lodged in the vestiges of a world of female domesticity” (509). This reading bears an uncanny resemblance to the process Laura Romero has analyzed in “Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire, and New Historicism,” a process in which the elegiac mode of cultural and literary history performs the “historical sleight of hand” of representing “the disappearance of the native as not just natural but as having already happened” (385). Both Michael Bell in *The Problem of American Realism* and Richard Brodhead in *Cultures of Letters* position their reading of Jewett in relation to what they see as an overtly feminist effort to recuperate Jewett for contemporary readers (see Bell 197 ff. and Brodhead 142–44), and both

participate in a process I call the “re-vanishing” of Jewett—Brodhead by seeking to dismantle the conceptual framework which has led to her recuperation and Bell by suggesting that she cannot finally be distinguished from the masculinist enterprise of realism. In Sundquist’s chapter the palpable politics of the discourse over Jewett is itself “vanished” to re-emerge as a description of her disappearance as “having already happened.”

While Marjorie Pryse and I retain the term “regional” for this tradition, in part to focus attention on the significance of place to the production, reception, and content of these texts, and in part to avail ourselves of whatever recognition currently obtains from its present usage, we seek primarily through this term to create a category parallel to and thus potentially of equal importance to the category of realism. And we seek as well to create a framework that will enable us to see connections, origins, and aims that remain obscure if we continue to subsume the work of regionalist writers under the category of realism. In creating the category of regionalism, then, we seek to model the effect on our understanding of “American” literature of deriving our map of American literary history from an analysis of the work of women. That this constitutes an unAmerican activity may be inferred from the fact that presentation of our work invariably leads to the question, “Weren’t there any men writing regionalist fiction between 1850 and 1910?”—a question which barely contains the anxiety that men might be excluded from an American tradition or that certain male writers (for example, Charles Chesnut) might best be understood in a context created by the work of women and subsumed within a category primarily female.

In asking readers to engage with the tradition of regionalist writing and in identifying the stakes of this engagement, I seek to provide you with a context within which the concepts of “unAmerican” and “treason” have meaning. For one can perhaps understand the intent of the effort to write Jewett out of history before she is even in, to “re-vanish” her, if one considers the effect of choosing Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as the required American text for an eighth-grade English class or a freshman introduction to literature course; or of organizing an entire course in American literature around the issues it raises; or even of introducing it in an American literature survey. As my students like to point out, “This isn’t an American book. It has no story and it is all about old women and a few old men. There isn’t an American in it.” Or consider the effect of defining Sylvie, the protagonist of “A White Heron,” as an American cultural hero, a girl who comes to understand (hetero)sexuality as sexual harassment, the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her in town reappearing in the form of the “nice” boy with a gun who seeks to kill and stuff “the very birds he seemed to like so much” (Fetterley and Pryse 201; hereafter cited as *AWR*); a girl who chooses to renounce the world, her chance of being an “American,” perhaps even nationality itself, in favor of a bird’s life. My students can’t under-

stand why she doesn't promise to marry the hunter when she grows up, and so we talk about domestic violence and why so much romance should end in so much battering.

My use of the term "unAmerican" presents one final question which I wish to raise here. In introducing literature currently considered unAmerican, is our goal to redefine the meaning of "American," to make it possible for girls to be Americans too? Or is the goal to replace the term "American" entirely? Can significant change be accomplished without renaming the field or has the term "American" become so profoundly associated with certain values that in order to introduce literature with different values into the field we will need to do nothing less than to cease using the term "American" and develop instead an alternative term, for example, "Writing in the U.S.," as Gregory Jay has suggested in "The End of 'American' Literature"? To put the matter another way, can the term "American" be recuperated for a different set of values, or does its energy, its power, its eroticism derive from the values currently associated with it and from its association with these values? Yet if we abandon the term are we not complicit in the very pattern we protest, and, by leaving all that power in the "wrong" hands, have we not made a major political error? Yet can we have the power without a price? And is it possible that our very attachment to the term "American" derives precisely from those values which have precluded the participation of all but a few persons in the literary and cultural definition of the term in the first place? By playing with the terms "American" and "unAmerican," I seek thus to join the effort to identify the naming of the field of "American literature" as itself a site of contestation, not so much because I care what name we give it as because I care what values we promote through it. In seeking to gain readers for these texts, I seek nothing less than the creation of a citizenry committed to the values of inclusion, empathy, diversity, and community, and the cultural change which would follow upon the creation of such a citizenry. And in bringing attention to texts which have historically been excluded from the canon of American literature, I seek to model the process of inclusion and the change which it can accomplish, whether the end result be a redefined American literature or a new name for our enterprise.

If Huckleberry Finn, white boy on the run from the "sivilization" of women, provides the paradigm for how "our" literature has constructed the American, a story like Mary Wilkins Freeman's "On the Walpole Road," which opens with a description of a woman "who might have been seventy" with "a double bristling chin" (*AWR* 306), driving slowly along a road in company with another woman who was "younger—forty perhaps," marks a difference, just as in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* Mrs. Todd, a woman of sixty-seven, and Mrs. Blackett, a woman in her eighties, pass on their knowledge to the younger generation, defined as a woman in her forties, "perhaps." A literature which foregrounds old women

rather than boys hardly seems American; it is as if the Widow Douglas were to take the story away from Huck.

But when we consider more closely that “bristling” chin, we realize that regionalism’s understanding of story must be as different as its understanding of character, for women with bristling chins are not capable of generating those stories we have come to think of as American, nor even those other fictions not quite so American, those novels whose business it is to negotiate the marriage of girls. Indeed, I would argue that literary regionalism occurs primarily in the form of the sketch or short story because this form made it possible to tell stories about elderly women with bristling chins, about women for whom the eventful means something other than marriage, about women in relation to each other, about women who take care of themselves. In “A New England Nun,” one of the few regionalist texts that might be considered well-known, Freeman makes this feature of regionalist writing the subject of the fiction itself, for in this story Louisa Ellis comes to realize that her meaningful event is not the marriage she has awaited for fourteen years but the ritualized and sacramental life she has created during those years, feeding herself “with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self” (*AWR* 356). Similarly, Jewett’s “A White Heron,” one of the few regionalist texts to feature a young girl as its protagonist, dramatizes Sylvy’s instinctive swerve away from the seemingly inevitable heterosexual plot, her choice of her own life over the hunter’s need. In that pause which halts the headlong rush, in that *Deephaven* time-out, regionalism creates its own “world elsewhere” which has yet to be recognized as American—no doubt in part because our current understanding of “American” cannot encompass the privileging of women’s relations to themselves or other women over their relation to men. Indeed, since the literature we call American romanticizes the relation of boy to boy and man to man while it denies, if it does not vilify, the love of women for women and presents women primarily as rivals for the attention of boys and men, *Deephaven* deserves the accolade “unAmerican” for its devotion to inscribing romantic love between women and the “deephaven” of female friendship (see Pryse; Fetterley, “Reading”).

If the sketch provided the form which made it possible to talk about unAmerican women—women with bristling chins, women who love other women, women who love themselves, women who choose birds over boys—it did so precisely because such fictions could not be candidates for the accolade “great American novel.” Indeed, the vexed relation of the form of regionalist writing to the definition of great American literature can best be demonstrated by *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. This text, which Jewett herself referred to as “papers,” has defied efforts to define it as a novel and puzzled readers who have previously tried to label it. In concluding her preface to the edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* published in 1925, Willa Cather writes: “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.'" If Jewett recognized that she had to write a novel-length book in order to have a chance at the "immortality" predicted by Cather, she nevertheless refused in so doing to relinquish the essential identity of the sketch, no doubt one reason why her text has not in fact had the kind of life Cather predicted for it. And while Jewett's genius enabled her to find a way to write a novel-length regionalist text and thus to seek for regionalist fiction the status associated with length, the very fact that she needed to do this underscores the marginal status of the sketch in American literature. Yet if the marginal status of the sketch form was the price that had to be paid to gain the discursive freedom of regionalism, and if to gain that discursive freedom literary regionalists sold their birthright to be considered great American writers, they too, like Louisa Ellis, could be said not to "know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious" (*AWR* 365). For, as Freeman suggests, to persons excluded from rights and required to cook, pottage may be preferable.

In Rose Terry Cooke's "Miss Beulah's Bonnet," first published in 1880 in *Harpers*, an elderly woman, having opened her house to her niece and her niece's children, Sarah, Janey, and Jack, finds herself "free to say I never did like boys. I suppose divine Providence ordained 'em to some good end; but it takes a sight o' grace to believe it: and of all the boys that ever was sent into this world for any purpose, I do believe [Jack] is the hatefulest" (*AWR* 130). Published four years after Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, "Miss Beulah's Bonnet" can be read as an item in a dialogue about boys as a privileged subject of American literature and culture, and Miss Beulah's "free to say I never did like boys" can be read as Cooke's articulation of her desire to be free to write about women with "bristling" chins. Though Miss Beulah's "boy" refers to an actual Jack, we feel free to read "boys" as referring to a cluster of values associated with that word and we see regionalism as originating in part in the desire to participate in a dialogue which challenges those values by doing something other than "liking boys."

Regionalist writers were themselves aware of the difficulties they faced in trying to create a space in American literature for stories asserting that bonnets matter more than boys, and they both addressed these difficulties in their fiction and developed strategies for circumventing them. For regionalist writers to be able to tell stories about bonnets rather than boys, they had to imagine audiences capable of hearing and reading such stories. In "Miss Beulah's Bonnet," Miss Beulah finds herself unable to attend church because her new bonnet, hidden under the cushion of a chair by that Jack, gets smashed when the "stout" Mrs. Blake unwittingly sits on it during a visit. When the deacons come to interrogate Miss Beulah about her absence from church, they are confounded by her explanation:

“Well, if you must know, I hain’t got no bunnit.”

The deacons stared mutually; and Deacon Morse, . . . curious as men naturally are, asked abruptly, “Why not?”

“Cause Miss Blake sot on it.”

The two men looked at each other in blank amazement, and shook their heads. Here was a pitfall. Was it proper, dignified, possible to investigate this truly feminine tangle? They were dying to enter into particulars, but ashamed to do so; nothing was left but retreat. (*AWR* 135)

Because the culture associated with the church defines Miss Beulah’s story as a trivial feminine tangle, hers is not a story that can be told or heard in church; and since the deacons are there in their official capacity as churchmen who must report back to their congregation, they cannot hear her story because they cannot imagine telling it. Indeed, within Cooke’s fiction Miss Beulah’s story only gets told by a woman to other women, within the separate sphere of the sewing circle, though we may suppose that the women go home and tell their husbands. In describing the deacons as dying to enter into particulars but ashamed to do so, Cooke herself constructs men as a rich potential audience for her story, just as she suggests that “girls” stories may not get fully heard until men can imagine themselves telling them. In writing *her* story for a readership obviously comprised of men as well as women, she proposes that men in the privacy of reading can satisfy their desire to enter a truly feminine tangle without the loss of status that would attend a public acknowledgment of their curiosity. Yet such a proposition reveals men to be boys, governed primarily by the peer pressures of male bonding formalized in such institutions as the church. In this context, male bonding, that holiest of holies in American culture (as witness the rituals of Superbowl Sunday), takes on a negative cast as Cooke challenges men to commit the treason of admitting publicly in front of other men their interest in and connection to women’s lives. In a culture obsessed with the question of why *Johnny* can’t read and insistent on providing boys’ stories to lure Johnny into literacy, since, as one elementary school teacher put it to me, girls will read stories about boys but boys won’t read stories about girls, to ask men to hear and tell women’s stories may indeed be unAmerican. Yet, as Cooke implies, what’s truly shameful is a construction of masculinity which makes boys ashamed to read girls’ stories.

For those of us interested in the unAmerican act of getting Janey to read, regionalism not only provides “girls” stories but models as well the importance for women of having and telling their stories. In the figure of her own Janey, Cooke presents the situation of woman and story in a world of boys. Jack preserves the letter of his own honesty by making his little sister hide Miss Beulah’s bonnet; he then terrifies her into silence with “wild threats of bears and guns” (*AWR* 126) and quickly distracts her so that she soon forgets what she has done. In creating women who come to recognize that they have a story and who

become empowered to tell their story, regionalist fiction seeks to construct women as storyful rather than storyless and to connect having and telling stories to their sanity and survival. In "Sister Liddy," Freeman identifies having a story to tell as the one thing that maintains the sanity and dignity of the old women who are inmates of the county poorhouse. Polly Moss, whose physical deformity adds another dimension to her struggle, temporarily comes into her own in this strife-ridden community when she makes up and tells a series of stories about her imaginary sister, Liddy. Similarly, in "The Praline Woman," Alice Dunbar-Nelson shows the significance of story to a working-class woman of color who is determined to share her stories with her customers and who exercises considerable ingenuity to find openings in the chatter of commerce for such an exchange. Of Jewett we could say that the entire art of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* lies in creating a written text that can identify women as a rich source of story and as story-tellers, through characters such as Mrs. Todd and, more importantly still, through the narrator herself, who must find the way to write them down.

In seeking to empower persons made silent or vacant through terror to tell stories which the dominant culture labels trivial, regionalism seeks to change our perspective and thus to destabilize the meaning of margin and center. For including the story of one previously silenced and marginalized inevitably affects the definition of margin and center and calls into question the values that have produced such definitions. In *Deephaven* Jewett specifically associates this process with the category of the American, seeking thus to unsettle and destabilize our understanding of that term. In a chapter entitled "The Circus at Denby," Kate and Helen attend a circus. At the end of the day, their companion, Mrs. Kew, declares an interest in the side shows and they enter the tent containing the Kentucky Giantess, for, as Mrs. Kew says, "she never heard of such a thing as a woman's weighing six hundred and fifty pounds" (106). When Kate and Helen return from looking at the monkeys, an added attraction of this side show, they find Mrs. Kew engaged in conversation with the giantess, who turns out to be someone Mrs. Kew used to know. In a quiet but momentous revolution, the freak turns out to be a neighbor with a story and a secret and feelings, and as we experience this revolution we are forced to question definitions of center and margin, norm and freak, national and regional. Positioned as a spectacle, the fat lady is not herself meant to speak. By placing cages of monkeys on the same platform as the giantess, the entrepreneur running the show seeks to rationalize the category of freak as somehow not really human and as therefore available for profit and use to exhibitor and viewer alike. Thus when the fat lady does in fact speak and the "freak" becomes "somebody's neighbor," the title Cooke gave to her 1881 collection of regionalist fiction, the rationalization collapses and the category it has sustained no longer seems inherent. Once revealed as constructed, it can then be deconstructed.

In the second half of the chapter, Kate and Helen attend an evening lecture on “The Elements of True Manhood.” Evoking here the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance, Jewett associates this event with the issue of who is and is not included in the term “American.” The young white man who comes to Deephaven to deliver this lecture assumes that in talking of and to himself he addresses everyone. His use of the stage as a place from which to speak at an audience expected to remain silent—so different from the arrangements of the fat lady—confirms his assumption of his own centrality. The lecture would seem to contrast with the circus, yet in Jewett’s hands it comes to seem far more of a “show” than the circus itself. “You would have thought,” observes Helen, “the man was addressing an enthusiastic Young Men’s Christian Association. He exhorted with fervor upon our duties as citizens and as voters, and told us a great deal about George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, whom he urged us to choose as our examples” (110). And she continues, “If the lecture had been upon any other subject it would not have been so hard for Kate and me to keep sober faces; but it was directed entirely toward young men, and there was not a young man there” (110). As the lecture drones on, we come to see the lecturer himself as crazy for delivering a talk on the elements of true manhood to an audience composed entirely of old men, women, and children. Yet his failure to recognize his audience, and the arrogant solipsism implicit in this failure, reflects a larger cultural madness. For young men do not represent the majority of the population in Deephaven or anywhere else, and a culture that devotes itself entirely to the feeding of boys, as if they constituted the whole human race, and has nothing to say to old men, women, and children is crazy, if not malicious. After they have laughed long and hard, Kate and Helen come to see “the pitiful side of it all” (111) and send a contribution to the lecturer to help pay his expenses. Later they learn that he will repeat his lecture the following evening and, as Helen observes, “I have no doubt there were a good many women able to be out, and that he harvested enough ten-cent pieces to pay his expenses without our help” (111). Although the chapter ends in anger, however subdued, we should memorialize Kate and Helen’s laughter, their inability to keep sober during the lecture, as an instance of treason *in* the text and as a model of unAmerican activity.

Challenging and destabilizing the meaning of margin and center serves as a paradigm for regionalism’s efforts to dismantle and deconstruct hierarchies based on the categories of gender, race, class, age, and region. Although certainly not free itself of the infection of these hierarchies, regionalist fiction works toward dismantling the binary oppositions and the concomitant privileging of one item over the other that structure a culture dedicated to the elements of true manhood. Regionalist texts are astonishingly free of the dialect of gender that dominates most of nineteenth-century American writing by both men and women, for while regionalist fiction acknowledges gender differences, it recognizes these differ-

ences as the product of privilege, not biology. Jack is not so much born a nuisance as made one by the fact of living in a world run by deacons. And a story like Freeman's "A Church Mouse," which opens with the line, "I never heard of a woman's bein' saxton" (*AWR* 344), develops the position that such failures to hear exist not because of "nature" but because they help men maintain the privilege of not having to share the church with a "mouse," the world with women. Hetty Fifield, old, poor, and homeless, fights for her own survival through pressing the revolutionary question, "I dun know what difference that makes" (*AWR* 344).

Writing of a world inhabited by old men and women, Jewett creates a space to experiment with breaking down the rigid gender identities associated in her mind with the Emersonian definition of "American." No figure in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is more pathetic than Captain Littlepage, landlocked in the trivial feminine tangle of Dunnet Landing while longing for a world of high art and obsessed by the memory of another man's last voyage to the "end" of the world, the ultimately masculine adventure. Yet, ironically, those discoveries he has promised to pass on of "a kind of waiting place between this world an' the next" (*Firs* 26) are emblems of mediation, dissolution, blending—as if Jewett means to say, go as far as possible toward one pole and you will arrive at a space that dissolves the idea of pole. For at the end of the world there seems to be a middle ground, a meeting place of this world and the next, emblematic of the dissolution of oppositional polarities. This space both obsesses and horrifies Captain Littlepage, but for other characters and perhaps for Jewett herself it functions as a desired goal. Thus Elijah Tilley places stakes in his fields to indicate, like buoys, the presence of rocks, declaring that "one trade helps another," and in the absence of his wife has become himself a careful housekeeper (*Firs* 120). And thus Mrs. Blackett declares that "William has been son an' daughter both" (*Firs* 41). Regionalism's intention to dismantle race and gender differences finds succinct expression in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "The Praline Woman." Here a praline-colored woman speaks a dialect which renders such distinctions temporarily inoperative: "Ah, he's fine gal, is Didele" (*AWR* 481). If this were American language, maybe we might not have a problem with gays in the military.

In regionalist fiction, the impulse to dissolve binary oppositions and destabilize the definition of margin and center through shifting our perspective begins with a feeling that can best be described as empathy, as the capacity to imagine how someone else might feel, and we see regionalism as a fiction characterized, indeed inspired, by empathy. Regionalism's commitment to empathy serves to distinguish it from the post-Civil War local color movement under which regionalist writers are often subsumed. In local color writing, genteel narrators present regional characters to urban readers as instances of the quaint or queer. Such characters form a literary circus which serves to ratify readers' sense of their own normalcy and normativeness. Despite the gesture toward the local, then, local

color writing in effect ratifies the hegemony of the “national” as a standard against which the local can be measured and found wanting. Regionalism, however, as we have seen from the instance of *Deephaven* and “The Circus at Denby,” deconstructs the “national,” revealing its presumed universality to be in fact the position of a certain, albeit privileged, group of locals.

In valuing empathy, regionalism proposes alternative behaviors to those which characterize the world of boys; to the extent that boys are equated with the national, regionalism models behaviors not in the national interest. In “Miss Beulah’s Bonnet,” Jack gets the reputation of a nuisance for his harassment of the hens, the cat, Nanny Starks, and even Miss Beulah herself, all creatures relatively defenseless against him. While empathy can obtain in a context of peers—as witness the impassioned defense of Beulah Larkin by Mary Jane Beers, the milliner who made her bonnet—regionalist fiction presents empathy primarily as a model for the relationships of “persons” with differing amounts of cultural power. By modeling an alternative mode of relating to that evinced by the “boy,” regionalist fiction seeks as well to convert the boy and by such conversion to redistribute cultural power. When Sylvy in “A White Heron” refuses to “tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (*AWR* 205), we are left to wonder how different her life might have been had the boy looked at her the way she looks at the bird. A further instance of this phenomenon can be found in Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*, a text which Jewett identified as the origin of her own career as a writer of regionalist fiction.

In this story, Stowe describes a boy and a girl, Moses and Mara, growing up together in early nineteenth-century New England, and analyzes the social structures which lead the boy to view the girl as an inferior being and to treat her with contempt. Mara, watching Moses prepare for his first fishing voyage, protests, however faintly, her own exclusion from the event:

“How I do wish I were going with you!” she says [*sic*]. “I could do something, couldn’t I—take care of your hooks, or something?”

“Pooh!” said Moses, sublimely regarding her while he settled the collar of his shirt, “you’re a girl—and what can girls do at sea? you never like to catch fish—it always makes you cry to see ’em flop.” (136)

Moses reads empathy as disqualifying Mara for life—Mara will later literally die for lack of the air and exercise such a voyage might give her—and as justifying his contempt for her, but Stowe reads Moses’s lack of empathy as a far more serious disqualification. In Moses we recognize a version of Tom Sawyer, the American bad boy who can do no wrong in the nation’s eyes, despite the cries of tormented cats and aunts. Thus when we realize that Stowe’s text intends to convert this boy into a “girl,” to bring him to the point of feeling pain when a girl gasps and thus to be more like her, we have a context for reflecting on the unAmericanness of empathy.

Empathy can characterize narrator as well as character; in creating empathic narrators, regionalist writers propose a different model of story-telling from that “American” tradition begun by Washington Irving and developed in the genre of the tall tale, in particular by the humorists of the old Southwest. In “In the Name of Wonder: The Emergence of Tall Narrative in American Writing,” Henry B. Wonham provides evidence of the gendered nature of “American” in this explicitly American genre, and not simply through the masculinist content of the tales or the masculine identity of the teller. More significantly, Wonham notes, the audience for such tales is composed of “boys” (303), the action involves the humiliation of a naïve outsider frequently figured as female, and “her victimization becomes a patriotic victory for American wit” (297). In “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Irving poses the question of who will be given possession of Sleepy Hollow, that imaginative space which inspires our stories, and who will be driven out. Irving identifies the masculine Brom Bones as the decisive victor, the effeminate Ichabod Crane as the figure to be driven out, and the tall tale as the best way to tell a story about winning and losing because its very telling enacts a similar drama. Indeed, in his postscript to this story Irving suggests that the quintessential American story will be a tall tale circulated among men for the purpose of establishing dominance. The good reader is the one who gets the joke; the bad reader is the one who doesn’t get it or refuses to find it funny, perhaps because the joke is on her or him; and telling stories about winning and losing becomes itself an act of winning and losing, of inclusion and exclusion, with character, teller, and listener all invited to identify with one another and against someone else, everyone becoming a Brom Bones getting rid of an Ichabod Crane. As Wonham puts it, the tall tale serves an audience of “cultural insiders” (288) whose enjoyment depends upon the exclusionary practices of a narrative form appropriately characterized as “a sort of inside joke” (305).

Regionalist writers provide a different model of story-telling. Constructing women as story-tellers, they also present story-telling as an activity designed to include rather than exclude, to heal rather than harm. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the long anticipated visit of Susan Fosdick creates the occasion for an evening of story-telling. The narrator has invited Mrs. Todd and Susan Fosdick to her room, and as story-telling follows from this invitation Jewett suggests the connection between story-telling and hospitality, just as she connects story-telling and healing through references to the season as the “time of syrups and cordials” (see Romines 63). Telling the story of Joanna serves as a way of keeping Joanna, the one “driven” out, connected in some way to her community and of easing the pain of those who feel they have lost her. Indeed, it continues the efforts Dunnet Landing folk made to stay connected with Joanna while she was still alive as “one after another ventured to make occasion to put somethin’ ashore

for her if they went that way” (*Firs* 77). Story-telling as one mode of staying connected thus participates in creating the community of Dunnet Landing as one in which far islands and scattered farms are linked together through “constant interest and intercourse . . . into a golden chain of love and dependence” (*Firs* 90). Moreover, in elaborating Joanna as a symbol of that place “in the life of each of us . . . remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness” (*Firs* 82), the narrator indicates that in hearing this story she has come not simply to empathize with but to identify with the exile.

In her last published story, entitled “The Foreigner,” however, Jewett chose to critique the limits of regionalist empathy and in so doing to complicate still further the question of the American and the unAmerican, a gesture appropriate to a tradition which takes the critique of cultural values as its particular province. Yet it would be a mistake, I think, to read Jewett’s critique as in fact arguing for a recuperation of the American, for the question her final story asks—how could Mrs. Todd have missed the foreigner and her story?—suggests that such losses occur through creating the category of the foreigner, a category which has meaning only in the context of the American and not American. Indeed, anticipating the arguments Virginia Woolf would make in *Three Guineas* against the value of nationalism for women, Jewett’s regionalist fiction implies that the ancient knowledge women need to learn and inherit, and the stories we all need to hear, can be unfolded only in a space which refuses to participate in the masculinist notion of nation. Thus I would like to conclude this essay with a brief meditation on Jewett’s “The Foreigner,” a story which helps me think about the value of the term “American” in the global context of the twenty-first century. Deephaven, Jewett tells us, was not in the least American in part because “the only foreigners there were a few standard sailors.” Here Jewett identifies Deephaven, and by extension the Dunnet Landing of her later work, as ethnically and racially homogeneous, an observation which prepares us for a story that seeks to extend the range of empathy to include those constructed as foreign.

“The Foreigner” tells the story of a woman, French by birth and Jamaican by residence, rescued from poverty and sexual harassment through marriage to a Captain Tolland, who brings her home to Dunnet Landing—a community as unable to hear her story as the deacons to hear Miss Beulah’s, and lacking their curiosity. As Mrs. Todd recounts to the narrator her story of Mrs. Tolland’s life in Dunnet Landing and of the circumstances of her death, she reveals as well the limits of her own empathy, her failure to extend herself to include this woman in her definition of community.

Jewett’s critique of the limits of Mrs. Todd’s empathy becomes even more pointed when we consider how she has constructed the foreigner whom Mrs. Todd belatedly accepts. In creating her foreigner, Jewett hints at dimensions of otherness that might have made it impossible for Mrs. Captain Tolland to live in

Dunnet Landing at all. She comes to Dunnet Landing by way of the West Indies, yet she herself is white and French, not colored or even native to those foreign islands. In this severely Protestant community, she seems foreign in her Catholicism, but she is neither Jewish nor atheist nor a practitioner of voodoo. Though the captains rescue her from a bar full of drunken men, she has not been raped and is not a prostitute, nor does she arrive either pregnant or with an illegitimate child. If Dunnet Landing cannot extend itself to include a white French Catholic who, duly married, still loves to sing and dance, what, Jewett makes us wonder, would they do to a black unwed mother who practiced voodoo?

Belatedly, Mrs. Todd finds common ground with the foreigner. Through her love for her own mother, Mrs. Todd can “see” the foreigner’s mother and assure her that her mother is indeed present in the room where she lies dying. While we are all familiar with the cliché “as American as motherhood and apple pie,” nothing is in fact more foreign to our literature than “seeing” mother or listening to her story. To return for a moment to Freeman’s “On the Walpole Road” and the woman with the “bristling chin,” we might equally locate this story’s unAmericanness in its celebration of the resurrection of “mother,” for when Mis’ Green discovers that the funeral she has been called to attend is not for Aunt Rebecca, the woman who has been like a mother to her, but for Uncle Enos, she becomes “kinder highstericky” and laughs “till the tears was runnin’ down my cheeks, an’ it was all I could do to breathe” (*AWR* 310). “I thought you was dead,” she explains to Aunt Rebecca, “an’ there you was a-settin’” (*AWR* 310).

Throughout this essay I have used the term “unAmerican” to refer to a body of literature that challenges the values currently understood as “American” in order to provoke reflection about what we are doing when we teach American literature. For, to me, the question of values constitutes the “to what end” of rethinking American literature, the title I gave to the 1993 NCTE Summer Institute for Teachers of Literature, where this paper was first presented. We suffer today from a national narrative that valorizes violence, that defines masculinity as the production of violence and defines the feminine and the foreign as legitimate recipients of such violence. We need different narratives and different identities, whether we locate these in a field named “American literature” or “writing in the U.S.” or “the literatures of America”—or “the Americas”—or “postcolonial writing.” It is my argument here that we can find such narratives and such identities in certain texts, of which the work of nineteenth-century literary regionalists serves as one instance, that have been systematically excluded from the definition of American literature precisely because they do not reproduce the national narrative of violence or the definitions of masculine and feminine, American and foreign, which such a narrative presents as our national interest. It is time, then, to take treason as our text and to begin reading “unAmerican” literature.

NOTE

1. For readers interested in exploring this claim further, I suggest the following references which, in the aggregate, provide evidence of a fairly continuous equation since the mid-nineteenth century of American literature with a very limited number of texts: Nina Baym, "Early Histories of American Literature," *American Literary History* 1 (Fall 1989), 459–88; Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," *American Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1981), 123–39; Ezra Greenspan, "Evert Duyckinck and the History of Wiley and Putnam's Library of American Books, 1845–1847," *American Literature* 64 (December 1992), 677–93; Paul Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 22–47; Lawrence Oliver, "Theodore Roosevelt, Brander Matthews, and the Campaign for Literary Americanism," *American Quarterly* 41 (March 1989), 93–111; Elizabeth Renker, "Resistance and Change: The Rise of American Literature Studies," *American Literature* 64 (June 1992), 347–65; Jane Tompkins, "Susanna Rowson, Father of the American Novel," in *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. Joyce Warren (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993), 29–38. In addition, in *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1989), William Spengemann, though by no means inspired by the politics of feminist canon critique, does an excellent job of laying out the difficulties that historically have beset the definition of American literature and the writing of American literary history. His work thus provides an important context for understanding the hegemony I refer to, for one can see such hegemony as one "obvious" solution to the problems posed by the term "American literature."

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