

CRAFTING RADICAL FICTIONS: LATE-NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN  
LITERARY REGIONALISM AND  
ARTS AND CRAFTS IDEALS

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Crafting Radical Fictions: Late-Nineteenth Century American Literary Regionalism and Arts and Crafts Ideals

This dissertation demonstrates that Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Mary Hunter Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (1906), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), and Mary Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* (1903) exemplify the radical politics and aesthetics that late nineteenth-century literary regionalism shares with the Arts and Crafts Movement. Despite considerable feminist critical accomplishments, scholarship on regionalism has yet to relate its rural folkways, feminine aesthetics, and anti-urban stance to similar ideals in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman all depict the challenges of the regional woman artist in order to oppose the uniformity and conventionality of urban modernity. They were not alone in engaging these concerns: they shared these interests with period feminists, sexual radicals, and advocates of the Arts and Crafts Movement like John Ruskin and William Morris, all of whom deeply questioned industrial capitalism and modernization.

Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman envisioned women's Arts and Crafts communities that appealed to readers through narratives that detailed the potential uniqueness of homemade decorative arts and other aspects of women's material culture. For Arts and Crafts advocates and regionalists, handcrafted goods made using local folk

methods and natural materials fulfilled what they saw as the aesthetic requirements for artistic self-definition: *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *The Land of Little Rain* embrace the destabilizing effect queer and feminist characters have on a presumably heterosexual domestic environment, and they formally resist the narrative structures of industrial modernity, emphasizing the Arts and Crafts ideal union between woman artist, natural environment, and communal bonds. *The Awakening* and *The Portion of Labor* expose the suffocating impact of industrial capitalism and sexism on women artists who strive for connection with their local environments and communities and cannot achieve their creative goals. I prove that all four texts do more than simply interpret regionalism through the Arts and Crafts Movement as a means to launch their critiques of industrial modernity, they transform the meaning of regionalist Arts and Crafts aesthetics and politics in late nineteenth-century American literature.

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Dedicated to Great-grandma Does, who loved to read with me



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION: REITERATING FEMINIST HISTORICISM .....	1
II. AN ARTS AND CRAFTS PASTORAL IN SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S <i>THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS</i> .....	22
III. INTERWEAVING NATURE AND THE ARTIST IN MARY HUNTER AUSTIN'S <i>THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN</i> .....	57
IV. A PLACE OF ARTISTRY AND LOVE: ARTS AND CRAFTS ARCHITECTURE IN THE REGION OF KATE CHOPIN'S <i>THE AWAKENING</i> .....	96
V. THE UNRAVELING OF REGIONALIST SELF-FASHIONING IN MARY WILKINS FREEMAN'S <i>THE PORTION OF LABOR</i> .....	131
VI. CONCLUSION: PATHWAYS TO AND FROM REGIONALISM .....	170
REFERENCES CITED .....	176

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: REITERATING FEMINIST HISTORICISM

Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have recuperated American literary regionalist texts written by women as significant literature, elevating their aesthetics and politics. In Ann Douglas's 1972 article "The Literature of Impoverishment: the Women Local Colorists in America 1865-1914," she observes that pre-Civil War sentimental literature and later local color fiction written by women utilized a non-threatening feminine façade as "the armor under which the woman activist of the second half of the century was to battle for her rights" (9). While Douglas and Alice Hall Petry in their 1970s articles about local color fiction note the significance of the women writers' veiled radicalism, they include all varieties of rural literature in the local color category, regardless of gender politics. The most important intervention into regionalism as a category in American literary studies was a recuperation of specifically feminist regionalist texts led by Marjorie Pryse and Judith Fetterly during the 1980s. At the time, regionalists faced sexist exclusion from the American literary canon because many regionalist works were written by women, focused on women characters, and often detailed feminine material activities in places that appeared geographically and politically distant from the concerns of masculine urban modernity. In her 1997 text *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction 1885-1915*, Donna Campbell introduces her analysis of regionalist form, arguing that regionalism's feminine formal qualities led to its dismissal by scholars primarily concerned with more masculine forms of realism and naturalism (5). Following two decades of feminist recuperation of regionalism, feminist scholars and

nineteenth-century American literature scholars continue debating how best to read regionalism through the lens of gender in order to discern its political contributions.

After more than ten years of producing feminist scholarship about regionalism, Fetterly and Pryse's 2003 book *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* concludes that the rural, feminine, and queer aesthetics in women's regionalism make it a literary movement marginal in comparison to naturalism and realism (37).<sup>1</sup> But from their perspective, this is political because regionalism's marginal status in comparison to realism and naturalism gives it critical distance from the gender and other social norms of "central" literary movements. Similarly, Sherrie Inness and Diana Royer describe this marginal position as a "decentered perspective of the dominant culture's values" (2). Other scholars of regionalism, like Richard Brodhead, Stephanie Foote, and Amy Kaplan dispute the claims that regionalism is a politically radical literary movement, instead articulating regionalism's role in assuaging American anxiety about the threat of immigration during a time of civil and economic unrest. Kaplan particularly emphasizes the politically reactionary aspects of regionalism's utopian communities that are devoid of social conflicts (11). Brodhead challenges the assumption that since regionalism depicts quaint locales, it is provincial and limited in its politics. However his ultimate point is that regionalism functioned as a form of escapism for the urban bourgeoisie (136). Brodhead and Kaplan led the way for later scholars like Patrick Gleason, Cynthia Davis, and Francesca Sawaya to unravel regionalism's implications in conservative nationalist agendas in spite of its depictions of seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Fetterly and Pryse clarify that although some scholars use the terms local color and regionalism interchangeably, they find that local color has a mixed heritage while regionalism interests them because it specifically includes women authors and characters (34).

quaint, struggling American towns.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship like Stacey Alaimo's *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000) navigates the ambivalent politics and aesthetics of regionalism, historicizing regionalism's relation to radical feminism while also investigating its formal compliance with popular literary modes that appealed to mainstream American readers<sup>3</sup>. This dissertation continues the work of several decades of feminist scholars in expanding the critical landscape of late-nineteenth century American regionalism.

Despite these considerable critical accomplishments, scholarship on regionalism has yet to relate its rural folkways, feminine aesthetics, and anti-urban stance to similar ideals in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Such an oversight of Arts and Crafts influence results from a failure to recognize regionalism's involvement in transatlantic anti-modern cultural movements that idealized regional cultural productions' potential to challenge the uniformity and masculinity of industrial capitalism. I argue that regionalism was not only a highly popular literature of the era, but one that leading critics of the day like William Dean Howells and Henry James promoted as a significant cosmopolitan art form. Both regionalism and the Arts and Crafts Movement were significantly cosmopolitan in their values, despite their seemingly unsophisticated shared ideals of natural beauty, communal relationships, women's handicrafts, and nostalgia for an anti-industrial mythic past. Both movements addressed the controversial status of the woman artist; regionalist literature did this through narratives of women's creative community in addition to literary forms

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading, see Gleason's "Sarah Orne Jewett's 'The Foreigner' and the Transamerican Routes of New England Regionalism, Davis's "Making the Strange(r) Familiar: Sarah Orne Jewett's 'The Foreigner'", and Francesca Sawaya's "Emplotting National History: Regionalism and Pauline Hopkins Contending Forces."

<sup>3</sup> In his 2010 book *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, Hsuan Hsu claims that the allegedly backward, nostalgic aspects of regionalism actually served these writers as a form of resistance to the industrial capitalist threat to local cultures and ways of living (166).

that self-consciously applied Arts and Crafts principles to the act of women's writing as liberating and self-defining. An 1897 article in *The Living Age* magazine describes the aesthetic necessity for regionalism, then called local color fiction: "the cry for local color was the cry of revolt against this tyrannous uniformity; a cry for the concrete and the characteristic in place of the conventional" (James 743). The regionalist authors I study, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Hunter Austin, Kate Chopin, and Mary Wilkins Freeman all depict the challenges of the regional woman artist in order to oppose the uniformity and conventionality of urban modernity.

This dissertation proves that regionalists were not alone in engaging these concerns: they shared these interests with period feminists, sexual radicals, and advocates of the Arts and Crafts Movement like John Ruskin and William Morris, all of whom deeply questioned industrial capitalism and modernization. This connection points to larger cultural concerns that bring regionalism forward as a major rather than minor literary mode of its era. As Jackson Lears explains, such anti-industrial ideals are better understood not as escapist or nostalgic but as conscious political expressions that "promoted eloquent protest against the limits of liberalism" (6). Lears's argument does not adequately address the centrality of gender to anti-modernism; however considered alongside my queer feminist reading of regionalism, his foundational work supports interpretations of the way gender and sexuality intersect with the anti-industrialism of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Along with reading narratives of regionalist women's community practices like quilting and weaving as expressions of Arts and Crafts values, I demonstrate how the formal elements of Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman's texts express Arts and Crafts Movement aesthetics. As this dissertation demonstrates, Sarah

Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Mary Hunter Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (1906), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), and Mary Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* (1903) exemplify the radical politics and aesthetics that late nineteenth-century literary regionalism shares with the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Like previous feminist scholarship on regionalism, this dissertation considers late nineteenth-century concerns over changing gender roles central to regionalism's aesthetics. Regionalism was a widely read literature of its era, and many of its readers and authors were women. When regionalism is examined in the context of art and politics of the era, it becomes clear that Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman "helped pioneer the first generation of American women writers who saw themselves as artists" (Brodhead 173). Aspiring to create complex works of literature while still maintaining their popularity as middlebrow marketable writers, these authors consciously adapted conventional literary genres to express their own literary interpretations of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Werner Berthoff observes the significance of the prolific publication of women writers, whose work represents a substantial share of serious literature of the period. Their fiction offered readers a new narrative perspective from the "point of view of their heroines: Mrs. Freeman's and Miss Jewett's nuns, widows, and spinsters; Kate Chopin's young matron in *The Awakening*" (Berthoff 27). Just as these women writers intervened in male-dominated literary circles, women painters, sculptors, and designers transformed popular artistic sensibility at the time. Although scholars of regionalism including Fetterly, Pryse, Inness, Royer, and Foote resist the sexist claims about the movement's aesthetic quaintness, simplicity, and backwardness as the basis for its exclusion from the literary canon, few historicize these aesthetic characteristics as part of

a transatlantic intellectual and creative context that included other women artists.

Regionalism was among the creative movements that invoked the philosophies and cultural productions to emerge from John Ruskin and William Morris's Arts and Crafts Movement.

While regionalism is still sometimes diminished in comparison to other artistic and literary forms of its time, when read in light of Arts and Crafts Movement ideals, the radical politics, queer identities, and women's creativity of regional narratives and aesthetics come into focus. The grittiness, materiality, visceral and sensual connection between individuals and their surroundings are usually interpreted as characteristics of naturalism that rebel against the frivolity and cloistered femininity of Victorian consumerism. Regionalism offers an alternative critique of industrial capitalism and the suffocating domestic life: a mythic yet satisfying artistic relationship with nature. Heterosexist and masculinist responses to regionalism still overshadow the many women and women writers of the time who sought sensuality, sexual excitement, and alternative relationships to what Lears describes as the prudish and "flaccid" marriages of the bourgeoisie (75). Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman do not rely on conventional heterosexual-family-obsessed tropes to maintain their popularity. Their literature conjoins alternative romantic relationships and feminist creativity, "no longer cloaking such ambition behind religious or familial ... covers" (Brodhead 174).

As alternatives to the heterosexual family functioning as the unifying force of their writing, Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman invoke the Arts and Crafts values of pre-industrial communities where local culture, creativity, and economic interdependence remain possible. Their efforts to represent these realities as new means for women's

independence played a significant role in defining the emerging creative freedoms for the woman artist. Radical feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes the feminist impact of the image of the independent and sometimes queer “New Woman” on literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

even when, as in so many cases described by the more reactionary novelists, the efforts of the heroine are shown to be entirely futile, and she comes back with a rush to the self-effacement of marriage with economic dependence, still the efforts were there. Disapprove as he may, use his art to oppose and condemn as he may, the true novelist is forced to chronicle the distinctive features of his time; and no feature is more distinctive of this time than the increasing individualization of women. (Perkins Gilman 151)

This dissertation illustrates that these regionalist texts of Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman offer their women characters a kind of independence through portrayals of supportive women’s communities, a social context relatively absent in many realist and naturalist novels of the same era. In contrast to the male-dominated genre of literary realism, where heroines might, as Gilman explains, rush back to subjugated lives as wives and mothers, feminist regionalism could more easily pose “both a critique of and a resistance to the cultural ideologies that realism naturalizes” (Fetterly and Pryse 4). Gilman’s perspective is even more salient when reading the anti-capitalist potential of women’s communally made goods in the context of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The kind of women’s communities that appear in the texts of Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman go beyond discussions of women’s rights to greater participation in masculine



public politics, instead facilitating the aesthetic and political ideals of women's communal bonds found in the Arts and Crafts Movement.

During the time that Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman were writing, radical women could still use their exclusion from public scrutiny to queer and feminist advantage. Women's periodical culture, women's clubs, and networks of correspondence between women all supported politicized, culturally engaged yet separate realms in which women could collaborate and create. As period feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage argues, women's "increasing freedom within the last hundred years is not due to the church, but to the printing press, to education, to free thought and other forms of advancing civilization" (Gage 526). Kenneth Price and Susan Belasco Smith argue in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* that the nineteenth-century women's periodical was a "social text involving complex relationships among writers, readers, editors, publishers, printers, and distributors" (3). Gilman explains at the time that the "woman's club movement is one of the most important sociological phenomena of the century" because without it, women would not have any means of political organizing or even socially connecting with each other outside their domestic roles (164). Thus Susan B. Anthony's groundbreaking feminist newspaper *The Revolution* served as a means not just for Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to advance a single feminist cause, but also to build community in "the web of its interconnections with other periodicals, women's organizations, women's parlor or 'pic-nic' discussion groups, readers and writers, and other means of communicating used by women" (Rakow and Kramarae 5). Hundreds of thousands of women participated in politics and culture through such clubs and periodicals. The underlying social assumption was that such institutions "rested on a

belief in women's unique identity that had roots in the private female sphere of the early nineteenth century" (Freedman 30). The privacy from public surveillance these alternative institutions provided allowed socially transgressive and queer women the support of the separatist space and community they needed to pursue creative goals. Alaimo postulates that for queer writers like Freeman and Jewett, regionalism upheld certain seemingly conservative aspects of domestic culture in order to protect such separate spaces. To maintain women's community and still allow for individual freedom, Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman gravitated to an expansive natural world in their literature (40). This dissertation proves that regionalism idealized women's separatism as a context for queer women artists to express themselves.

Many nineteenth-century feminists realized that women's spaces allowed certain freedoms but at the same time limited their power to affect economics and politics. Even while women had greater access to periodical and public culture and education, they were still hindered socially and economically by their expected roles as wives and mothers from the kind of intellectual and artistic development that some women's rights advocates idealized (Stansell 227). Middle-class women were quick to consider the labor question in relation to their own economically-marginalized position. Even bourgeois women possessed few legal and economic rights: "In the early 19th century, married women could not enter into contracts without their husband's consent, women lost all title to property or future earnings upon marriage" (McElroy 5). However, as lesbian Historian Lillian Faderman argues, during the late nineteenth-century, middle-class white women, and in particular those who might not identify with normative heterosexual marriage, "no longer needed to resign themselves to marriage in order to survive. They

could go to college, educate themselves for a profession, earn a living in a rewarding career, and spend their lives with the women they loved” (Faderman 12). Women who had access to spaces like those provided by the women’s publishing industry, writing, the women’s club movement, and settlement house life still confronted the limitations of sexism. Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman resisted the injustice of women’s exclusion from public life by portraying regional contexts in which their women characters attempt to make their living as writers, craftswomen, and artists against great social pressures.

This dissertation demonstrates that feminist regionalists represented women’s Arts and Crafts communities that appealed to readers through narratives that detailed the potential uniqueness of homemade decorative arts and other aspects of women’s material culture. In light of the oppressive and rapid expansion of industrial, factory-filled gray and hazy uniformity of working class neighborhoods in urban centers, the anti-modern ideals of Arts and Crafts leaders was often described in terms of an individual’s right to occupy and create beautiful, anti-industrial surroundings (Shor 125). Along with the ugliness of industrial settings, their corrosive effect on community identity created a cultural crisis as a result of “the loss of local identity” (Blake 15). The Arts and Crafts Movement sought to restore a sense of connection between what the movement’s advocates saw as each individual’s creative nature and their natural surroundings, while also supporting guild-like social structures to maintain communal bonds between like-minded artists. For Arts and Crafts advocates and regionalists, handcrafted goods made using local folk methods and natural materials fulfilled what they saw as the aesthetic requirements for artistic self-definition.

The region as an imaginative space offers unique opportunities to the cosmopolitan and rural women depicted in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *The Land of Little Rain*, *The Awakening*, and *The Portion of Labor*; the authors translate the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement into literary form to imagine women's retreat into tight-knit communities where residents could produce their own Arts and Crafts objects in the image of the many goods Ruskin and Morris promoted. Ideals and objects from the Arts and Crafts Movement of England migrated to the United States throughout their creation, leaving a lasting impact. While the literature of Morris and Ruskin became popular first in England and then in the US, their artistic objects were displayed most prominently in Philadelphia in 1876, and their products communicated not just artistic methods but also a politicized "lifestyle" (Zipf 6). Morris and Ruskin determinedly sought alternatives to industrialism and modernity, and Arts and Crafts advocates imagined an identity that could exist outside or in opposition to the modern and urban; as a result they embraced "feminine" aspects of pre-modern character" (Lears 57). Read in the context of Arts and Crafts aesthetics and politics, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *The Land of Little Rain*, *The Awakening*, and *The Portion of Labor* reflect an anti-industrial and at times rustic aesthetics that derives more from Arts and Crafts Movement ideals than from the effect of regionalism's often remote geographical settings.

The marginal or critically-distant perspective that scholars attribute to the feminine or rural position of regionalist authors and narrators reflects an Arts and Crafts perspective that intentionally removes itself from urban industrialism through a more intimate relationship to material culture and the environment. The advocates of the Arts and Crafts Movement first in England and later in America shared aesthetic ideals about

beautiful, useful, rural surroundings with anarchist agrarian revivalists. Regionalists follow that lead, invoking alternative communal structures in which “women are no longer bound within the domestic or cornered in a ‘prim’ bit of land that is merely an extension of the home, but instead may venture out into ‘the whole world’” (Alaimo 43). This regionalist world where women are free to roam offers a beautiful alternative to the industrial urban center: “regionalism in art and architecture was without a doubt a form of resistance to the social alienation resulting from industrialization... Particularly within artistic (literary) circles, there was a growing awareness of an inevitable loss of local ‘urban and rural beauty’” (Van Santvoort 14). In Arts and Crafts aesthetics as with literary regionalism, inspiration comes “from three general areas: The Middle Ages, the local or historic environment, and natural elements” (Zipf 6). The Middle Ages inspired Arts and Crafts advocates especially for the model of small agrarian communities and medieval guilds of artisans. Similarly, local culture and wilderness provided regionalists and Arts and Crafts artists “a decentered perspective of the dominant culture's values” even as they confronted the central cultural concerns of their era (Inness and Royer 2).

But the aesthetic compatibilities between the Arts and Crafts Movement and literary regionalism extend beyond the idealization of wild, free, anti-industrial spaces and the practical virtues of homemade goods like quilts, herbal medicine, baskets, and handknit crafts made by women. Historically, the Arts and Crafts Movement appealed to women because it emphasized the political and aesthetic merit of designs inspired by local cultures and environments, promoting social reform yet celebrating women’s regional traditions; by “encouraging artists to create high-quality, handmade objects, these tenets led to a revolution in taste that elevated the value of crafts, such as

needlework, traditionally performed by women” (Zipf 2). Thus Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman elevate regional women engaging in creative and political activities, echoing the value that Ruskin placed on “all the waged peasant women who worked in the cottage crafts” (Callen 2). Such women and their processes of making crafts are a central foci of Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman’s narrators. Most of the plot incidents in regionalist literature involve communal folkways. As Donna Campbell explains,

Gathering herbs, knitting, making quilts, braiding rugs, distilling essences, and putting up preserves take up a great deal of women's time, just as storytelling occupies their attention...each is a method of preserving the present for the future, of making and reshaping something into a usable and durable object to be shared.

(41)

Regionalist narrators play a central role in conveying the communal values and aesthetics of regionalism. In keeping with Morris’s Arts and Crafts ideals, these texts insist that the material and the maker should be evident in the products; those products are not divorced from the human and material sources of their production. But the texts of Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman go beyond simply representing craftswomen and their handiwork; they also intervene in contemporary literary values. Through narratives that value seemingly mundane women’s activities, relationships, and sketch-like detailed descriptions of setting, the authors challenge readers to accept a feminist form that deviates from the linear, plot-driven narrative conventions of realism and naturalism. This focus validates women’s labor and their creative projects, elevating useful, beautiful,

and locally-produced items to greater importance within the text and within the larger context of literary regionalism.

Although regionalist writers could not completely destabilize the importance of the home in defining identity, they could represent alternative homes. In the late nineteenth century, women still defined themselves in relation to their surroundings, particularly their homes: while the period feminist critique of the domestic “rejects the situation of women in the home, it nonetheless retains in its aspirations for women's enfranchisement and self-determination the domestic definition of self” (Brown 4). This definition influenced many women, even those who sought to oppose it. Yet, I distinguish between a modern conception of self and a nineteenth-century one in order to read the nuances of gender and queer politics. Queer relationships of the era were not defined by the modern concept of unfettered sexual identity, but rather by resistance to marriage and residence in a non-heterosexual home. The medical term “homosexual” existed, but sexual deviants had many different names specific to their sexual acts, like tribade, sapphist, and invert, reflecting the nineteenth-century view of sex as a behavior less significant as a means of defining identity and status than gender, race, or class. Because the home was a much more salient symbol of women’s identity than their sexual behaviors in nineteenth-century America, a queer feminist investigation like the one in this dissertation must examine how queer women might inhabit homes differently or resist period expectations of domesticity. The domestic pervades regionalist fiction, which offers various alternatives to domestic identity represented in the uniquely safe and lovely natural surroundings of regionalist texts. As Alaimo explains, Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman utilize their fiction to document “the details of domestic space even

while experimenting with the potential to pose nature as an alternative (feminist) space” (39). In the feminist spaces that Alaimo finds among regionalist texts, women characters leave their houses freely, but more significantly, in regional settings the local inhabitants’ homes blend into the landscape. The walls of women’s homes appear more permeable, rendering their homes, communal areas in town, and feminized outdoor environments more intimately connected. Michael Davitt Bell observes that “the characteristic world of New England local color fiction is distinguished above all by the absence of men and of masculine activity” (176). This dissertation reads this absence of significant male characters from these feminized towns and outdoor environments as an expansion of women’s queer homes; Jewett in particular broadens women’s sphere of existence, allowing them to form relationships with each other in a feminized space.

Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman do not only represent women’s relationships to their social and natural landscapes using Arts and Crafts ideals, they also analyze the viability of these ideals for supporting the woman artist. The first two body chapters of the dissertation illustrate the authors’ great optimism about an Arts and Crafts future for women. Both Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* offer readers mythic fantasies that enable the authors’ criticism of the aesthetic uniformity and gender oppression of capitalist modernity. The second two body chapters analyze Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Freeman’s *The Portion of Labor* as representations of authors’ increasing disillusionment with Arts and Crafts ideals as a meaningful alternative to the pressures of industrial capitalism and sexism. The tragic conclusions of Chopin’s and Freeman’s texts critique the social punishment suffered by their transgressive women protagonists, a stance that brought more negative critical and public



attention to these texts than both Chopin and Freeman's other works. Rather than support a version of regionalist Arts and Crafts aesthetics that are commodified and stripped of their political radicalism, both Chopin's *The Awakening* and Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* formally sabotage Arts and Crafts regionalism as a statement of their growing pessimism about women artists' ability to maintain agency in a modern capitalistic world. Despite the differences in the tone and political conclusions of these four key regionalist texts, they all translate Arts and Crafts ideals into literary form and share a common interest in how the women artists' varied success in freeing themselves from the confines of heterosexual marriage in pursuit of creative connection with their environments.

Chapter II, "The Arts and Crafts Pastoral of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," argues that Jewett adopts visual design from the Arts and Crafts Movement to merge a form of pastoral literature with the liberating potential of the rustic environment for queer women. Jewett's series of sketches invokes utopian women's separatism, deviating from male-centered, plot-driven realist texts and instead focuses on the life of an unmarried woman who visits a Maine fishing village in search of inspiration for a book she is trying to write. The narrative lacks a linear plot and instead formally imitates the way a woman might meander around town interacting with other residents if she was free to leave the house to pursue creative ambitions. The text resists plot incident and conflict, composing the book less like a novel and more like a collection of pastoral idylls that fit together like patches on a quilt or different colored panels of a stained-glass window. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* appeals to readers through descriptions of the shapes and hues of the distant horizon, the textures of the narrator's immediate surroundings, and the tone and expression of the women characters as they weld, weave,

and sew together. An 1897 review describes such detailed narration as “so true to the real experience of life, so real and yet so suggestive of the ideal, that the chapters as they come are a well-spring of living interest, continually flowing, continually fresh and delightful” (240). I posit that analyzing Jewett’s queer life with Annie Fields, her cosmopolitan literary interests, and her friendship with Arts and Crafts artist Sarah Wyman Whitman reveals *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as a feminist version of John Ruskin’s pastoral ideals.

Chapter III, “Mary Hunter Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* and the Raw Materials of Art,” argues that Austin’s text invokes a radically anti-industrial aesthetic that fuses fiction with nature essay to take Ruskin’s principles down to the bones, earth, water, and air that form the wilderness. The narrator describes *The Land of Little Rain* as a place free from the pressure to marry and have children, a place where animals and plants instruct humans on how to live. The narrator is not a distant observer, but a character with great compassion and interest in the desert women portrayed in each chapter. Austin represents Seyavi the basket weaver as the ideal artist, emulating her with a literary style that weaves the natural, animal, and human elements of the text together. Austin establishes the basis for what would later become Southwest Arts and Crafts style, incorporating cultural history, women’s art societies, and concern over issues of conservation and unjust land allotment. If the *Country of the Pointed Firs* takes the form of a colorful stained glass window or a hand-sewn quilt, then *The Land of Little Rain* patterns itself after a basket, woven by reeds and branches from inherited forms of nature writing and the wild, feminist imagination that Austin attributes to desert landscape and the communities of women who live there. Austin writes of such inspiring connections

from a time in her life when she was trapped in an unhappy marriage, seeking refuge among local white women and Native American women on the east side of the Sierras. Her politics “related to local water issues or the treatment of American Indians” (Goodman 26). Austin’s narrator tells “stories” in *The Land of Little Rain* in the style of Native American tradition in order to invoke the artistry she saw in local women’s basket weaving. The narrator weaves together two aspects of writing; the scientific and observant nature writer attuned to the natural processes of the outdoors, and the artful poet or craftswoman, embellishing a traditional structure with her own intricate designs. Austin’s formal and political concerns invoke her youthful interest in Ruskin, and her application of Arts and Crafts ideals to desert writing.

In Chapter IV, “Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and the Anti-Domestic Domicile,” Arts and Crafts architecture symbolically frames the sexually-liberated and feminist themes expressed in a regionalist version of a naturalist novel. Chopin’s narrator opposes the opulence and the stifling marital circumstances that define women’s lives in late nineteenth-century New Orleans. The white, privileged, creole Women represented in *The Awakening* pay for their lives of luxury by living under their husbands’ control with no voice, a price intolerable for artistically-inclined women like the main character, Edna Pontellier. The narrator encourages readerly sympathy for Edna’s retreat to a bungalow and an artistic community in her quest for the self-awareness that happens only in vast open spaces and through passionate relationships. Within the world of the novel, passionate love and inspiring surroundings are essential to the woman artist, just as they are to arts and crafts proponent William Morris. However, Chopin’s narrator finally renders such ideals out of reach, critically examining the Arts and Crafts philosophies

that can never fully validate a woman artist. The sexually-transgressive acts Edna pursues in search of true love caused moral outrage at the time of the novel's publication; the two women writers who reviewed *The Awakening* first, Willa Cather and Frances Porcher, extolled the lyrical qualities of Chopin's prose, but denounced the transgressive sexual plot (Toth xix). Chopin's text appeared in a regionalist context in which women authors had been striving for images of successful women artists for the prior decade, yet few had articulated the role that passionate, free-love relationships might play in feminist creativity. In her diary, Chopin acknowledges Jewett and Freeman as significant influences on her narrative style, citing them as the literary predecessors of importance, geniuses of literary technique (Toth and Seyersted 181). However, in writing her own version of a woman's search for artistic autonomy, Chopin concludes that until women artists are permitted significant sexual, economic, and creative freedom, they are unlikely to thrive or even survive.

Chapter V, "The Unraveling of Regionalist Self-Fashioning in Mary Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*," finds Freeman's bitter resignation to the failure of Arts and Crafts and regionalist ideals. She was the most popular regionalist of her era, publishing her novel in 1903, after more than a decade of publishing successful and more conventional regionalist stories. In spite of the beautiful, regional landscapes of her prior fiction, *The Portion of Labor* launches an incisive critique of the classist ideals embedded in anti-industrial aesthetics. Freeman further elaborates on the themes of tragedy in Chopin's *The Awakening* by portraying the corrupting class privileges and problem of commodified feminine beauty as antithetical to radicalism, exposing an undercurrent of escapism running through the idealistic politics of women's regionalist literature and late

popular Arts and Crafts aesthetics. Neither a typical Freeman novel nor a popular example of regionalism, *The Portion of Labor* nonetheless confronts the struggle of working women from the perspective of a regionalist narrator. The novel's narrator observes a naturalist plot, disapproving of the gender and class circumstances that the protagonist conforms to, yet revealing the inescapability of such social hierarchies.

Freeman wrote the novel in her forties, around the time that she reluctantly married, after decades of heterosexist public pressure and economic struggle. Freeman had become a household name among writers at the time, yet even her success did not exempt her from gender and class expectations. Rather than imagine a rustic environment as an empowering escape from capitalist modernity, Freeman employs a regionalist narrator to criticize the world she and many like her had to endure. No longer describing the lovely mythic rural New England of yesteryear common in her earlier texts, the regionalist narrator of *The Portion of Labor* expresses disgust and concern about the circumstances of the tens of thousands of urban working girls in late nineteenth-century New England who yearned for Paris fashions while toiling to sew shoes and clothes in factories. The novel portrays the failing of Arts and Crafts ideals as a result of the capitalist competition that undermines women's community. Compared to venerated rural communal folk arts, handiwork in the fashion industry is meaningless except as underpaid labor for the benefit of the wealthy. Yet in spite of this lack of meaning, women's desire for self-expression and aesthetic identity compelled them to buy into the impossible trap of capitalist fashion. Rather than write a novel that formally invokes the texture of Arts and Crafts fashion to elevate women's relationships to each other and make their textile labor meaningful, Freeman uses the language of women's fashion to show that the dream of a

queer and creative women's community supported by Arts and Crafts ideals and products is a luxury of the wealthy. In *The Portion of Labor*, the failure of queer feminist Arts and Crafts ideals serves less as a critique of regionalism, however, more as a tragic acknowledgement of a changing social climate that rendered the political project of regionalism increasingly untenable. For Freeman, once the radical feminist politics of regionalism became impossible, it was preferable for the aesthetics of regionalism to fall apart rather than to submit to commodification as a vacuous popular form draped over oppressive gender norms.

By reading Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman as authors of queer feminist Arts and Crafts ideals, this dissertation allows for greater consideration of their regionalism's impact on American literary history and engagement with the primary social concerns of its era. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *The Land of Little Rain* embrace the destabilizing effect queer and feminist characters have on a presumably heterosexual domestic environment, and they formally resist the narrative structures of industrial modernity, emphasizing the Arts and Crafts ideal union between woman artist, natural environment, and communal bonds. *The Awakening* and *The Portion of Labor* expose the suffocating impact of industrial capitalism and sexism on women artists who strive for connection with their local environments and communities and cannot achieve their creative goals. I prove that all four texts do more than simply interpret regionalism through the Arts and Crafts Movement as a means to launch their critiques of industrial modernity, they transform the meaning of regionalist Arts and Crafts aesthetics and politics to author meaningful contributions to late nineteenth-century American literature.

## CHAPTER II

### AN ARTS AND CRAFTS PASTORAL IN SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S

#### *THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS*

Sarah Orne Jewett exemplifies late nineteenth-century American literary regionalism. Marketed as middlebrow in spite of its artistic influences and the education of its primarily women authors, regionalism had broad popular appeal and enjoyed a significant female readership. Between 1889 and 1901, Jewett published thirteen stories and two book-length works in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Scholars like Nancy Glazener continue to interpret the historical significance of regionalism's ongoing reputation as a politically conservative, popular literary mode. Feminist scholars of regionalism, especially its early advocates Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse, have long refuted the view that the literary regionalism of Jewett and her contemporaries was an aesthetically quaint and politically insignificant movement. Jewett was relegated to the local color category for many decades, a literary mode disparaged by sexist comparisons that make local color and regionalism the minor literatures of an era dominated by literary realism (Holstein 188). In a 2014 article about *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Kaye Wierzbicki reminds readers that Jewett was so nonthreatening to Henry James that he "backhandedly lauded" *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by referring to it as her "beautiful little quantum of achievement" (Wierzbicki 57). Although James extolled Jewett's popularity, he minimizes the book's literary, political accomplishments, ignoring its queer feminist aims. Yet it is the problem of gender and genre in Jewett's regionalism that make it productively complicated for today's feminist scholars. Sandra Zagarell posits that the

feminine qualities of queer feminist regionalism make it what she calls a narrative community that is “double-voiced” in its feminist politics and relationship to traditional life (Zagarell 510). Fetterly and Pryse demonstrate instead that Jewett’s regionalism simultaneously expresses radical responses to social hierarchies and a white middle-class escapism, an argument they support by emphasizing the feminist and queer potential of regionalism’s representation of women’s autonomy in nature (34). Donna Campbell describes this ambivalence or doubleness in Jewett’s local color fiction as a vacillation between exciting readers with socially threatening situations, then offering readers a means of controlling those threats (Campbell 14)<sup>4</sup>. These scholars productively elaborate many of the queer feminist political influences on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Yet *The Country of the Pointed Firs*’ aesthetic contribution to regionalism still deserves further analysis. The form of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* remains somewhat elusive for scholars; an 1897 review of the book summarizes the primary aesthetic focus of scholarship from then until now: the book “is made up of short sketches, in which there are but a few figures, whose experience and character are suggestively outlined, but in which we have no extended or elaborated plot....They have the color of life” (240). The phrase “the color of life” praises what the reviewer sees as an alternative and appealing kind of verisimilitude in the text. In a more recent critical analysis, Michael Holstein concludes that Jewett’s character sketches lead up to a symbolic reunion feast or “symposium” of all the characters for the reader to imagine mythic figures of the rural townscape celebrating together before they fade into history (197). Critics and readers acknowledge that the setting of Dunnet Landing is mythic, yet Jewett’s descriptions

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Gleason investigates how the ambivalent politics of gender and class in Jewett’s lesser known work *The Foreigner* map onto the “imperial nostalgia and amnesia” of the late nineteenth-century. *The Foreigner* includes the Dunnet Landing character Mrs. Almira Todd.



compel them to sympathize with the place and the characters. An 1896 review in *The Independent* values the reader's visceral experience of the text: "reading Miss Jewett's pages is like a visit to Dunnet Landing, like a series of chats with Mrs. Todd, during which one feels the sea air and smells the pine breath" (1651). Such responses suggest that Jewett's prose transports readers' imaginations so thoroughly to Dunnet Landing that they can feel the place. More recent scholars continue to discuss the formal appeal of the text: Michael Schmidt's "blurring form" entry in *Novel: A Biography*, notes that in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett refused prescribed form, which her friend and fellow queer regionalist writer Willa Cather attributed to Jewett's belief that theme and setting were enough (555). Jeff Morgan describes *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as a pastoral work, yet his and many other formal characterizations of the text don't adequately explore the depth of Jewett's aesthetic and political influences in developing her own version of the pastoral. These authors find the text lovely, beautiful, and full of interesting themes, yet remain uncertain about Jewett's formal strategies. Accounts of Jewett's aversion to literary convention endure in scholarship, but many interpretations of form linger on the looseness of the book instead of drawing definite conclusions from Jewett's letters and historical analysis of her aesthetic influences.

This study elaborates on the feminist historical work on *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by contextualizing Jewett's feminism and aesthetic influences in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Although not a strictly defined movement, the Arts and Crafts influence in late-nineteenth-century America caught hold of many idealistic writers and artists, inspiring utopian resistance to encroaching modernity through anti-industrial

aesthetics<sup>5</sup>. Jackson Lears's history of anti-modernism in American art and culture in the late nineteenth century offers crucial context about the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, although it excludes regionalism as a significant anti-modern movement. Lears overlooks many women artists and writers who took up Arts and Crafts ideals to seek economically-viable creative lives independent of marriage. Jewett and her lifelong domestic partner Annie Fields lived together during a historical moment in which constructions of queer female love had not yet transformed from romantic, private relationships into the highly scrutinized medical concept of homosexuality (Love 311). Analysis of Jewett's letters, the political and critical works she read by Arts and Crafts leader John Ruskin among others, her relationships with other writers and artists, and the pastoral themes and form in the text clarify the anti-industrial feminist art of Jewett's literary aesthetics.

This chapter demonstrates that beneath its seemingly escapist surface, Jewett's regionalism resists this popular impulse to objectify rustic people by invoking the literary pastoral as a critique of the urban industrial perspective. Glazener posits that despite its oppositional potential, regionalism responded to the popular demands of the literary market (191). *The Country of the Pointed Firs* superficially appeases the middle-class delight in tourism, exoticizing rural people, their landscape, and their commodifiable resources<sup>6</sup>. I argue that Jewett compels readers with a narrative point of view that moves between the distant travel writer's solitary perspectives of the landscape, and a more

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<sup>5</sup> Many nineteenth-century arts and crafts idealists attempted communal experiments, some urban some rural. Some American communities of note include: The Rose Valley Experiment, Oneida Community, Hull House, and Roycroft.

<sup>6</sup> In William Dean Howell's Essay "Confessions of a Summer Colonist," he describes the fascination summer tourists had with leaving behind social rules during rural vacation, one of them describing such behavior as making "a fetish of ... informality" (109).

politically-meaningful narration of her connection to the women's community in Dunnet Landing. Jewett's version of pastoralism embraces the socially-critical, queer tradition and elaborates it through themes of strong women who live in emotionally-intimate and communal circumstances, surviving by their skillful relationships to the outdoors instead of relying on men to provide. I demonstrate that the conformist aspects of regionalism in Jewett's text provide a socially acceptable exterior, while veiling an anti-industrial, queer, feminist form of the pastoral that appears only when the text is read in the context of Arts and Crafts Movement.

The pastoral as a literary mode encompasses diverse texts over the course of more than a thousand years. While impossible to define in strict terms, the pastoral has two characteristics that inform this reading: first, as a thematic literary tradition that emphasizes a mythic golden age when rustic people lived in harmony with their scenic environment, written by authors Jewett refers to in her letters like Theocritus, Virgil, Spenser, Milton, and the Wordsworths; second, as a literary response to the specific historical anxieties in New England nearing the turn of the century when the beauty of rustic life lost ground to the growth of bleak and uninspiringly uniform urban environments. Both Ruskin and Jewett invoke William and Dorothy Wordsworth as nineteenth-century authors of pastoral literature that elevate the romantic relationship between the artist and the mythic natural landscape. Robin Magowan elaborates on Jewett's use of the pastoral "mode of vision" to transform her personal experiences into works of art to assert her own definition of the artist (333). He defines Jewett's pastoral and all others as examples of a literary mode that values the past "through the medium of constantly changing present seen as a last lingering of an infinitely distant Golden Age"

(Magowan 333). While Magowan finds the pastoral escapist, this chapter proves that Jewett depicts the pastoral's politically-oppositional history and queer subtexts in *The Country of The Pointed Firs*. In pastoral poetry, distant speakers idealize rural people as rustic, quaint, simple, coarse, and unencumbered by urban social norms, using the rustic as a site of resistance to the social requirements of polite society. Jewett invokes the critiques of urban decadence and corruption present in classical pastorals, noting in her letters the pastoral authors who were empowered by their rural surroundings to live queer lives. The 1889 edition of Andrew Lang's translation of Theocritus includes shepherd's song contests, Goddesses, rustic dialect, and "that singular passion which existed between men in historical Greece" (Lang 14)<sup>7</sup>. Ruskin put pressure on pastoral poetry, in a critique not just of classical pastoral poetry but of the generally self-involved poetry of the countryside that focused attention on an urban male artist who knew nothing of the struggle of the people there, and wanted to idealize and distance himself from the locals (*Seven Lamps* 32). As a pastoral writer, Jewett responds to Ruskin's concerns about the individualism of pastoral speakers through depicting a narrator who participates in women's relationships and their creative endeavors. Jewett's conjunction of the pastoral and regionalism makes space for understated feminist, anti-industrial politics in regionalism and re-defines the pastoral as community-oriented. Jewett's pastoral envisions a mythic place where neither men nor industrialism impede the artistic endeavors of women.

The Arts and Crafts Movement appealed to Jewett and other like-minded American women artists and writers because of shared aesthetic ideals. As Arts and

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<sup>7</sup> The Lang translation emphasized that Theocritus wrote in Doric dialect, a pattern of speech that would have appeared like the rural dialects sometimes written in local color literatures.

Crafts Movement historian Catherine Zipf argues, the movement particularly valued designs that emphasized the local environment, natural materials, and handmade objects (2)<sup>8</sup>. Ruskin advocates the connection between design and the natural and local environment: “Of all embellishments by which the efforts of man can enhance the beauty of natural scenery, those are the most effective . . . while the spirit which they bestow is in unison with its general character” (Ruskin 33). Ruskin evokes designs in harmony with nature; he also conveys his assumption that natural places have an inherent character that local craftspeople can discern. Ruskin’s philosophy elevates the burgeoning artistic careers of women artists to a politically and aesthetically relevant position, and he called the first group of arts and crafts practitioners “waged peasant women who worked in the cottage crafts” (Callen 2). He pointedly rejects the binary between high and folk art, thus offering women whom male critics often diminish as “folk artists” an opportunity to engage with broader audiences. Ruskin promotes not just the natural beauty of rural folk art aesthetics, but also an idealization of the cultural practices of rustic people (*Modern Painters* xi)<sup>9</sup>. Regionalism reflects similar aesthetic principles: an emphasis on local traditions and handicrafts, the transformation of the home environment and the possibility for social change taking place there, and validation for women’s work. This chapter demonstrates that Jewett responded to the stigma that regionalism and women’s folk art shared by blurring the boundary between the feminized, middlebrow, folksy aspect of

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<sup>8</sup> Many Arts and Crafts women affiliated themselves with guilds, clubs, and colleges; Jewett’s woman painter friends Rose Lamb and Sarah Wyman Whitman participated in the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts (Hirshler et. al. 42).

<sup>9</sup> Ruskin’s first major work was a five-volume essay series titled *Modern Painters*, published in 1843, in which he defended and advocated for the value of landscape art. He introduced the work by advocating “Truth to Nature” as the defining characteristic of masterful art (xi).

regionalism and the socially acceptable and predominantly masculine yet equally queer anti-urban form of the pastoral.

Jewett immersed herself and her work in the world of American women artists. Although white middle-class women writers like Jewett had the opportunity to pursue leisurely writing or art, they endured gendered exclusion from highbrow literary canons and fine-art galleries (Callen 2). Still barred from Harvard and many other universities, Jewett and her contemporaries sought out their own forms of education and acknowledgement as artists. An anonymous 1885 article in *Art Journal* titled “Women Who Paint” celebrates the growing numbers of women in the fine arts, positing that for many, the “mere fact that a picture was painted by a woman was sufficient to warrant its dismissal” (3). While the presence of women in the fine and decorative arts grew increasingly acceptable by the time Jewett became a popular writer, as this article suggests, even if women’s art gained popularity, critics would often diminish its aesthetic complexity. Jewett’s life partner Annie Fields challenged such discrimination as a member of the community of artists and intellectuals who championed the opening of Radcliffe College, a women’s liberal arts college. Both Jewett and Fields navigated a world of gender discrimination through relationships of solidarity across many different aspects of their lives.

This chapter interprets Jewett’s queer feminist politics in literature as an aspect of her participation in local communities of women’s education and arts activists. She read her work occasionally at the Women’s Saturday Morning Club as her contribution to local feminist intellectualism (Blanchard 110)<sup>10</sup>. I prove that along with her direct

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<sup>10</sup> Founded by Julia Ward Howe, the club began in the 1870s and evolved into a scholarly lecture series by local and national feminists

participation in political organizations, Jewett gathered inspiration from her queer domestic partnership with Fields and her friendship with New England book cover and stained glass artist Sarah Wyman Whitman, innovating a feminist aesthetics in response to the philosophies and aesthetic ideals of Ruskin (Jewett 74). Ruskin championed a “true-to-nature” aesthetic that celebrated handmade arts usually associated with rustic women. By the time Jewett wrote *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* was so widely read across America that it was on lists of mandatory college entrance reading (Hufford 440). His influence on anti-industrial, anti-modern aesthetics reached across the US and into many communities of women artists.

I argue that Jewett lived a queer life that was more visible than most during her era. During the time that Jewett wrote *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the word queer could denote same-sex partnerships, which were romantic identities that were visible “in upper-crust Boston social circles” which included Jewett among others (Murphy 192). Jewett and Fields lived as visible queer feminists in Boston artist circles in their “Boston Marriage,” a relationship that their friends accepted regardless of whether they understood it as a sexual partnership. Although Jewett was not a free love or radical feminist demonstrator, her publicly queer life with Fields was a form of radical resistance to gender roles and heterosexuality. Their mutual economic and emotional support allowed Fields to pursue her political interests while Jewett could spend time travelling and writing. Conforming to social expectations could have completely stifled Jewett’s creative freedom to pursue her literary career. Her romantic choices make sense in the context of her identity as a woman artist: a “large number of women involved professionally in the Arts and Crafts Movement remained unmarried or childless” (Callen

218). Due to her status as a woman artist, Jewett had a particular stake in economic independence in light of her lifelong aversion to heterosexuality. She contributed to a queer politics and aesthetics in her New England community.

Like other women invested in the Arts and Crafts Movement, Jewett pursued both queer feminist and anti-industrial impulses. Although not a political activist or high profile champion of working women's rights like some of her friends from the Saturday Morning Club, Jewett's pastoral writing reflects alternatives to the challenge of economically supporting herself as a writer through a capitalist system she objected to. In an 1889 letter to Fields, she lamented that

the business part of writing grows very noxious to me, and I wonder if in heaven our best thoughts—poet's thoughts, especially—will not be flowers, somehow, or some sort of beautiful live things that stand about and grow, and don't have to be chaffered over and bought and sold. (Jewett 62)

Jewett's statement betrays a bourgeois distaste for the reality of economic exchange<sup>11</sup>. Yet Jewett's aversion to the business aspect of art motivates her version of resistance. To aesthetically oppose pressures to market and mass-produce popular art, she innovated a regionalist pastoral, utilizing the genre's characteristic rural escape from the demands of urban life. Fields shared Jewett's aesthetic and political concerns about the injustices of urban industrialism, writing and distributing the pamphlet "How To Help the Poor" in 1894, two years before Jewett wrote *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Fields confronts the problem of isolation and need for women's community in her pamphlet, advocating community as the cure for middle-aged women who end up alone; she argues that they

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<sup>11</sup> In Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, she discusses the same dilemma among women sentimentalists; sentimentalism provides a means of protesting the very capitalist forces that enable it to thrive as a cultural production, the inevitable paradox for any artist in a capitalist country (12).



“might have been saved the unhappiness and need into which they fall in extreme age, if into the empty heart some other lonely ones had been taken, and a new home, where all worked together” (77) The co-operative impulse in Fields’s statement reveals her perception that industrial capitalism has an isolating effect, particularly on older women. Fields, Jewett, and many of their friends resisted the alienation of industrialism and shared what architecture historian Linda Van Santvoort describes as a “growing awareness of an inevitable loss of local ‘urban and rural beauty’ as well as local tradition” (14). As Fields advocates for the working classes, and Jewett’s English friend Mary Ward establishes a women’s settlement house, Jewett contests the impending disappearance of rural women’s culture by rendering in her book a pastoral women’s community that resisted to capitalist industrialism.

Jewett values natural beauty as the antidote to the pressures of time and money. In an 1895 letter she muses to her friend Sarah Wyman Whitman that from the perspective of a bee, human time might as well be timeless because humans move so slowly by comparison:

I have found such a corner of this world, under a spruce tree, where I sit for hours together, and neither thought nor good books can keep me from watching a little golden bee, that seems to live quite alone, and to be laying up honey against cold weather. He many have been idle and now feels belated...He took me for a boulder the first day we met; but after he flew round and round he understood things, and knows now that I come and go as other boulders do, by glacial action, and can do him no harm. (Jewett 115)

Against the impending rush of the industrial world with its ever-quickenning pace, Jewett dreams of the apparent permanence of stone while seated idly beneath a conifer. Even her letter reveals her symbolic interest in the material of nature: stone, wood, and air. Her meditation on the lonely, busy honeybee reflects her concern not only for the economic aspects of industrial capitalism, but for its pressure on human time. The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is Jewett's most important interlocutor of her Arts and Crafts Pastoral because she accomplishes the anti-industrial writer's life that Jewett idealizes.

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* begins with an unnamed narrator describing the distant, mythic Maine seaside town Dunnet Landing. A city-dwelling writer arrives by steam ship to board with the 62-year-old herbalist Mrs. Almira Todd, spending the summer in the village to pursue her creative writing. As the title suggests, the narrator finds herself among the aging, wooden, sea-mist weathered structures of the town that standing near the water's edge, surrounded by the year-round green of seemingly endless pointed fir trees. Jewett establishes the pastoral aspects of the story by depicting the quaintness of the local people and the natural beauty of their surroundings, wilderness and sea insulating them from a seemingly distant industrial world. Invoking Theocritus, Jewett emphasizes the classical pastoral beauty of the place, a unique beauty that cannot exist anywhere else. The narrator describes Mrs. Todd's status in the community with a comparison to classical bucolic poetry: "Mrs. Todd's wisdom was an intimation of truth itself. She might belong to any age, like an idyl of Theocritus" (133). The narrator likens the resourceful middle-aged widow to an enduring pastoral poem in order to elevate Mrs. Todd's aesthetic significance as a matriarch of Dunnet Landing. Jewett insulates the

vanishing qualities of Dunnet Landing from urban modernity through imagining them outside of time.

Though Dunnet Landing might seem like a plausible locale in the late-nineteenth century, read in historical context, its time-defying qualities become more clearly mythic. Editor and friend of Jewett William Dean Howells described late nineteenth-century New England as transformed by urbanization, leading to “the abandonment of more than ten thousand farms in Massachusetts and Rhode island alone. By 1870 more than half of Massachusetts’s residents lived in cities” (Wortham-Galvin 24). Nearer the turn of the century, middle-class white urbanites sought vacations in rural New England, motivating the construction of artificially-aged rustic clapboard cabins temporarily to house travellers seeking escape from urban tedium (Wortham-Galvin 22). The authentically anti-industrial New England Jewett imagines in Dunnet Landing had nearly faded to extinction by 1896, a ghost in the memory of idealistic artists and vacationers. The narrator responds to this crisis of vanishing New England rural landscapes at first with a sense of nostalgia to draw readers into a timeless scene. Rather than describe Dunnet Landing as a representative, realistic New England town, the first lines of the book distinguish it as an idyllic place:

There was something about the coast town of Dunnet which made it seem more attractive than other maritime villages of eastern Maine. Perhaps it was the simple fact of acquaintance with that neighborhood which made it so attaching, and gave such interest to the rocky shore and dark woods. (Jewett 8)

What the narrator describes is a place where she is intimately aware of the residents and their relationships. Rather than visiting a tourist’s cabin as a seasonal writer’s escape, she

immediately expresses interest in her acquaintance with the neighborhoods, foregrounding a narrative that values the pastoral character sketches of Dunnet Landing as much as its natural beauty. The first pages of the text promise the reader that knowledge of the characters makes the rocky shore and dark woods interesting.

While Jewett invokes the pastoral in her depiction of Dunnet Landing scenery, she departs from the convention of the distant pastoral narrator and instead directs the narrator's attention to the ways that local women in particular interact with their scenic surroundings as a community. The typical pastoral focuses on men or individual women characters, but the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* describes a strong community of women who uphold the history of Dunnet Landing. While Theocritus wrote of naked sailors sleeping beside each other at the shore and shepherds singing to each other passionately, Jewett describes women's caring conversations between the goddess-like community leader Mrs. Todd and her female companions. Mrs. Todd's herbal remedies utilize the wild, natural herbs and flowers of her region as alternative medicine, soothing locals and avoiding conventional, male western doctors. Along with the medical benefits of Mrs. Todd's unique herbal remedies, she offers the curative virtues of a woman-centered home to her visitors. The narrator admires Mrs. Todd's unique contribution to the community, describing one patient as

a pale young creature like a white windflower left over into midsummer, upon whose face consumption had set its bright and wistful mark; but oftener two stout, hard-worked women from the farms came together, and detailed their symptoms to Mrs. Todd in loud and cheerful voices. (Jewett 19)

The narrator observes the ethereal, sometimes vulnerable young girls who might stop by but also emphasizes the strength and endurance of herbal medicine patients at Mrs. Todd's house. The presence of such strong women suggests that the nervous ailments and frailties of women wasting away in urban domestic entrapment don't afflict the homosocial outdoorswomen of Dunnet Landing.

The scenery and people in Dunnet Landing don't just exist as rustic and beautiful fixtures of the countryside that inspire the narrator as a writer, however. The narrator broadens her focus from viewing the characters as part of the scenery that she distantly describes, and instead describes her increasing involvement in the matriarchal community of local artists and craftswomen. Both the scenery and people of Dunnet Landing embody precisely the kind of natural setting that arts and crafts advocates idealized. Supporting the cottage crafts of rustic women and the idealized sustainability of such endeavors, Dunnet Landing puts no economic pressure on women and does not require them to be married to or attached to men to accomplish their goals. Instead the women enjoy their own version of a leisurely pastoral life, affording them time and energy to pursue their creative interests. Many of Jewett's close friends worked to make the artist's life available to women; Fields supported working class women's communities as an alternative to the economic necessity of marriage, Jewett's British friend Mary Ward helped establish a settlement house in London for the same purpose (Silvey 1). Almira Todd similarly offers Dunnet Landing a uniquely queer feminist housing situation for arts and craftswomen. She makes her living selling herbs and entertaining other women tenants like the narrator:

The tiny house of Mrs Almira Todd, which stood with its end to the street, appeared to be retired and sheltered enough from the busy world, behind its bushy bit of a green garden. . . . It was a queer little garden and puzzling to a stranger, the few flowers being put at a disadvantage by so much greenery. (10)

Rather than the superficial role of a purely picturesque, leisurely garden, Mrs. Todd's unruly herb garden serves a specific purpose: the narrator emphasizes that unlike a carefully manicured decorative garden, the plants become medicines and tonics to cure the community, a role more important than visual beauty. Zagarell describes the centrality of community in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, as a community that maintains itself through stories and folk arts (499). The practical, humble aspects of Dunnet Landing make it nearly an ideal place for aspiring artists or writers to retreat and enjoy their creativity. I interpret Mrs. Todd's utilitarian relationship with her garden as the source of home-crafted health for women in the community as a symbol of the Arts and Crafts ideal of intimate, practical connection with nature as a creative tonic for socially stifled women artists.

Instead of advocating a reformist feminism that might enable women to join men in politics and a capitalist workforce, Jewett imagines an early feminist separatist space where women can develop their bonds and enjoy queer relationships outside the pressures of marriage and reproduction. Mrs. Todd and the narrator become close, and Mrs. Todd begins to share stories and eventually narrate the lives and meanings of the landscape of Dunnet Landing. Their mutual interest in stories leads to a unique affection and connection between them. In his study of Jewett in the context of New England summer tourism, Kevin Murphy explains that Jewett's queer characters occupy "forgotten

byways, historic but dilapidated mansions, and moldering cottages....they openly discussed their same-sex desires and practices as ‘queer.’ Others can be regarded as queer to the degree that they resisted heteronormativity” (Murphy 191). I posit that for Jewett, the communal emphasis of the Arts and Crafts Movement finds a place in Dunnet Landing through the bonds between queer women. On a trip to visit the lonely Joanna, a single woman who lives outside of town on her own island retreat after she fails to conform to a heterosexual relationship, the narrator observes her closeness with Mrs. Todd: “There was something medieval in the behavior of poor Joanna Todd under a disappointment of the heart. The two women had drawn closer together, and were talking on, quite unconscious of a listener” (157). Jewett refers to Joanna as medieval to emphasize Joanna’s impulse to create useful crafts and ally herself with other women for support. The narrator grows closer to Mrs. Todd through experiencing and supporting the tight-knit community alongside her. The narrator becomes so well integrated into Mrs. Todd’s life that Joanna hardly notices her presence while they visit.

In her own celebration of women’s ritual power, Jewett renders Mrs. Todd’s herbal remedies as a form of magic. The women’s subsistence in Dunnet Landing rests on communal bonds, but their mythic, divine feminine qualities establish their aesthetic appeal to the narrator. Jewett’s use of the magical and divine to elevate women’s importance resonates with Ruskin’s feminist purpose in *Sesame and Lilies*. He stresses the importance of women’s spiritual, literary, and artistic contributions to the world by reminding his readers of the story of Joan of Arc, who was denied education yet became a paragon of womanly strength due to her connection with the “forests of Domremy...for in them abode mysterious powers and ancient secrets that towered into tragic strength”

(*Sesame and Lilies* 153). Jewett echoes Ruskin's invocation of the mythic connection between women's power and their landscape when her narrator experiences the magic of Mrs. Todd's herbalism. When Mrs. Todd warmly offers the narrator a special mysterious herbal tea that is like a magical potion designed to endear the narrator to the town, she emphasizes that it symbolizes their closeness:

“I don't give that to everybody,” ... I felt for a moment as if it were part of a spell and incantation, and as if my enchantress would now begin to look like the cobweb shapes of the arctic town. Nothing happened but a quiet evening and some delightful plans that we made. (60)

Jewett's narrator responds to the gesture of affection Mrs. Todd expresses with the special herbal tea by describing her connection to Dunnet Landing as a magical spell, naming Mrs. Todd as the “enchantress” whose figure draws her into the ethereal cobweb shadows of the remote, far-northern town. The cobweb represents the feminine mystery of nature that defines the homes of Dunnet Landing, it is an intricately woven textile often unwelcome to the undiscerning eye. Mrs. Todd evokes Ruskin's Goddesses to emphasize the power of women's mythic relationship with their natural environment to resist sexist and capitalist forces.

Mrs. Todd's home and the quiet and remote northern Maine town challenge the stereotype of the desperately simple, slow-paced and economically-depressed village. The elderly residents of Dunnet Landing actively resist industry. Rather than pure nostalgia for bygone eras, this aversion to industry works as an antidote to modernity for the aging residents and their visitors. As the narrator observes about the boats in the harbor, “Nothing was going on, not even the most leisurely of occupations, like baiting



trawls or mending nets, or repairing lobster pots; the very boats seemed to be taking an afternoon nap in the sun” (Jewett 261). From the narrator’s perspective, the town itself moves willfully slow, offering residents a dreamlike respite from the pace of the outside world. Along with the town generally avoiding industry, Mrs. Todd’s herb garden offers a soothing remedy to the threat of industrialism, curing the locals with “great treasures and rarities among the commoner herbs. There were some strange and pungent odors that roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past” (Jewett 11). The herbs offer only a dim recollection of the past, which for the narrator is as much nostalgia as it is a creative opportunity to write her own artistic version of Dunnet Landing history. The word “treasures” usually refers to manmade, sparkling gems and coins of no practical use. The narrator imagines a different kind of treasure among the herbs: one that can recall a mythic past when status symbols and material wealth meant less to people’s sense of self. Arts and Crafts author and illustrator Walter Crane affirms the particular importance of the pastoral in a moment when the effects of industrialism could be harsh and crushing: “if modern civilization is only tolerable in proportion to the number and facility of the means of escape from it, we may find, at least, the beauty of the country, and of wild nature unimpaired” (132). The residents of Dunnet Landing similarly seek to avoid modernity, productivity, and efficiency. The narrator explains that even the way time moves in Dunnet Landing resists the pace of industrial modernity: “an hour was very long in that coast town where nothing stole away the shortest minute” (Jewett 28). The locals go so far as to avoid doing anything quickly as an effect of their anti-industrial, inefficient environment. Scholar Michael Davitt Bell connects the feminist and anti-industrial aspects of Jewett’s fiction, explaining that escape from urban capitalism

avoids “the world of men's activities” a withdrawal into a rural world of women's communities (179). For such a women’s community to thrive, it must contradict industrial capitalism, freeing women’s imaginations from the onslaught of ready-made consumerism and the oppressive relationships they endure to access it.

In addition to portraying the pastoral as a socially-critical form, Jewett celebrates literary tradition in service to her life as an artist. Like Ruskin, she believed that certain ills of the world could be addressed through thoughtful aesthetics. Jewett makes possible the relationship between the single woman artist and her scenic, inspiring surroundings by emphasizing the complexities of relationships in the Dunnet Landing community. She pairs daily practices of solitude in the wilderness or other scenic locations with the nightly comfort and support of country community. As an artistic ideal, this balance between solitary work time and supportive company echoes Ruskin’s emphasis on a kind of solitary beauty: “One of the principal charms of mountain scenery is its solitude. Now, just as silence is never perfect or deep without motion, solitude is never perfect without some vestige of life” (Ruskin 83). Ruskin was highly skeptical of both the pastoral and romantic conventions of a solitary male artist distantly observing the presumably lesser people of the scenic countryside. Rather than simply describing beautiful scenery from afar, Jewett’s narrator also invites the reader to enjoy the interior of Mrs. Todd’s house, which she describes “as if it were a larger body, or a double shell, in whose simple convolutions Mrs. Todd and I had secreted ourselves, until some wandering hermit crab of a visitor marked the little spare room for her own” (Jewett 123). In some ways, the house represents what Casey Nelson Blake calls the domestic realm, a feminine sanctuary of love and culture safe from the masculine world of capitalist competition (16). The

house functions as a little shell for hermit-crab women, allowing Mrs. Todd and her visitors sanctuary without sacrificing their ability to freely meander outside. Rather than trapping the women inside or blending the inhabitants of Dunnet Landing into their surroundings, objectifying them and distancing them from her reader, Jewett's narrator instead brings Mrs. Todd's house to life, describing it as a collective organism, living symbiotically with the outside world. Whitman praises Jewett's writing, delighting in "the pure literary style and aromatic individual flavor that gives one such special pleasure, and the people live and breathe for me and take their place in the New England landscape" (Whitman 80). Whitman considers community the breath of life in Jewett's description of the landscape. The narrator's description of Mrs. Todd's house as a double shell protecting their "secreted" relationship implies intimacy and safety. Figuring the house as a living organism demonstrates its reliance on the outside environment, unlike the symbolically separate sphere of a domestic space that shelters women at the cost of their agency beyond its walls.

Instead of describing the outside world as filled with spaces that people might utilize for some purpose like building roads, plowing fields, or digging water reservoirs, Jewett's narrator focuses on their aesthetic value. She depicts the community as the most unique and inspiring aspect of Dunnet Landing. Unlike pastoral literature's seemingly interchangeable shepherds or other rustic folk, from the narrator's perspective, the characters of Dunnet Landing are each connected with their regional surroundings in unique and quirky ways. Ruskin describes a pastoral landscape with two perspectives, one of a potential outsider looking at a seemingly endless horizon, and then a more intimate view of the place as if through the eyes of a local: "the far-reaching ridges of

pastoral mountain succeed each other, like the long and sighing swell which moves over quiet waters from some far-off stormy sea. And there is a deep tenderness pervading that” (*Seven Lamps* 150). Ruskin finds tenderness in the nature he sees, not awesome or terrifying power that unsettles him. Nature and humans sustain an emotional and spiritual connection for Ruskin, and scenic landscapes invoke not only individual self-reflection, but deeper truths about people’s emotional connection to each other. For Jewett, outsiders can only understand the beauty of the pastoral landscape if they connect with the people who live in it. Jewett’s narrator spends most of her time describing the way the people of Dunnet Landing inhabit their rural environment, and she occasionally looks outward to focus on the surrounding environment that protects the community from the outside world. While Mrs. Todd invites the narrator to sit and observe the view outside the window, the narrator instead relishes in the view of Mrs. Todd’s homemade, endearing interior design:

I went to the door of the bedroom, and thought how pleasant it looked, with its pink-and-white patchwork quilt and the brown unpainted paneling of its woodwork. "Come right in, dear," she said. "I want you to set down in my old quilted rockin'-chair there by the window; you'll say it's the prettiest view in the house” (Jewett 104)

Mrs. Todd’s homemade quilt, a patchwork, symbolizes the creation of useful goods out of the scraps and remnants of clothes and other linens. Rural American women quilt together in the story, sharing a tradition that integrates their individual artistic designs with the scrap and remnant materials of their particular context. The plain, brown, unpainted woodwork of the wall contrasts the typical fine, gilded-age, urban apartment

that might totally obscure the material of its walls with colorful, floral, wallpapers and decoration. The narrator represents the arts and crafts ideal of making the creator and the material of a work apparent in its design. The developing character of the narrator and the patchwork eclogue-style chapters formally emulate the rough, patchwork of the towns quilts and rough-hewn houses that reveal the mechanisms of their own creation. The simple, rustic beauty of unpainted wood in this bedroom literally frames the narrator's view of the beautiful woods outside, the likely place of origin of the materials in the house. Rather than a house full of fancy china or art from distant, unknown places, Mrs. Todd's house in its aesthetics and actual materials upholds a direct connection with the people and place of its production. The narrator's increasingly intimate relationships with people in the town formally mirror this connection between the text and the mythic source of its creative production.

Jewett elaborates the theme of locally-produced, handmade goods to its extreme in the chapter about "Poor Joanna," a solitary woman who occupies her time with creative endeavors. Living alone on a rocky island, pointedly distant from her neighbors, Joanna dedicates herself to merging with the natural environment. Whiling away her lonely hours, she utilizes the most seemingly unattractive materials to outfit her modest home as Mrs. Todd explains:

Joanna had done one thing very pretty. There was a little piece o' swamp on the island where good rushes grew plenty, and she'd gathered 'em and braided some beautiful mats for the floor and a thick cushion for the long bunk. She'd showed a good deal of invention; you see there was a nice chance to pick up pieces o' wood

and boards that drove ashore, and she'd made good use o' what she found. (Jewett 144)

Joanna's house exemplifies Ruskin's ideal of harmony between place and art. Joanna spends hours gathering the humble swamp grass to then slowly braid her own mats for the floor and even a mattress for her bunk. She might have access to more conventional household items through her family and community members, yet deliberately weaves her surroundings into the interior of her home. She dedicates most of her time to creating goods that cannot be easily reproduced in any other environment. Her anti-industrial lifestyle compels her to avoid even the processing of spun fibers and fabric in favor of directly weaving whole dried plants themselves. She similarly integrates driftwood, an impractical material, into her home. Unlike fresh-cut lumber that can be milled and shaped into standard, square sizes, driftwood defies conventional building with its inconsistent, curved shape and size determined entirely by the randomness of the ocean. Ruskin was the foremost advocate of decorative arts, a category of art relegated to women's domestic concern. Part of Ruskin's philosophy is not for women to abandon the domestic, but to revive the connection between their artistic potential, their natural environment, and their home. He extends his philosophy of union with nature and value to handicraft to nuance the symbolic meaning of interior decorative arts:

the only essential distinction between decorative and other art is being fitted for a fixed place; and in that place, related, either in subordination or in command, to the effect of other pieces of art. And all the greatest art which the world has produced is thus fitted for a place, and subordinated to a purpose ("On Decorative Art" 14)

Joanna's driftwood-adorned home filled with braided swamp grass furnishings is an exaggerated expression of the women's separatist and anti-industrial Dunnet Landing aesthetics of Mrs. Todd's handmade quilt-filled and wood-paneled house. Joanna lives unproductively yet Mrs. Todd mentions to the narrator that Joanna's circumstances invoke a very utilitarian, organic aesthetics that arise from their natural environment.

The aesthetics of Mrs. Todd's and Joanna's homes are specific to the culture and natural surroundings in Dunnet Landing and visually represent their connection with that environment. Their hours spent on quilts and braided grass mats along with their choices of unconventional materials demonstrate their aversion to the aesthetics of industrially-produced, mass-marketed housewares. In spite of the community's economic unimportance in a larger network and the aged state of most of its inhabitants, they persist in purposeful inefficiency with their time. They resist economic and sexual productivity in their daily habits. Those who work at anything occupy themselves with pointedly anti-capitalist endeavors like story telling, practicing herbal medicine, or crafting home goods from rocks, driftwood, and swamp grass over hundreds of hours. The narrator observes the lack of productivity among the locals, in particular Mrs. Todd:

when Mrs. Todd had seemed limited and heavily domestic, she had simply grown sluggish for lack of proper surroundings...It was not the first time that I was full of wonder at the waste of human ability in this world, as a botanist wonders at the wastefulness of nature, the thousand seeds that die, the unused provision of every sort (210).

Upon arrival in Dunnet Landing, the narrator subconsciously carries with her the latently bourgeois value of writing for economic or social gains and as a result cannot at first

understand the virtue of Mrs. Todd's "wasted" potential. The narrator observes that Dunnet Landing holds Mrs. Todd back from what could be a life of productivity, and while judgmental about Mrs. Todd's wasted potential, the narrator also significantly characterizes their way of living as better aligned with nature. Instead of focusing on Mrs. Todd's age as the reason behind her sluggishness, the narrator contextualizes it as natural; making natural processes antagonistic to capitalist efficiency. More interestingly, for the narrator Mrs. Todd's inefficiency ultimately mirrors the curious and compelling process of nature's own wastefulness, like the creation of so many seeds that never survive into fully mature plants. As an herbalist, Mrs. Todd, shirks the conventions of botanical organization and efficiency, in favor of methods in fine harmony with what she sees as the life cycle of plants, at times curing the town with the herbs from her garden and at other times seemingly idle like seeds adrift on the sea breeze of Dunnet Landing. However, after spending time in Dunnet Landing, the narrator begins to question her own assumptions about productivity, considering whether Mrs. Todd's lack of "proper surroundings" make it possible for her to cultivate such a beautiful life in her community.

The narrator, a writer, drifts through each day, unproductive by her own standards. She blames Dunnet Landing for distracting her from serious self-reflective writing and leading her to narrate the meandering sketches of various community members instead. However, in spite of her occasional judgment about the inefficient and unambitious habits of her hostess and neighbors, she still finds herself compelled by their storytelling and intriguingly inefficient tendencies. The displaced bourgeois writer aspires to sit alone in a scenic place with no distractions, to draw distant inspiration from the quaint townspeople, and perhaps even commodify their country life in the manner of



other pastoral writers who bolstered a writing career in a similar fashion. Yet rather than remaining distanced from the characters, the narrator increasingly joins the community, engulfed by their customs and at times inspired to actively participate. She attempts to write insightfully and instead loses herself to a rich description of her distractions: “one anxious scribe felt very dull that day; a sheep-bell tinkled near by, and called her wandering wits after it. The sentences failed to catch these lovely summer cadences” (27). Her sense of commitment equally to her writerly responsibilities and the community suggests a pastoral description of the mythic qualities of Dunnet Landing merging with the regionalist emphasis on women’s communal bonds. Wendy Griswold explains the distinction between the two impulses though arguing for their similarity; the pastoral works as “stylized escapism” and literary regionalism operates as the modern version of it, offering privileged readers access to remote, scenic vistas and entertaining them with the feeling of distance from the lives of the local people (Griswold 28-29). Griswold overlooks the oppositional politics of the pastoral in confronting the social problems of the privileged, urban world; regionalism accomplishes a similar politics. So Stacey Alaimo counters Griswold, arguing that politics form the basis of similarity between the pastoral and conventions of regionalism; authors like Jewett “have endorsed their social visions by drawing on the pastoral tradition in American literature ... and held it up as the conscience of culture” (Alaimo 18). Both Alaimo and Griswold observe the pastoral potential of literary regionalism, but don’t elaborate on its aesthetic implications as a utopian union between queer feminist separatism and Arts and Crafts anti-modernism.

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* represents the anti-industrial feeling of Dunnet Landing as an organic interjection rather than a carefully-crafted intention of the

narrative. Jewett's narrator describes this relationship between her narrative and the town through her inability to focus on her writing as a result of the disruptive neighbors and distracting natural surroundings. While the narrator fails to maintain adequate focus in capturing the picturesque qualities of the town in a way that elevates her as a solitary artist, Captain Littlepage interrupts her, offering his random musings like his objection to bicycles as a modern technology, claiming that they offend him "dreadfully; they don't afford no real opportunities of experience" (Jewett 40). Although the narrator begins her writing venture in search of the ideal work environment, she finds her solitary writing less fulfilling than the social opportunities that occasionally derail her project. The ostensibly dull Captain Littlepage and his ramblings against modern efficiency, embodied by the highly efficient bicycle, push the narrator to experience the community in a way not possible in an industrial, efficient world. Rather than pedaling by like a modern new woman on a bicycle, she must walk around the curved paths and cross the uneven waters of the town, finding connection with the locals wherever she goes. The text suggests that the natural beauty and opportunities for artistic retreat in Dunnet Landing do not elevate a solitary artist or a distant reader; beauty exists only in the context of connection with the community.

The form of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* does not employ a plot of development like a novel, does not form self-contained plots like a short story cycle, but instead includes twenty-one short sketch-like chapters that focus primarily on the lives and dwellings of people in Dunnet Landing. The narrator drives the beginning and end of the loose plot with her planned arrival and departure, but she quickly loses control over the sequence of chapters because Mrs. Todd and her other neighbors entice her to follow

them on rambling experiences with various community members. Jewett uses the narrator like pastoral or regional narrators, who serve as interlocutors for bourgeois readers; when the narrator relinquishes control over the narrative to the residents of Dunnet Landing, readers must question their own individualistic desire for a voyeuristic or distant tourist perspective of the place. In spite of its conventional marketing as a novel, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, presents a series of loosely organized regionalist sketches inflected by a long tradition of pastoral poetry, with moments of dialogue not unlike the poetry of Theocritus, “whose cumulative force lies in thematic continuities . . . rather than in an event or a represented change” (Alpers 412). As Paul Alpers suggests, a formal interpretation of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as a prose version of idylls rests on the lack of events or change in the town or the characters. While Almira Todd and the narrator become closer, neither of them evolve or develop in response to any significant events that take place during the summer the narrator stays there. This formal likeness to classical pastoralism supports the Arts and Crafts ideals celebrating an enduring art form that resists the urban and industrial. Preserving an Arts and Crafts pastoral form of regionalism in the context of a multi-thousand year old literary tradition expresses Jewett’s optimism about the timeless relevance of Dunnet Landing’s queer feminist retreat for women readers. Ruskin and Jewett both imagine a historical continuum of pastoral, landscape, and regional art and literature that naturally confront to the ills of urban society.

Not only does Jewett combine Ruskin’s ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement with her own feminist literary pastoral, she also shares interest in the visual, formal aspects of Arts and Crafts with her friend Sarah Whitman. Jewett and Whitman

collaborated on several of Jewett's books; Jewett wrote them and Whitman designed and created the gilded, floral, arts and crafts covers. Whitman established her artistic career as a watercolorist, book cover artist, stained glass artist, and woman of note among Art Nouveau proponents in Boston artistic circles. Not unlike the emphasis Art Nouveau placed on classically beautiful women in Greek robes with flowing hair and natural surroundings, Jewett draws elements of visual art and architecture into *Dunnet Landing*. She emphasizes the curves of the feminine, particularly in reference to the ever-compelling Almira Todd, who takes the narrator on an adventure to a small island outside of town where her mother lives. The narrator observes Mrs. Todd in the rocky environment and watches while "Mrs. Todd had mounted a gray rock, and stood there grand and architectural, like a caryatide" (Jewett 58). The narrator's description calls upon an Arts and Crafts-oriented fascination with goddesses and the historical celebration of women's strength and power. Sculptors in ancient Greece built caryatides as architectural elements that looked like woman-pillars, holding up buildings while calling on the tradition of Greek Goddess worship, an inspiration for later nineteenth-century feminist artists. On the same adventure, the narrator also refers to Mrs. Todd as a figure of Victory, like the Winged Victory of Samothrace, a statue of the Goddess Nike (Jewett 77). The goddess-inspired analogy Jewett uses to describe Mrs. Todd draws readers' attention to distinctly feminine features in a historical art form. The narrator's perception of Mrs. Todd's strength and harmony with the natural environment transcends *Dunnet Landing* and extends back to ancient and revered feminine sculptures. Jewett and her circle of women artists elevated their representations of women to include not just women artists but also significant subjects from artistic and literary tradition. They seek a

place reproducing the conventionally male high art forms, but instead expressed their creativity by elaborating potentially subversive feminine arts and crafts.

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* formally merges literary pastoral and regionalism by intentionally exposing its own uniquely feminine and folkloric methods. The text reveals the material of its own creation, in accordance with Arts and Crafts ideals, as a means to make the work more appropriate to its environment. For Ruskin, the lost meaning of the pastoral endures only if artists can appropriately render nature's beauty (Bowman 12). The narrator describes the ways that the handicrafts of Dunnet Landing reflect the natural surroundings and material of their own creation and the processes through which the local artists create them. She similarly elaborates on her own process of encountering and documenting the stories that comprise the book. Describing the place where the narrator sat, the way each of her writing days progressed, and the physical act of writing, the story reflects its own creation. Jewett imagines her project as a form of arts and crafts pastoral art that she writes using an anti-industrial method. She describes, in an 1896 letter to artist Rose Lamb, the writing of fellow regionalist Mary Wilkins Freeman and French impressionistic and regionalist author Daudet by considering their similar methods as "well-proportioned in themselves and well-managed, ... and give one clear ideas of a beautiful way of doing things. One must have one's own method: it is the personal contribution that makes true value in any form of art or work of any sort" (Jewett 118). In the same way that the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* describes her writing process and observes the daily crafting and medicine making of the locals in Dunnet Landing, Jewett insists on contributing a method that emphasizes a self-reflective narrative position. The narrator considers her experiences as interludes in her

endeavor to write, at times swept up by the interesting locals, she admits eavesdropping, when she “Laughed and listened again, with an idle pen in my hand, during a particularly spirited and personal conversation, I reached for my hat, and, taking blotting-book and all under my arm, I resolutely fled further temptation” (Jewett 19). Although the conversation tempts the narrator to distraction, she nonetheless describes herself in the process of writing about the very people who distract her. Her writing method blends involvement with them and quiet, solitary descriptions of the beautiful landscape. The material process of creating writing, blotters, pens, paper, and the bodily effort of the writer enter into the narrative by way of the narrator.

Jewett writes of her aesthetic impulse to depict life not unlike how a watercolorist might. In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, she frames life in Dunnet Landing, as the title suggests, with the great and infinite-seeming presence of the dark fir trees: “As we looked upward, the tops of the firs came sharp against the blue sky. There was a great stretch of rough pasture-land round the shoulder of the island to the eastward, and here were all the thick-scattered gray rocks” (19). The colors in her description offer the reader an image of contrast, dark and bright colors together, different lands like the gray rocky terrain, the brown gold pasture, the blue sky, and the green fir trees. Interestingly, the narrator describes this vast scenery by saying “we,” implying that she shares her point of view with Mrs. Todd. Her experience of friendship with Mrs. Todd shapes her perspective. Jewett writes in her letters of the ways that she and her artist friends attempted to share their perspectives with each other for inspiration. In a letter to her watercolorist friend Rose Lamb, Jewett explains that painting and writing both endeavor

to depict the beautiful landscape with an emphasis on human relationships to the environment:

Story-writing is always experimental, just as a water-color sketch is, and that something which does itself is the vitality of it. I think we must know what good work is...the power of suggestion that is in it, or the absolute clearness and finality of revelation; whether it sets you thinking, or whether it makes you see a landscape with a live human figure living its life in the foreground. (Jewett 119)

Her emphasis on landscape with human figures connects the vast setting with single colors, then focusing the reader's attention on the characters. She explains her commitment to precision of situated perspective in a critical letter to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*: "The Trouble with most realism is that it isn't seen from any point of view at all, and so its shadows fall in every direction and it fails of being art" (Jewett 79). Jewett's skepticism reveals her belief in the unique perspectives that regionalist writing offers; without such a perspective, an author could miss some of the beauty of a community-oriented, organic writing method that emerges from a specific context. Omniscient, unbiased, distant narrators do not offer Jewett the artistic opportunities she seeks. Throughout the novel, she continues to contrast distant vistas with intimate connections with people and their character. The narrator attracts the reader to the town of Dunnet Landing first with an emphasis on the quality of acquaintance with the neighborhoods, which makes the scenery of the shore and the woods meaningful. She doesn't describe a distant shore framed by woods with an unknown perspective, but instead directs readers to imagine the shore as if they stood alongside neighbors in Dunnet Landing. Rather than eschewing the purported limitations of a quaint, regionally-

specific perspective, Jewett invokes them to create a clearly rooted point of view that she invites her readers to share. The arts and crafts pastoral becomes accessible through her description.

Although *The Country of the Pointed Firs* represents an imaginary place outside of time that offers women artists a particularly free and inspiring creative environment, the text ends by confronting the inevitable disappearance of places like Dunnet Landing. The perspective that the narrator expresses can only exist in that community, and their aging and death at the end of the novel signify anxiety about dwindling rural folkways. Later in her career, Jewett explains the importance of pastoral experience to a friend:

the true and “simple life,” [is] full of such beautiful “lines” as you artists would say, genuineness and power of enjoyment; as I write this I wonder if a certain state of mind that we call power of enjoyment didn’t go out of fashion. (Jewett 222)

In her letter, Jewett insists on the importance of the simple pleasures. For her, beauty, simplicity, contentment, and genuineness interrelate, sources of artistic inspiration that exist in places like Dunnet Landing.

Jewett’s book renders an Arts and Crafts pastoral with a self-aware narrator who writes herself and other women into a literary lineage that unifies community, nature, and the role of the woman artist. The artistic and emotional importance Jewett ascribes to the true and simple life emerges at the conclusion of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*:

there above the circle of pointed firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for



nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in,—that sense of liberty in space and time. (Jewett 89)

From this distant perspective, the narrator reflects on the possibilities that Dunnet Landing encompasses, a transcendent freedom from the pressures of space and time. The particular Arts and Crafts-inspired pastoral beauty Jewett imagines in Dunnet Landing reflects the formal beauty of the art she most admired. Jewett's suggestion of the power of enjoyment both refers to a kind of significance associated with historical pastoral literature and the rewards for useful, homemade arts and crafts. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* offers its readers a timeless reminder of how to find the meaningful beauty of an Arts and Crafts pastoral: through connection with the women's utopian community. Read as an arts and crafts pastoral Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* ceases to be a quaint feminine, offshoot from American literary realism; it becomes discernable as a Ruskinian invocation of a valuable literary mode spanning centuries.

## CHAPTER III

### INTERWEAVING NATURE AND THE ARTIST IN MARY HUNTER AUSTIN'S *THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN*

Mary Hunter Austin's 1903 illustrated book *The Land of Little Rain* describes the desert, adapting nature writing and women's literary regionalism to the American Southwest. Austin's book deviated from other Southwest nature essays of the time, due in part to her feminist perspective (Hart and Slovic 13). Her book emerged from the context of both nature writing and literary regionalism, and readers accepted it in spite of its formal ambiguities.<sup>12</sup> Risa Applegarth summarizes scholarship of *The Land of Little Rain*, that emphasizes its hybrid form, neither essay nor narrative, that puts the reader and narrator in touch with the wild and unmanageable landscape of the desert east of the Sierras using a narrative style "based in close observation, and uniting scientific and poetic diction in artful, sometimes intricate sentences" (42). A 1904 review written in *The Critic* not long after *The Land of Little Rain* appeared in print emphasized Austin's closeness to her natural environment, citing her "desert studies, which are concerned with nature itself, with animals, and with types of Human character [as] the outgrowth of an intimate knowledge" (Anonymous 566). In *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin "developed her voice as a writer by acknowledging her role as a storyteller, by not trying to

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<sup>12</sup> To some Thoreauvians, *The Land of Little Rain* appeared like a women's southwest response to *Walden* (Anderson 7).

disappear, by emphasizing her relationship to her material” (Graulich 99)<sup>13</sup>. Austin’s text describes her narrator as existing in a liminal space between the human and nonhuman world and between white and indigenous ways of knowing, and as a writer her prose vacillates between storytelling and nature writing. She situates her fiction in the desert, invoking cultural, historical, and environmental themes from the region. A 1904 *Life Magazine* article reviewing the book exposes the common assumption among readers that Southwestern deserts as strange lands of “forbidding wastes” where “a loving understanding, a touch of the poet and the artist’s instinct for omission can give us the spirit of a strange land. That Mary Austin possesses these is amply proved by her delightful interpretation” (Anonymous 620). Stacey Alaimo summarizes a common observation among scholars of Austin, that *The Land of Little Rain* challenges the predominantly masculine conceptions of the American West while simultaneously allowing women access to a spacious and liberating landscape. Alaimo’s historical account of the southwest wilderness points to popular conceptions of the desert as the place furthest away from society; however as Alaimo observes, most writing about the forbidding and dangerous west constructs narratives in which “manly men escape the annoyances of prettified culture and head to open spaces where they can finally breathe free” (Alaimo 83). Alaimo interprets Austin’s interesting position as a woman author appropriating masculine postures toward the Wild West as a feminist narrative style.

Although many Austin scholars observe the narrative ambivalences and feminist position of the narrator in *The Land of Little Rain*, the philosophical and political context for Austin’s creative rendering of the desert requires further investigation. Austin’s ideals

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<sup>13</sup> Austin’s first published story was “the Mother of Felipe” in a November 1892 issue of *Overland Monthly* (Goodman 28).

for feminist artists of the desert are more clearly understood in the context of her Arts and Crafts community and influences. She did not begin with a solitary, individualistic vision of the lonely transcendent artist. Many authors analyze the ambiguities of her book, but the greater context of the Arts and Crafts Movement still eludes scholarship. Austin sought to dissolve the divide between the communal aspects of regional culture and the individually spiritual experience of nature for the artist; John Ruskin, father of the Arts and Crafts Movement, shared an interest in redefining the figure of the artist based on community-oriented ideals. Although *the Land of Little Rain* critiques the shortcomings of white industrial masculinist society, it also offers the potential for communion between human and environment. For Austin, women are capable of material connection with the land, not just benefitting from it but also relating to it as a source of creativity. Teena Gabrielson argues that “Austin positions women within the realm of the material, but their skills in administrating the goods of this realm elevate their activities to a higher art” (Gabrielson 656). Instead of being trapped in a domestic context in which their material skills are mundane and limited, women in the desert connect to a greater source of creativity, thus elevating their productions. However, Gabrielson’s classification of high art overlooks the complex period debates about the nature of the artist and about the contrast between folk art and high art that are deeply indebted to Arts and Crafts ideals and that help explain Austin’s philosophy. Austin’s narrator and women characters did not administrate or curate material goods like white collectors buying Native American baskets and displaying them in a gallery; Austin represents women fully embracing the realm of the material for deeper spiritual understanding. Scholar Heike Schaefer describes Austin’s representation with the spiritual essence of the artist and the material

environment as a “paradoxical sense of being other, of not wholly belonging to the natural world while also being made of it, sustained and eventually reabsorbed by it, is ... the basis for spiritual experiences of place” (97). Austin’s imagination was not as incoherent or paradoxical as scholars like Schaefer believe; it originated from Arts and Crafts leader John Ruskin’s ideals relocated in the context of the desert. In her autobiography, she introduces readers to her two most important personas: “Mary,” the socially engaged and educated persona who distantly observes life and experiences the social, and “I-Mary,” the artistic persona who can connect intimately with nature, drawing creative energies directly from the environment. Carol Dickson interprets the literary form of *The Land of Little Rain* as a “tapestry of nature essay, personal essay, folk legend, and local history” of the California Sierras that resists generic classification (Dickson 49). This chapter argues that *The Land of Little Rain* is not a tapestry, but a hand-woven basket, crafted from the intersection of natural materials of Austin’s desert environment and the cosmopolitan influences of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

While *The Land of Little Rain* appears to be written in remote California by an isolated author, it is more legible as a cultural production that emerged from Austin’s relationship to a network of artists asking questions about the relationship between raw material, wildness, and art. Austin belonged to artist enclaves, read Arts and Crafts ideology, and befriended Arts and Crafts artists and supporters. She seeks an “Arts and Crafts” revival of the basket weavers and artful animals in her story not just as relics of the past or a mythic and out-of-reach world, but as ideal artists. The Arts and Crafts Movement ideals that proposed a reciprocal relationship between artist and nature inspired Austin to represent an idealized reality where women writers and the raw

materials of nature could have an interconnected relationship undamaged by the pressures of industrialism, like metaphorical basket weavers. In her 1932 essay “Literature and the Regional Environment”, Austin posits that “the regional environment...orders and determines” practical life and permeates “that field of consciousness from which all invention and creative effort of every sort proceed” (261). Austin crafts her own definition of a regionalism in which intimate knowledge of a specific landscape as a spiritual entity guides a creative process of representing the landscape in the most true and beautiful way. Austin’s letters and the history of her involvement with Arts and Crafts artists and feminists included in her letters confirm the mutually supportive relationship she rendered between artist and landscape in *The Land of Little Rain*.

Austin’s aesthetics developed in the context of lifelong feminism. Austin describes herself as a feminist, recalling her family history as one source of inspiration for her politics: “my mother was a suffragist and an ardent member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, which at the time represented the most advanced social thinking among women.... With this background it was inevitable that I should become a fighting feminist” (Austin 164). Yet however progressive her parents were, Austin suffered under rigid expectations of gender roles, and from an early age, she challenged them. She advocated for a level of women’s freedom that put marriage and childrearing somewhat in conflict with a creative career. She remembers her parents’ pessimistic impression of her gender rebellion: “Being plain and a little ‘queer,’ it was hoped rather than expected that I would marry. My queerness consisted, at that time...in stoutly maintaining against all contrary opinion that I would some day write” (Austin 118). Austin defines queerness as an aversion to standards of feminine beauty and pressure

toward heterosexual marriage in favor of a life as an author. Her determination to become not just a progressive woman but a woman artist motivated beliefs and practices that she felt would help her achieve more intimate connection with the earth, the source of artistic creativity.

Overlapping communities of women writers and artists supported Austin's ideal of an anti-industrial feminist artistic life. These comrades included anti-capitalist feminist Charlotte Perkins Stetson (later Gilman), Unitarian freethinker Grace Ellery Channing, Ina Coolbrith (the first poet laureate of California and honored speaker at the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women), short story writer Margaret Collier Graham, and regionalist writer Mary Hallock Foote. Moreover, Austin wrote the *Land of Little Rain* during a time when other transplants were authoring popular nature writing and stories about rural California: she did not aspire like Frank Norris and Jack London to depict the rugged masculinity of the west idealized by her male naturalist peers (Stineman 47). Ina Coolbrith "the reigning matriarch of San Francisco literati" mentored Austin (Stineman 47). Not just a successful writer, Coolbrith struggled against literary stereotypes to make a name for herself as a renowned feminist with an established role in the literary world. As Austin writes in *Earth Horizon*, becoming a conventional woman and an artist did not satisfy her creative and political yearnings; she wanted to be a feminist artist. Rather than working in isolation and suffering, Austin developed as a writer in a community of strong, independent women and forward-thinking artists. Her version of feminism emerged from the context of community support. In her autobiography, she describes her process of becoming a feminist:

Mary found the pointers on her own trail going in the direction of women who desired the liberation of women for its own sake....They dressed and wore their hair as it pleased them; declined to admit marriage as a bar to public careers; refused on every side to admit the pertinence of personal behavior to public appeal (Austin *Earth Horizon* 279).

Mary began her evolution into Mary and I-Mary by joining with a community of feminists who boldly defied the aesthetic rules of gender. In order for Austin to finally discover the liberated I-Mary, Mary had to deviate from public appeal first. Mary is a person indebted to community and formed from a lifetime of experiences, however the radical I-Mary is so radically free of social expectation that she is outside of time, never appearing in Austin's narrated past. I-Mary is always and already rooted in nature.

Austin's radical feminism and later artistry emerged from her community of feminist intellectuals and activists, even during her writing process she had friends like feminist doctor Nellie McKnight and would listen to her writing and offer feedback (Goodman 36). Although she found herself in the remote Owens Valley at the mercy of changing water rights law with an irresponsible and financially inept husband, Austin quickly gravitated to fellow independent women and women of vision to keep her spirit and creativity alive while enduring feelings of isolation.

Austin further developed her creative feminist inclinations in a cohort of west coast artists, writers, and thinkers connected through west coast Arts and Crafts leader Charles Lummis, editor of regional arts and literature magazine *The Land of Sunshine*, which later became *Out West*. Austin published an early work in Lummis's *The Land of Sunshine* in 1901, a poem titled "The Burgher's Wife" that introduced her audience to a



question about gender that she constantly revisited: “There are some women who are sullen, there are women who are wild/And one perhaps is hopeful, but that one has no child” (423). Austin laments the pressure to reproduce as the downfall of women’s hope for themselves; her most valuable offspring was her I-Mary, a persona that required years of nurturing. Austin sought to embody the role of the artist in every way, her own elaboration of the Arts and Crafts community ideals that influenced her. Lummis and his Arts and Crafts-style house called El Alisal attracted an expansive group of west coast intellectuals and artists who shared in conversations about gender and the meaning of the artist. He led efforts to rebuild the California missions and collect historical and anthropological artifacts; as a result he became a major architect of what is now the Arts and Crafts-inspired regional culture of the southwest (Byrkit iv). Although Austin spent much time with her husband, she elaborated on many of Lummis’s aesthetic and political projects. However, in order to establish her own artistic identity, she had to create her own El Alisal, a physical place that represented the Arts and Crafts aesthetics she valued.

Austin believed that bourgeois gender roles inhibit women from pursuing meaningful forms of self-expression. This belief originated from the Arts and Crafts Movement decades earlier. Between the 1840s, when Ruskin started to publish, and the turn of the twentieth century, when Austin expressed her variation of Ruskin’s views, American people’s ability to produce their own goods had become more strained and more important. Earlier in the century, the pressure for women to produce the woven, sewn, and knit goods that helped a household function demanded hours of their time. Technology and globalized goods freed them from the tedium of making garments and tapestries to serve many household purposes. However along with these advances came

pressure to conform to increasingly modern fashion trends and social expectations of gender that did not offer women artists like Austin greater independence. In response to these conditions, Austin developed her own resistance to heterosexual gender roles by challenging capitalist norms of beauty. Ruskin similarly argues for the honor and meaning inherent in men producing their own goods from raw materials:

These,—hewers of wood, and drawers of water,—these, bent under burdens, or torn of scourges—these, that dig and weave—that plant and build; workers in wood, and in marble, and in iron—by whom all food, clothing, habitation, furniture, and means of delight are produced....from these, surely, at least, we may receive some clear message of teaching; and pierce, for an instant, into the mystery of life, and of its arts (Ruskin 276).

According to Ruskin, whose ideals formed the Arts and Crafts Movement, people who can transform raw wood, metal, and reeds into useful creations are artists with a particularly meaningful relationship to their surroundings; they can resist industrialism and unjust social hierarchies through their skills to meaningfully connect with their regional environment.

Austin understood the problems of industrial capitalism, sexism, and white dominance over indigenous peoples and their ancestral lands as related, and as having both material and aesthetic consequences that she opposed. *The Land of Little Rain* depicts the problems of civilization as problems of “man,” to emphasize the role of gender hierarchy on exploitation of the wilderness. *The Land Of Little Rain* challenges masculine privilege by associating it with industrial white society and exposing its failings. Since property ownership and naming are privileges of white men, Austin

prefaces her books with a statement against such systems. In the process of shedding the ugliness and impediments of industrial life, artists must also be willing to compromise their investment in masculinity. Like the narrator in *The Land of Little Rain*, John Ruskin describes the failings of capitalist hierarchies as spiritual and aesthetic as well as ethical: “these capitalists and men of business, who weigh the earth, and the dust of it, in a balance. They know the world, surely; and what is the mystery of life to us, is none to them” (Ruskin 270). Understanding, ownership, and accounting for the earth and its resources limits creativity, moreover life’s mystery, the source of art and creativity and spiritual connection, cannot co-exist with that kind of domination. Against the backdrop of a mythically intimate relationship between the narrator and the natural environment, Austin offers critiques of the struggles and failings of white, industrial society. Austin and others in her Arts and Crafts cohort believed that “industrialization had produced a mass culture of imitation, destroyed communal bonds, and divested work of its inherent worth, [while] Arts and Crafts Movement supporters sought ‘authentic’ objects and experience” (Jacobs 187). Austin resists the sexist, imperialist notion that white American men’s technological and social advancements equip them for every environment; the seemingly simple plants and animals of the desert thrive in places that remains hostile and mysterious for white men: “Man is a great blunderer going about in the woods, and there is no other except the bear makes so much noise. Being so well warned beforehand, it is a very stupid animal, or a very bold one, that cannot keep safely hid” (Austin 14). Although *The Land of Little Rain* primarily concerns the desert, Austin sets this critique in the woods, a more familiar and widely accepted environment that is fully under the control of white men. Yet even in the woods, men are blundering and

stupid compared to the rest of the animals. The narrator identifies with the supposedly intellectually inferior creatures of the forest, incorporating their perspective into her understanding of the landscape. The narrator critiques the hierarchy between men and women, white and indigenous people, and humans and animals as social impositions of bourgeois society that interfere with true artistic insight.

Austin's position that conventional white domestic life thwarts artistic potential is an important influence on her feminist Arts and Crafts identity. Austin believed that such entrapment in the domestic sphere distanced her from intimate connections with the world that, according to some Arts and Crafts ideals, inspired women's creativity. Discontent with the idea of upholding sexual and gender norms and enjoying a life that would financially support a writing career, feminist craftswomen, women artists, and literary women like Austin "championed a new vision of womanhood that emphasized women's self-fulfillment, individualism, and sexual expression" (Jacobs 200). Rather than expressing their individualism through mass-produced clothing or consumption of ornate housewares, women sought a relationship with materiality that revived a connection to local environments and folkways. In her autobiography, Austin criticizes women who embrace conventional bourgeois aesthetics as their only available option for self-expression. In *The Land of Little Rain*, she describes native women's resistance to industrialism and industrial aesthetics in their different ways of relating to gender expectations than those of a white woman:

In our kind of society, when a woman ceases to alter the fashion of her hair, you guess that she has passed the crisis of her experience. If she goes on crimping and uncrimping with the changing mode, it is safe to suppose she has never come up

against anything too big for her. The Indian woman gets nearly the same personal note in the pattern of her baskets. Not that she does not make all kinds, carriers, water-bottles, and cradles,—these are kitchen ware,—but her works of art are all of the same piece. (34)

Like other women in the Arts and Crafts Movement, the narrator celebrates the utility, beauty, and durability of Native Americans baskets as well as the cultural support that basket weavers get from their communities (Cohodas 90). She validates Native American women's folkways as part of her critique of white American capitalism-driven beauty standards. The narrator takes on one of the Mary personas, authoritatively asserting the role of Native American baskets as an integral element in the desert environment. The narrator lacks sympathy for women's tireless assimilation into fickle white society beauty ideals. She defines a meaningful, challenging life based on whether women can resist spending hours adjusting their hair to suit the current fashion. Such resistance would allow them to understand themselves and their environment like the Native American women she admired.

Austin developed her knowledge and appreciation for Native American women's lifeways when her dysfunctional marriage compelled her to seek social support beyond her family and the provincial Christian context of her small town. Austin found herself in the desert because she and the man her family pressured her to marry, Stafford Wallace Austin, moved to Lone Pine in the eastern Sierras in her twenties, and later in 1900 they moved to Independence, California in the Owens Valley. At that time, "around 1,000

Native Americans lived in the Owens Valley” (Langlois 34)<sup>14</sup>. Austin employed a Paiute housekeeper and befriended local Native American women because she found greater acceptance and inspiration in their company than among white locals whom she considered relatively small-minded. She accepted invitations to their ceremonies and visited their camps, learning about their traditions as well as their struggles against the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Langlois 34). She almost certainly learned of the spiritual movement that Paiute leader Wavoka invoked in his project to develop the Ghost Dance as a Pan-Indian spiritual practice (Hertzberg 10). Austin explains in her autobiography *Earth Horizon* that her family never spoke much of it, but that she had Native American ancestors in the Midwest where she grew up (Earth Horizon 243). She developed an interest in learning about the survival and resilience of local Native Americans as well as preserving aspects of traditional culture that she valued for its creative and spiritual qualities.<sup>15</sup> She clarifies that her experiences with her Paiute friends and neighbors were “intimately connected with my life as an artist,” and that she supported not only their cultural histories but also their political struggles of the present (Austin *Earth Horizon* 267).

Austin criticized capitalism as vigorously as her urban labor-organizer friends. However, she chose to align herself with the political cause most pressing and immediate in the Sierras, the constant threat against the rights of the local Paiute community:

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<sup>14</sup> Although Mary Hunter Austin resented her then husband, he played a significant role in bargaining for water rights in the Owens Valley during a time when the growing Los Angeles population sought to drain the area’s resources for their own use (Hoffman 305).

<sup>15</sup> Along with the oppressive impact of the Dawes Act of 1887 and later Curtis Act of 1898 that sought to break up tribal lands and force Native Americans to take up farming in only nuclear families, the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902 claimed public lands and in exchange promised water only to eligible farmers over the long term. Austin witnessed the material and social effects of both of these legislations (Jack 260).

I took to the defense of Indians because they were the most conspicuously defeated and offended against group at hand....I got out of the actual activities involved precisely what my contemporaries in cities got, a knowledge of the persisting strain of bruteness, of emotional savagery, of greed and hypocrisy which taints the best of our Western civilization; precisely what my contemporaries learned by seeing strikers beaten up by policemen; citizens deprived by violence of their constitutional liberties (Austin *Earth Horizon* 267)<sup>16</sup>.

She specifies that white “Western” civilization imposes the greatest brutality and savagery known to so many oppressed groups. She stood up against what she called the “fierce and untiring opponent of the colossal stupidities, the mean and cruel injustices, of our Indian Bureau” (Alaimo 71). Government Strategies of cultural control established a link between the nineteenth century cult of domesticity and the “imperial work of domesticating colonial land, animals, and native populations” (Piatote 3). Austin’s appreciation for Native American lifeways resists white cultural forces that sought to contain, limit, assimilate, and eradicate the spiritual and communal aspects of Native American life. While the majority of early twentieth-century White Americans feared Native American cultural practices and sought to justify land appropriation, scientific and artistic interest in the mythically liberating, anti-modern Native past and cultural artifacts exploded in popularity. Austin’s political position about Native American rights exposes the ambivalence of arts and craftswomen who idealized Native American culture and

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<sup>16</sup> The Wounded Knee Massacre took place in 1890, representing centuries of brutal physical against Native Americans. In addition to military violence, laws prevented Lakota and many other tribes across the US from performing meaningful religious rituals like the Ghost Dance (Holm 40). Austin’s comment on Western brutality speaks to physical and cultural aggression against Native Americans.

cultural productions while at the same time doing little to support tribal political sovereignty. However, Austin was very invested in a culturally autonomous future of women basket weavers, since for her they represented the kind of artistic role she sought to emulate in her literary career.

Austin's interest in Native American women basket weavers as symbols of the Southwest arts and craftswoman draws from Ruskin's writings on ancient traditions in *Sesame and Lilies*<sup>17</sup>. Along with espousing theories about nature and its necessity in art, Ruskin elevates women's importance in mythic and ancient history:

Nay I could go back into the mythical teaching of the most ancient times, and show you how the great people,—by one of whose princesses it was appointed that the Lawgiver of all the earth should be educated, rather than by his own kindred;—how that great Egyptian people, wisest then of nations, gave to their Spirit of Wisdom the form of the weaver's shuttle. (Ruskin 124)

Ruskin's unique Arts and Crafts feminism traces a transnational history of weaving as evidence of women's great contributions to societies throughout time. He also renders the weaver as the epitome of a spiritually enlightened woman artist. Following Ruskin's philosophical stance, women in the Southwest sought a regional mythic past and associated contemporary Native American women with the weavers of western history. Part of the appeal of Native American baskets was for white people the assumption that they were part of tradition that had not changed over thousands of years and remained

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<sup>17</sup> *Sesame and Lilies* was a later work by Ruskin that made more political statements against capitalism, sexism, and excesses of modernity. It was extremely popular in the US and was regularly assigned as required college entrance reading during the last several decades of the nineteenth century (Hufford 440).



untainted by white culture (Berlo 47)<sup>18</sup>. Although many white Americans shared the view that seemingly primitive indigenous folkways proved the backwardness of Native American culture, Southwest women Arts and Crafts enthusiasts evinced a more ambivalent perception of the value of Southwest Native American cultural productions.<sup>19</sup>

Not only did Southwest Arts and Crafts Movement advocates participate in the revival movement to celebrate the crafted goods that Native Americans created; they also idealized the position of the Native American craftswoman whom they held up as more authentic and connected to the earth, yet more free to live an artist's life; "White women transformed Indian women artists into powerful symbols of their competing notions of women's roles in modern America" (Jacobs 188). An article published in the popular *Godey's Magazine* in 1897 titled "A Study in Indian Red" romanticized the basket weaver's connection to a landscape unaffected by modernity:

On the margin of the willow-shadowed pool are tall reeds and grasses and thirsty water-weeds that bend down, down, each green leaf and pliant stem reflected clearly in the placid surface as in a mirror. It is here that the Indian woman, Juanita, comes to gather material for her basket-making. (Connor 604)

The burgeoning Southwest regional identity that conflated ideals about the immediacy and intimacy of indigenous relationships to the earth and elevation of cultural productions as spiritually and environmentally superior emerged from anxiety about the aesthetic and spiritual impact of impending modernity: "Native American basketry also exemplified a

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<sup>18</sup> In Thoreau's *Walden*, he makes the analogy that writing was like weaving: "I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy" (17). He laments the lack of appreciation for art in a system that favors capitalist trends.

<sup>19</sup> At the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial World Fair, Native American "objects" were organized in "evolutionary sequence" from least to most technologically advanced in order to promote the idea of Native American cultural backwardness and primitivism (Huhndorf 28).

second tenet of the Arts and Crafts style: ornamentation must be true to the material and form of the object, so that aesthetic and utilitarian components exist in perfect balance” (Berlo 90). Weavers harvested basket materials outdoors, wove them from wild-crafted branches and reeds and had a long history of combining tribal symbolism and the identity of the basket weaver with the functional purpose of the basket. Austin promoted the southwest artist identity as a forerunner of a larger Arts and Crafts Movement in which white women celebrated and appropriated the spiritual and artistic superiority they associated with Native American women. Paiute women represented in *The Land of Little Rain* follow folk traditions of utilizing wild-crafted materials from the southwest region<sup>20</sup>; Austin participated in a community of white women who valued such traditions, and as a result “worked to preserve local arts and crafts. She collected, for instance, European American folktales, Hispanic songs and artifacts, and Native American chants, myths, and poetry” (Schaefer 201). However, Austin also appreciated Native American culture and lifeways because of her personal relationships with Native American women, her involvement in water rights, and her support of early Native American rights advocacy groups.

Austin’s interest in regional Paiute culture and indigenous folkways of the past led her to contemplate the way Native Americans in the Owens Valley approached artistry. She did not believe in a wild landscape devoid of inhabitants but imagined instead a regional identity that resisted national identity and politics. Austin’s approach to the desert and its people espoused a “place-based mode of identity formation and cultural development” (Schaefer 32). The Paiute women Austin met wild-crafted raw materials

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<sup>20</sup> Wild-crafting is a term used by today’s primitivists or foragers that refers to non-exploitive harvest of wild materials for the purpose of herbalism, food, or craft projects.

from the landscape and created works that combined abstract symbols with practical application. The sturdy and supportive traditional warp structure of the baskets represents the historical folkways Austin values, and the detailed symbolic designs in the weft represent the artist's self-expression. Austin's idealized basket makers weave cultural tradition, regional landscape, and contemporary influences together in a structure flexible enough to adapt to modernity without fully assimilating to it. In *The Land of Little Rain*, the narrator ponders the role of the basket maker in this process of negotiating indigenous past and future through technical skill and creative design:

Every Indian woman is an artist,—sees, feels, creates, but does not philosophize about her processes. Seyavi's bowls are wonders of technical precision, inside and out, the palm finds no fault with them, but the subtlest appeal is in the sense that warns us of humanness in the way the design spreads into the flare of the bowl (34).

Austin essentializes Native American women as artists because she imagines their connection to their landscape as more innate than white women's. Yet, unlike many of her peers who invoke the mythic noble savage as the only antidote to modernity and a representative of anti-civilization, Austin imagines an I-Mary persona as essentially connected to the earth as well, capable of combining technical skills, artistry, alongside Mary's geographically-specific history. Austin renders Paiute ways of life regionally and culturally specific, but she also idealizes the basket as symbolic of humanness. The connection between I-Mary and the environment, she emphasizes, results from the materials and their practical application, but also resides in the abstract designs that appeal to the eye. The narrator acknowledges that some aspects of *The Land of Little*

*Rain* relegate an idealized version of Native American history to the past: “It is true I have been in Shoshone Land, but before that, long before, I had seen it through the eyes of Winnenap' in a rosy mist of reminiscence, and must always see it with a sense of intimacy in the light that never was” (Austin 18). Amid stories based on Austin’s encounters with Paiute women who wove baskets and attempted to live in spite of water shortages, affronts to their rights to the land, and racist aggressions, the narrator distinguishes the mythic and idealized image of the pre-European landscape from history. Austin does not dispute the regionalist fantasy about harmonious and distantly past Native American life but rather reveals its fantastical status. The rosy mist of reminiscence reflects a white construction of a Native American mythic past, and Austin acknowledges that such a view excludes the possibility of current or future indigenous adaptations to modernity. For her, the problem of indigenous tradition and futurity intersected with the struggles of the modern Southwest woman artist.

When read in the context of Arts and Crafts ideals, Austin’s literary representation of the Arts and Crafts artist’s relationship to their environment takes the form of the warp and weft in a Native-American inspired basket. Accordingly, the narrator in *The Land of Little Rain* constructs a balanced arts and crafts world in which artist, environment, and raw materials emerge organically from the regional context of the desert. This harmony elaborates on Ruskin’s Arts and Crafts ideals:

The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful....In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing, or group of things, manifest to him;—this, the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and earth has permitted him to seize. (Ruskin 33)

Like Austin's "Mary," Ruskin describes himself as an author in the third person, as if his manifesting of sunshine and earth developed as a personal process separate from his role in describing his own writing. Ruskin emphasizes the core of his ideals: the greater spiritual truth of the universe can be found in things that are useful and beautiful. From her youth, Austin defined herself by her connection to art and literature, along with questions about the identity of the artist and the political radical. She found herself estranged from the typical gender and societal norms her family expected of her, an estrangement she attributed to her uniquely artistic worldview. In her autobiography, she credits Ruskin's writings as a key source of her alternative perspective:

to read things like '*Seven Lamps*,' before you could understand them, was what made you queer, so that people didn't like you....If you talked about reading Ruskin at your age, people would think you were conceited...much more in that key, which seemed to spread like a dull smear over the bright surface of Ruskin, against which all Mary's profounder loyalties were engaged (Austin 133 *Earth Horizon*)<sup>21</sup>.

Mary writes about herself in the third person, second person and first person: I-Mary is artistically connected with nature and spirituality, Mary is the third-person aspect of herself living in society. The third and second person Marys converge around her early interest in John Ruskin. His brightness and politics resonated with her and even though her interest in him alienated her from her peers, she found this alienation a path forward as an introspective artist. She found herself drawn to Ruskin's ideas and versions of them shared among American women artists and intellectual society. In the Southwest context,

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<sup>21</sup> The *Seven Lamps of Architecture* is a 1849 extended essay of Ruskin's early aesthetic and philosophical ideas.

the revival of classical arts that Ruskin advocated came in the form of revival of indigenous arts with an emphasis on the idealized connection between Native American basket weavers and their physical surroundings. Arts and Crafts revivalists in the US merged ethnography, anthropology, and anxiety about industrial modernity, with an interest in indigenous folk arts.

Austin's unique feminist artistic perspective specifically relied on a connection with the desert in *The Land of Little Rain* "as a place to cast off constricting domestic values. For Austin, nature serves as a place of possibility, a space of misidentification from rigidly gendered cultural scripts" (Alaimo 66). As Alaimo observes, Austin understood gender as an expectation that included a script, a way of speaking and writing that limited her potential to express her artistic relationship with nature. So Austin's response was to move away from the idea of a whole, unified, feminine identity or static labels for her sense of self, her spiritual practices, or her artistic style. Similarly, she did not aspire to gain privileges to property and ownership in the white, masculine sense. Instead in *The Land of Little Rain* she represents a world where such norms and fixed terminology are unimportant. Instead she finds that indigenous relationships to the landscape offer white women a model for freedom from the idea of women and land as property that men can claim to own through re-naming. She explains her resistance to naming in the context of western expansion and the white settler tendency to rename landmarks they encounter:

For if I love a lake known by the name of the man who discovered it, which endears itself by reason of the close-locked pines it nourishes about its borders, you may look in my account to find it so described. But if the Indians have been

there before me, you shall have their name, which is always beautifully fit and does not originate in the poor human desire for perpetuity.

Austin finds that the Native American names better represent the landmarks of the eastern Sierras than the white names that typically emphasize the name of the man who once encountered them. She finds fault with the desire for perpetuity, or leaving one's mark on the world, because it can distract from the beauty and sense of connection that someone might have with the place in the moment that they experience it. She avoids giving any examples of names and relies instead on the specific description of a lake that might be defined by the trees that encircle it. She compels the reader to consider nature in each moment, rather than focus on the history of white people who claim it. Austin eschews naming, measuring, claiming, and knowing as impulses that not only distract people from the mystery and complications of nature, but also pose threats to self-understanding. Rather than frame her feminist analysis as simply critique of the material consequences of oppression, Austin explores the psychologically and creatively liberating potential of a southwest woman artist's way of knowing.

The relationship between the distant and observant Mary and the artistic, intuitive, and cosmically connected I-Mary mirrors her interwoven form in *The Land of Little Rain*; the narrator will be one with the thoughts and motives of the landscape. Mary stands for the form, the warp, the enduring identity structure that responds to society, and I-Mary contributes the organic, changing, creative self that emerges from moments of contact with the environment. Austin's persona, the I-Mary, leads readers to their own intimacy with Arts and Crafts ideals that they can maintain without totally abandoning the versions of themselves that live in society, in relationships with people, and more distantly from

nature like Austin's Mary. She shares her identity as a writer essential and innate, a spiritual pursuit:

Long before that time it was clear that I could write imaginatively, not only of people, but of the scene, the totality which is called Nature, and that I would give myself intransigently to the quality of experience called Folks, and to the frame of behavior known as Mystical (Austin *Earth Horizon* vii).

Her I-Mary persona in her view works less as a whole person than a version of herself that can somehow remove certain levels of self in order to connect organically with life's interwoven qualities. In that regard, she sees herself as a channel for nature and folk life. Austin meditated, using a Paiute prayer technique before writing to train herself to minimize superficial consciousness (Stineman 60). Prior to the full development of I-Mary, she had to dissolve her socially-defined exterior self or ego in the service of a less conventionally human perspective. Austin's "Mary" narrator in *The Land of Little Rain* reflects the importance of ongoing resistance to industrial society to accomplish such desert consciousness.

The sparse yet vibrant desert ecosystem Austin's narrator inhabits challenges industrial capitalism by exposing its shortcomings. In the context of the desert, an urban socialite would fail to thrive. In addition to a society man's inability to exist harmoniously in the woods, the narrator disparages the wastefulness of industrial society in comparison to intelligent systems in nature:

The cunningest hunter is hunted in turn, and what he leaves of his kill is meat for some other. That is the economy of nature, but with it all there is not sufficient



account taken of the works of man. There is no scavenger that eats tin cans, and no wild thing leaves a like disfigurement on the forest floor. (Austin 14)

Instead of depicting nature as a wild zone vulnerable to human garbage, the narrator uses nature's beauty to emphasize the relative unsightliness and stupidity of human failings: the ugliness of industrial waste like tin cans represents the uneconomical and inefficient way that most humans choose to live; their litter evidences the destruction and waste of industrial modernity. The supposed superiority of civilization erodes in the context of the wilderness of the eastern Sierras. Rather than just imagining a desert escape as an antidote to industrial society, the narrator first makes it clear why artists in particular need such an antidote.

Austin sets the narrator's confrontation with the inability of modern, white men to comprehend spiritually or artistically the wilderness and function in it against capitalist narratives of efficiency and ownership. Apart from the wastefulness and foolishness of some ignorant men, the narrator objects to industrial capitalism on a deeper level:

You of the house habit can hardly understand the sense of the hills. No doubt the labor of being comfortable gives you an exaggerated opinion of yourself, an exaggerated pain to be set aside. Whether the wild things understand it or not they adapt themselves to its processes with the greater ease. (41)

Instead of simply denigrating those who are caught in the trappings of capitalist industrialism and its hierarchies, the narrator criticizes those who cannot understand the hills, and calls their inflated sense of self "an exaggerated pain." She clarifies that adapting and relating to the earth with ease doesn't necessarily require understanding, but that excessively comfortable material living inhibits a meaningful relationship. Ruskin

also takes issue with the fetishization of material wealth and the imperial attitudes it could embody, focusing his critique on the spiritual meaninglessness of fashion:

unpleasant you may think it; pleasant, it seems to me,—that you, with all your pretty dresses, and dainty looks, and kindly thoughts, and saintly aspirations, are not one whit more thought of or loved by the great Maker and Master than any poor little red, black, or blue savage, running wild in the pestilent woods, or naked on the hot sands of the earth. (*Sesame and Lilies* 150)

Ruskin echoes the narrator's hostility to the frivolity of feminine standards of beauty, implicating those who subscribe to it in common assumptions about white cultural superiority. Although Ruskin does not take care to specify cultural histories and uses problematic racial categories in his description, the message of his blunt assertion is that the seemingly "savage" people of color who suffer persecution, are just as well loved by the Christian God as self-righteous overdressed Victorians. Interestingly, Ruskin invokes images of people in the desert as symbols of people whose existence was depicted as anti-modern, and mutually exclusive with urban white society (DeLoria 105). Austin's urgent desire to look toward primitivism for spirituality, art, and the environment in the face of an oppressive modernity is a philosophy she shared with the Arts and Crafts context.

Austin's narrator in *The Land of Little Rain* recovers an intimate relationship with the earth as a resistance to industrialism. Austin invokes Ruskin's ideal that the aesthetics and ethical repercussions of industrial capitalist life impede the spiritual knowledge that makes life beautiful. For Austin's narrator, spirituality was necessarily linked with artful language and a freedom from literalist religious dogma:

Sometimes the speech of simple folk hints at truth the understanding does not reach. I am persuaded only a complex soul can get any good of a plain religion. Your earthborn is a poet and a symbolist. We breed in an environment of asphalt pavements a body of people whose creeds are chiefly restrictions against other people's way of life. (Austin 56)

The narrator comments not just on the analogy between asphalt paving over the earth and its people, but also the way that industrial development fosters an environment that inhibits understanding. Those who are “earthborn,” which in this context means the rural or indigenous peoples of the desert, are inherently poets and symbolists, enriched with creative and philosophical understanding. Poetic, symbolic, and earthborn living replaces “plain religion,” the church-centered Christianity that took place indoors in humble buildings. For the narrator, the aesthetic complexity of the earth sustains meaningful spirituality.

Austin’s narrator first condemns industrial society for estranging people from connecting with their local surroundings then offers alternatives. Austin thoroughly explores the possibility of intimacy with the earth as healing connection with the divine. For Austin’s narrator, nature provides divinity, creativity, and cures for modern ills:

The rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the luminous radiance of the spring, have the lotus charm....For one thing there is the divinest, cleanest air to be breathed anywhere in God's world. Some day the world will understand that, and the little oases on the windy tops of hills will harbor for healing its ailing, house-weary broods. (5)

Austin begins by describing the colors and lights that make spring distractingly beautiful, beguiling visitors like the often-revered lotus flower. The narrator shifts emphasis from the lights, colors, and textures of the air and horizon to the healing properties of the air. The landscape nourishes the body as well as the mind in a way that built structures cannot. The narrator focuses on house-weariness, a psychological condition that finds a life trapped indoors the cause for depression. The narrator opposes the sexist psychology at the time that often prescribed rest cure for women's anxiety disorders, condemning them to a life trapped indoors and worsening their neurosis<sup>22</sup>. In contrast to the overly socialized, house-weary white people who might lose themselves in the unfamiliar rejuvenating and beautiful air of the open hills, Austin idealizes the curative power of unstructured wildness of the desert.

Even though the desert offers freedom, it resists stability and cannot be named or its essence captured; it must be encountered moment to moment. *The Land of Little Rain* and its inhabitants avoid the impulse for mapping and definition. The narrator envisions an organic form of identity that does not rely on fixed labels, names, and social structures but can adapt. The narrator describes the landscape as beyond definition:

Not the law, but the land sets the limit. Desert is the name it wears upon the maps, but the Indian's is the better word. Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be bitted and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil. (Austin 2)

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<sup>22</sup> For a concise explanation of the rest-cure in literature, see Stiles, Anne. "The Rest Cure 1873-1925" BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net. Accessed online 2-5-2015. Web. 1-11.

The English name for the desert inadequately describes its processes and effects on people; and the narrator makes clear that no one yet knows whether the desert can be dominated and controlled. The narrator's idea that understanding and management might break the land suggests that the beauty of the desert resides in its mystery, even though that beautiful mysterious landscape can be dangerous and inhospitable. Navigating the desert proves just as difficult; the narrator advises those in search of a trail to

Venture to look for some seldom-touched water-hole, and so long as the trails run with your general direction make sure you are right, but if they begin to cross yours at never so slight an angle, to converge toward a point left or right of your objective, no matter what the maps say, or your memory, trust them; they know.

(Austin 7)

The only ones who know the way are the animals who create water trails; human maps or memory can never really capture ever-changing throughways. The land cannot be comprehended, managed, or even traversed easily; from the eastern horizon it appears that "the land goes very far by broken ranges, narrow valleys of pure desertness, and huge mesas uplifted to the sky-line, east and east, and no man knows the end of it" (Austin 19). By depicting the desert as a place that shirks human definition and comprehension, Austin elevates it as one of the few environments that can restore life's mystery to visitors who are perceptive enough to contemplate it the way she does. For Austin, the desert willfully resists human perspectives, it has a spirit of its own with aesthetic sensibilities. Rather than discussing the desert past or the future of its wildness as a potential frontier to be conquered, Austin instead portrays the desert as a place apart from and opposed to industrial time.

Austin challenges the civilized perspective and then goes further, shifting away from a human-centered perspective entirely. Time moves differently in *The Land of Little Rain*. Austin's narrator engages the impermanence that defines certain aspects of the landscape by merging with an animal point of view. She addresses her civilized readers with a criticism of scientific generalizations about nocturnal animals:

We have fallen on a very careless usage, speaking of wild creatures as if they were bound by some such limitation as hampers clockwork. When we say of one and another, they are night prowlers, it is perhaps true only as the things they feed upon are more easily come by in the dark, and they know well how to adjust themselves to conditions wherein food is more plentiful by day. (8)

Rather than simply pointing out that we misunderstand the nuances of certain animal behavior, the narrator emphasizes that the impulse for standard usage and clockwork time prevents human understanding of nature's constant adaptations. The narrator criticizes a typical science writer's tendency to define animals by their feeding habits, because they depict food acquisition in a capitalist context, which excludes other meaningful activities in an animal's life. The narrator contrasts her term "wild creatures" with the term "night prowlers" as another way to invigorate the mystery of nature and our inability to comprehend it. She represents the shortsighted white man as an unnamed "he" as an antagonist to the land, which she figures as a separate character whom she perceives as "a lonely, inhospitable land, beautiful, terrible. But he came to no harm in it; the land tolerated him as it might a gopher or a badger. Of all its inhabitants it has the least concern for man" (Austin 15). The narrator concludes that to abandon the ills of civilization, one must on some level abandon being a man. The land makes this decision

for you if you venture there. Instead of developing a human protagonist who becomes one with the landscape, the narrator moves between instructions on how people can engage with their environment and insight into the inner meaning of the landscape. Austin ascribes psychological complexity to the landscape in order to mitigate modern women artists' eminent alienation from their regional surroundings. If the landscape can function as an agent of its own processes rather than simply a material resource vulnerable to capitalist exploitation, it can nurture meaningful relationships with its human inhabitants.

In the *Land of Little Rain*, therefore, the land itself guides human and animal inhabitants to turn away from the constricting pressures of industrial society. The narrator emphasizes how the desert represents an alternate reality, almost a character of its own with desires and dislikes:

This is the sense of the desert hills, that there is room enough and time enough. Trees grow to consummate domes; every plant has its perfect work. Noxious weeds such as come up thickly in crowded fields do not flourish in the free spaces....the wild things will show you a use for everything that grows in these borders. The manner of the country makes the usage of life there, and the land will not be lived in except in its own fashion (Austin 19).

The land itself determines its fashion, its schedule, and in some ways the art that inhabitants might create using available raw materials. Rather than a mythic besieged landscape depleted by human exploitation and threatened by urbanization, the desert manages its relationship with humans. It offers humans a wilderness that functions with an alternative kind of efficiency that demands simplicity and co-operation with diverse

species attuned with the desert. The narrator understands the perspective of trees, animals, and the land itself as if all elements each had their own unique experience. Alongside sections that describe human motives and desires, the narrator becomes the voice of “the wild things.” In Austin’s narrative, the only humans with a future are those who understand the non-human world.

Austin theorizes ways the reader can understand the desert, and the narrator practices moments of intimate connection with a non-human perspective through narration that moves between the Mary whose narrative voice works like a structural warp and the I-Mary whose intimate perspective of the desert is like the decorative, detailed weft of the basket literary form. The narrator moves back and forth from the human perspective to the animal; she writes for an audience of artists who might also seek a relationship with the earth as the key to their creative invigoration. While other popular regionalist authors like Jewett represent an artist’s relationship with the earth within popular forms of fiction, Austin utilizes a nature essay form as the socially recognizable structure into which she weaves her artful, fictional prose. As she explains in her essay “How I Learned to Write”, although the formal structure of *The Land of Little Rain* invokes other nature writing, many of her readers found her diction and syntax are unusual:

the young woman who did my typewriting, corrected my diction and phraseology. “It sounded so queer,” she would cheerfully explain her alterations of my text....But I stuck to my original conception of the proper form to be employed between me and the sort of people I hoped to reach. (Austin 150).



Austin's words and syntax caught the attention of the typist not as incorrect or difficult to understand, but as simply "queer." Austin later argues in the essay that she intentionally cultivated queerness; she wanted to capture the attention of those gender and sexual rebels in the artistic community interested in art and alterity rather than in a literature that conformed to expectations. Her focus wasn't just on having the freedom to write, she had a more significant "interest in natural history involved a transgression of late nineteenth-century gender codes" (Schaefer 53). As a regionalist, Austin gravitated toward the boldly unconventional in her writing. Instead of masking her radical content in a romantic or sentimental plot that would undermine her feminist aims, she employed non-fiction forms like the scientific nature essay for the broader observations the Mary narrator makes. She then includes I-Mary's closeness to the desert, making the remote locations more accessible and artistically inspiring to women readers.

Austin explored indigenous folk arts, joining Paiute women in the Owens Valley; as she explains, she spent time "absorbing women's lore, plants good to be eaten or for medicine, learning to make snares of long, strong hair for the quail...how and when to gather willows and cedar roots for basket-making. In this way, she began to learn that to get at the meaning of work you must make all its motions, both of body and mind" (*Earth Horizon* 247). Like the basket weavers who understand the motions of a willow branch, philosophical and material, Austin seeks to understand the basket weavers in order to write about them. For the basket weaver, the water-softened willow branches have a character of their own, and for Austin, the desert and its inhabitants have an inherent character that she wanted to reveal. Her interest in the materials that informed her literature invokes the Arts and Crafts emphasis on honoring the material of one's art: "In

the Arts and Crafts context . . . objects and their materials personified desired human virtues. Clay, wood, and metal were sincere” (Stankiewicz 170). The sincerity Stankiewicz describes gestures toward the spiritually meaningful qualities that Austin attributed to natural elements. To Austin, the willow branches and reeds of the basket represent the virtue of adaptability and collaboration; the water renders each individual piece pliable and vulnerable, but together they form a strong and beautiful structure. The formal structure that Austin creates in *The Land of Little Rain* is not just aesthetically appealing but constructed to hold together against the unsettling, unfettering forces of industrial modernity.

The basket weaver symbolizes the ideal woman artist and the timeless and resilient I-Mary; her contact with the natural environment dissolves the boundaries between human and non-human that inhibit artistic expression. In the *Land of Little Rain*, the weaver Seyavi physically interacts with soil and water almost as if the environment nourishes her in the same way it gives sun and water to the plants she harvests: “The weaver and the warp lived next to the earth and were saturated with the same elements. Twice a year, in the time of white butterflies and again when young quail ran neck and neck in the chaparral, Seyavi cut willows for basketry by the creek” (Austin 35). The narrator describes Seyavi alongside the butterflies and quail, signaled by their yearly schedule to gather her supplies. Her body is not separate from nature: nature physically shapes her the way the creek water, the soil, and the sun develops the reeds and willow sticks she weaves. Seyavi belongs in her environment, sharing the perspective of non-human creatures like the butterflies and quail. The narrator makes the willow branch and the basket weaver into a single being with different aspects. Warp and weft are the two

perpendicular strands of thread used to weave textiles, and the narrator's description of warp and weaver point to Seyavi's intimacy with her medium. Seyavi's relationship to the warp of her baskets represents a third essential element that emerges from the same environment as the reeds and willow branches.

Austin's formal warp and weft are not antagonist forces, but structures that bend around each other to exist in non-linear harmony. As Bredahl observes, *The Land of Little Rain* embraces a "non-chronological form, and by doing so it avoids a focus on constructing a single, cohesive individual; instead Austin depicts an ecosystem working in harmony and intersecting with each other" (53). Austin's prose structurally creates a metaphor for the kind of organic form Austin considered most true and beautiful, which she wants to share with her readers:

Nevertheless there are certain peaks, canons, and clear meadow spaces which are above all compassing of words, and have a certain fame as of the nobly great to whom we give no familiar names. Guided by these you may reach my country and find or not find, according as it lieth in you, much that is set down here. And more. The earth is no wanton to give up all her best to every comer, but keeps a sweet, separate intimacy for each. (2)

The narrator of the preface takes on the Mary voice to explain factually the larger landmarks, then the I-Mary elaborates on the spiritual meaning of the peaks, canyons, and meadows. The organization of chapters also describes broader geographic areas that form the sturdy warp of the text; the narrator's prose signifies the pliable weft where she expresses each moment of intimate understanding of some aspect of the environment. The earth that she knows won't give everything to everyone, but the sweet intimacy is

available to all who are willing to experience the wildness of the desert. The narrator invites readers to navigate the text like they would their walk around the uncharted desert: according to their own senses. The narrator encourages readers to follow her and Seyavi in gathering inspiration from the desert. The preface explains the landscape's symbolic meaning before the rest of the chapters bend it into the sentence patterns that express the narrator's relationship to each distinct place and character.

For Austin, artists can only contact the truth of the earth through a co-operative relationship with the landscape. The narrator shifts between a distant observer with a human focus and a part of the environment with direct knowledge of non-humans. Thus Austin's narrator vacillates between perspectives discernibly-human Mary and the I-Mary who is mysteriously aware of the land; the form and themes of the *Land of Little Rain* blend "the romantic with the real, of the human with the non-human, of the spiritual with the material" (Hume 61). Although there are times when the Mary narrator criticizes the limitations of white society life, I-Mary makes the difference between humans and "wild things" seem less distant: "The business that goes on in the street of the mountain is tremendous, world-formative. Here go birds, squirrels, and red deer, children crying small wares and playing in the street, but they do not obstruct its affairs" (Austin 41). The children are like small desert animals who all play in the street without getting in the way of anyone else's comings and goings; they are part of the natural community rather than distant consumers. The mountain's structure and organization parallels a city, with streets and affairs of its own. While Jewett's narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* distances the mythic New England town of Dunnet Landing from capitalist business by elaborating on artful inefficiency, Austin's narrator bends the structural elements of

capitalist efficiency into a metaphor for natural processes. Its “business” evades the trading, buying, and selling among men but instead maintains “world-formative,” creative, and generative processes. Without the intervention of city planners, the mountain the narrator describes shapes itself through carefully timed natural processes. Erosion, eruption, and earthquake are all phenomena beyond human control, and the narrator punctuates this point about human smallness by describing only animal children who play on its tremendous surface. Minimizing human values and perspective offers a receptive reader the opportunity to begin to grasp what Austin imagines as the land’s perspective.

In *The Land of Little Rain*, wild animals are the intermediaries between the land and human perspective. Their daily habits are easy to understand, and they symbolize greater harmony with the chaos and inherent beauty of nature that Austin idealizes. The narrator encourages self-awareness of human relationships to the wilderness by conveying plant, mineral, and animal perspectives to the reader. The narrator finds man’s inability to comprehend the desert not only an environmental problem, but also an artistic and spiritual tragedy for humans. The narrator offers readers the kind of mythically close relationship with animals they need but cannot access. She describes animal paths as streets that, although they are

faint to man-sight, they are sufficiently plain to the furred and feathered folk who travel them. Getting down to the eye level of rat and squirrel kind, one perceives what might easily be wide and winding roads to us if they occurred in thick plantations of trees three times the height of a man. (Austin 7)

The *Land of Little Rain* invites humans to understand the artistic aspects that Austin and other arts and crafts proponents found inherent in nature. What men's eyes can only faintly perceive, the narrator can see and gives readers analogies so they too might imagine themselves like rats or small birds. The narrator does not describe animals from the man's point of view, but brings specifically-male readers to the squirrel's point of view, describing the landscape as they might. The narrator draws I-Mary's artistic perspective from the tall male line of sight to a less masculine, more animal point of view. Ruskin similarly finds animal perspective and instinct crucial to artists' self-awareness:

Does a bird need to theorize about building its nest, or boast of it when built? ....  
in the doers of the best, there is an inner and involuntary power which  
approximates literally to the instinct of an animal—nay, I am certain that in the  
most perfect human artists, reason does NOT supersede instinct. (Ruskin 227)

Ruskin and Austin conceive of instinct as a connection to animality, one that dissuades artists from self-aggrandizing or justification. A person's claims of greatness or discovery have no relevance in the animal world; Ruskin and Austin both advise readers to relinquish their capitalist-inspired egos in order to access their own inner I-Mary. For Ruskin, one's connection to beauty matters most: Austin's stories similarly blur "distinctions between human and nonhuman work, between hunting and herding, gathering and farming, domestic and wild" (Nelson 29). A deep desire for spiritual connection with the natural and material in the face of a rapidly modernizing world remained at the heart of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Unlike the grim, grittiness of most naturalism that sought to expose the dehumanizing impact of industrial capitalism,

Arts and Crafts regionalists re-established an intimate relationship between people and the land they lived on. Austin's book thus suggests possibilities for women artists to find a meaningful relationship with their regional environment: "*The Land of Little Rain* is a hybrid naturalist text, one in which realistic details reflect the author's romantic ruminations and vision of an idealized state-of-being" (Hume 63). This state of being reflects aesthetic ambitions Austin shared with others in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Further, this idealized state could only happen in the absence of industrialism.

*The Land of Little Rain* reflects an aversion to the popular and marketable characteristics of women's regionalist writing, especially romantic sentimentalism and emphasis on how different rustic people are from cultured readers. Instead, Austin re-defines regionalism as a genre that invites artists and writers to weave together a creatively productive relationship with their environment and their socially defined notions of self and literary genre. The narrator of the text distantly observes nature and understands intimately the processes of time, transformation, and creation. The omniscient narrator also understands the heart of plants and animals on a closer level. The narrator employs the second person as a way to invite readers to develop their relationship with the landscape, and to make clear how ill-equipped they are to understand and deal with the raw earth. The book vacillates back and forth between the Mary narrator who criticizes industrial society's failings, then I-Mary who weaves in beautiful, detailed artistic expressions based on a direct understanding of non-human nature. The narrator does not develop a linear plot line but instead cycles through levels of immediacy with nature's perspective. The intimate perspective makes western, capitalist concepts like ownership, naming, and efficiency irrelevant. Austin invokes the

Arts and Crafts ideal of a basket in literary form: a text created by women artists, their earthly materials, and their spiritual relationship to their environment.



## CHAPTER IV

### A PLACE OF ARTISTRY AND LOVE: ARTS AND CRAFTS

#### ARCHITECTURE IN THE REGION OF KATE CHOPIN'S

##### *THE AWAKENING*

*The Awakening* was published by Kate Chopin in 1899, and immediately faced widespread disapproval from reviewers. Its sexual content disturbed American moral standards of literature. The first noteworthy review of the text after publication, written by Willa Cather, questions why Chopin “devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme” (170). In spite of its scandalous beginnings, *The Awakening* has become, as Donald Pizer observes, “one of the most thoroughly examined novels” in American literature (5). Chopin’s artful prose, psychological investigation of the protagonist Edna Pontellier, and the ways that Edna transgresses period gender codes have attracted the most critical attention. Set in New Orleans and Grand Isle, Louisiana, the text includes many aspects of local color fiction, and remains a strong example of late nineteenth-century American literary regionalism. However, the novel deviates from popular norms because “in *The Awakening*, women express a sexuality absent from most regionalist writing” (Fetterly and Pryse 287). Scholars have also observed that the text gestures toward other literary modes, including naturalism and to some degree romanticism. The version of American naturalism represented in the novel reflects the belief “that a human being is substantially determined by its milieu, both exterior and interior” (Margraf 101). Both popular and

critical reviews of the novel at the time of its publication focused on the adulterous plot, which differs from most American narratives at the time but draws inspiration from major European novels like *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Effi Briest* (Mikolchak 30). In addition to interpreting European influence on the themes of the novel, more recent new historicist arguments draw on Chopin's interest in the transatlantic progressive music of Wagner and Frédéric Chopin to explain the lyrical quality of her prose (Camastra 155). Since Kate Chopin lived such a varied life in the company of authors, activists, and intellectuals, investigations of her cultural milieu that illuminate feminist politics and arts and crafts elements of *The Awakening* continue to offer readers greater understanding of the novel.

The figure of the woman artist in Chopin's life, as well as in *The Awakening*, exposes the limits of the domestic life. Although critical arguments about the social construction of women's gender role as "angels of the house" illuminate *The Awakening*, many still lack specificity with regard to the material and aesthetic construction of the houses themselves. Brown argues that the economics and politics of domesticity intersect with the cultural constructs of individualism because the "woman at home exemplified ideal values and presided over a superior, moral economy" (6). Chopin's representation of the woman artist unsettles the domestic roles of women and the sexually repressive norms that accompany them. Naturalist arguments consider the impact of biological sexual drives and socio-economic forces beyond the main characters' control in determining the outcome of the plot, forces explained by broad influences like Charles Darwin (Margraf 94). Yet, as Priscilla Leder argues, such arguments about sexuality and gender, while highly compelling can make it easy to ignore the significance of Edna's

“artistic awakening and her attempts to nurture her creative ability” (229). Pizer ultimately characterizes the novel as naturalistic, but doesn’t specify the representations of material and social conditions that drive Edna: “she will find her efforts to establish a fully independent and self-expressive life circumscribed and eventually thwarted by the conditions in which she must live” (6). Pizer finds Edna’s social and material contexts the reason for her tragic end, yet doesn’t fully explore how Chopin represented that context aesthetically. These naturalist and feminist accounts of *The Awakening* do not adequately contextualize Edna’s sexual desires, romantic hopes, and artistic goals as interrelated aspects of her identity, an identity that aligns with Arts and Crafts ideals. Since the aesthetic and political influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on regionalist authors remains a subject as of yet minimally explored, few have considered the role of William Morris on the cultural milieu of Chopin and her enclave of creative, intellectual, and radical friends.

Along with the political and gendered implications of the woman artist, Chopin’s aesthetic context connects the sensual and romantic ideals of *The Awakening* with Morris’s vision for an Arts and Crafts identity. Morris’s writings reveal his stance that beautiful surroundings and uninhibited sexual connection are pre-requisites for love, crucial elements for artistic inspiration. Dieter Schulz argues for consideration of *The Awakening* in a specifically transatlantic fin-de-siècle context, which makes obvious the influence of “turn-of-the-century mood poetry and art nouveau” (3). He finds that Pre-Raphaelite portraits’ emphasis on moods like ennui and melancholy shaped period definitions of the “modern artist” (4). My study elaborates Schulz’s exploration of European art nouveau and Pre-Raphaelite influences to pursue the influence of Morris’

political and aesthetic visions and how they affected American definitions of the politics, emotions, and aesthetic environments of woman artist. Although a number of craftswomen succeeded in gaining acceptance and economic success, for many their lives as artists put significant strain on their romantic and sexual lives. In the 1860s and 70s, political feminists and radical intellectual and artistic communities explored alternative sexualities. However, by the time Chopin wrote *The Awakening*, public protests and publications by the Free Love movement had been eclipsed by Anthony Comstock, the first official US censor. His misogynistic censorship policies pressured many suffragists to become morality police to protect their political reputations. New Women, like Chopin, found themselves caught in a paradox of sexual self-denial and creative yearning. Chopin's life transgressed social norms and due to the extreme conditions of censorship for radical women writing during the later nineteenth-century in the United States, she and her friends often consciously chose obscurity to protect their personal and artistic lives. However, Chopin did not disguise her aesthetic connections to both feminist and arts and crafts ideals. Biographer Per Seyersted, studying a photograph of her St. Louis home, notes that Chopin

read sitting in a Morris chair in her comfortable but simple living room; apart from a few paintings on the wall and a candle and a naked Venus on the bookshelves, there were hardly any ornamentations in it. This unpretentious parlor was the regular meeting-place for some of the city's outstanding minds (Seyersted 62).

Chopin's parlor offers insight into the themes and aesthetics this chapter explores about *The Awakening*. Her sparsely decorated home hosted many artistic and literary salons and

privately radical confabulations. These gatherings shared the influence of the Morris chair and the boldly naked Venus on her mantle, a minor yet telling sign of the role of sensual love in Chopin's interpretation of Arts and Crafts. Elements of Arts and Crafts architecture and design are similarly important to Edna Pontellier's life. Edna awakens to ideals of art, architecture, and design as opportunities for a new life, yet confronts the practical limitations of such ideals in a society stratified by class, race, and gender. From the Atelier to the Pigeon House, Edna gains autonomy that she expresses through art, creative community, and romantic pursuits. Even wilder places like the open air of Grand Isle and the ocean offer Edna a feeling of freedom. Sadly, however, she cannot free herself from society's rules and their psychological impact. Reading Edna alongside Morris's work offers not only insight into both Edna's and Chopin's aesthetics but a context for the free love impulses of *The Awakening* as well. In addition to his role as a famous literary man and the "consummate craftsman, Morris was a communist, deeply concerned with an ideal of free, anti-oppression, anti-industrial art" (Kaplan 55). Free lovers wanted the same thing for love; a romantic relationship defined by mutual attraction and consent rather than economic or social obligation. Reading *The Awakening* alongside Morris's architectural and artistic writings justifies the interrelated romantic desires and artistic aspirations of Chopin's tragic protagonist. *The Awakening* both idealizes the figure of the woman artist and carefully examines it in the context of Edna's privileged life, ultimately concluding that women might never have the autonomy necessary to accomplish such an ideal of liberated female creativity.

Chopin's writing gained popularity during her time and although *The Awakening* inspired moral outrage at publication, it has become popular among literary scholars in

the last 40 years. Chopin did not start writing until nearly in her forties; she published a novel in 1890, then the short story collections *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Her short stories, poems, essays, and even her musical composition appeared in popular and literary magazines (Corse and Westervelt 139). Along with involvement in musical and literary culture, Chopin participated in women's clubs, artistic guilds, and her own salons: by the early 1890s, she hosted a literary salon, and her "Thursdays" were the place to be for authors, artists, and visiting creative people" (Toth and Seyersted 130). Her artistic, domestic, and social worlds intersected; she "was a lifelong member of the St. Louis Artist's Guild . . . . Chopin read, by invitation, from her work at the exclusive St. Louis women's club, the Wednesday Club, on November 29, 1899" (Corse and Westervelt 153). Her son called her cohort "a liberal, almost pink-red group of intellectuals, people who believed in intellectual freedom and often expressed their independence by wearing eccentric clothing" (Toth and Seyersted 131). She arrived at her feminist bohemian lifestyle gradually; growing up in the company of independent women in Missouri she involved herself in conversations about women's suffrage during her youth (Toth 48). She later became more rebellious and transgressive, known by her neighbors to keep company with men after her husband died, go on long walks or horse rides late at night, and smoke cigarettes (Toth 51). She translated *Madame Bovary* into English, and was aware of Flaubert's obscenity trial over it. She read and reviewed the works of Guy de Maupassant, whose books were not really available in American libraries because their sexual context did not pass the approval of the censor (Toth 123). Chopin believed in gender and sexual freedom. Her artistic and radical circles almost certainly discussed Morris and Ruskin.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In her diary in 1894, Chopin names among her influences Jewett and Wilkins: "I know of no one better

During the later nineteenth-century, Morris gained notoriety as the craftsman whose chairs, wallpapers, and fabric helped decorate the western world. Morris & Co received a gold medal from the Royal Society of the Arts at the 1862 International Exposition in England for their stained glass, and later branched out to “paper-hangings and textile fabrics” (Sharp 779). At the 1900 British Pavilion at the Paris Expo, the British government chose Morris & Co as the official decorators (Alfodly 107). While his designs and imitations proliferated across the world, Morris’s poetry appeared in literary magazines. American readers accessed his works in the *Atlantic Monthly* and Dean Howells reviewed it; much of it included the socialist themes Morris advocated, some of which espoused versions of free-love. In 1896, William Sharp wrote an obituary and brief biography in that magazine linking Morris’s designs, socialism, and literature (779). Although Morris himself did not often lecture in the United States, as a founding father of the Arts and Crafts Movement, he inspired many of the lecturers who visited America to transmit Arts and Crafts ideals (Wilson 29).<sup>24</sup> Morris espoused theories of free love, championed Ruskin’s craft revival aesthetics, and praised gothic revival architecture. His death stirred up significant public attention in the U.S., introducing people who were familiar with his wallpaper, stained glass, chairs, and poetry to his socialist politics. Houghton Mifflin published his socialist utopia, *News From Nowhere* in Boston in 1898.<sup>25</sup> For people who read Morris more carefully, “the craftsman ideal provided a way

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than Miss Jewett to study for technique and nicety of construction. I don’t mention Mary E. Wilkins for she is a great genius and genius is not to be studied” (Seyersted 181).

<sup>24</sup> Among them Oscar Wilde and Walter Crane (Wilson 29).

<sup>25</sup> “What he published in 1890 (the Commonweal version) was considerably closer to the anarchist view of revolution than what is now accepted as *News from Nowhere*, and what he added for the 1891 version (the book) shows a distinct shift towards an attitude more favourable to the State Socialists, or Fabians, than anything he wrote in *Commonweal*” (Lloyd 273).

to step outside of their position within the developing corporate order and find individual autonomy within a renewed secular (rather than religious) community” (Boris 209). This secular ideal discouraged conventional assumptions about morality and religious dogma and instead promoted ideals that affirmed aesthetic and social beauty. Unlike some nineteenth-century socialists, Morris considered the non-tangible work of writers and philosophers to be a kind of labor. He called it “intelligent work” and argued that the division of labor by class opposed the fulfillment of people’s inherently creative nature (Casement 362). This alignment between the “intelligent” work of writers, artists, and philosophers with the politically idealized labor of the working classes resonated with the intersecting economic and social concerns that Chopin and her fellow writers encountered. Along with the appeal of Morris’s artistic opposition to oppression, his theories encouraged deviation from conventional marriage on the same basis: “Chapter 9, ‘Concerning Love,’ from *News from Nowhere* would in the 1890s be considered as an argument for promiscuity” (Lloyd 279). However, Chopin interprets Morris’s utopian view as an ideal for the kind of uninhibited love that artists require for their creative inspiration. For white middle-class progressives and New Women, Morris played the role of an important leader and representative of their overlapping concerns about labor, aesthetics, and the changing role of sexual relationships for artists.

Chopin’s ideas about women’s artistic and sexual potential were superficially tragic in comparison to Morris’s utopian views; she and other radical feminists had to disguise their beliefs by using metaphors, euphemisms, and plots that punished transgressors. *The Awakening* did not evade notoriety, but it did avoid censorship in part because Chopin employed conventions of regional literature to distance privileged



Anglo-American readers from the Creole context of the novel<sup>26</sup>. Following the 1873 passage of Comstock's anti-obscenity laws, many kinds of publications became illegal: no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature. (258)

Comstock and his department were responsible for the destruction of a huge number of books and photographs, and he boasted that "out of 227 different books published in this country, the stereotypes and electro plates, woodcuts and steel and copperplate engravings for printing and illustrating 225 have been seized and destroyed" (162).

Moralists and vice-suppression zealots joined forces with anti-suffragists who "used the specter of female adultery to argue against what to them was a startling—and threatening—new form of female individualism" (Higgins 193). Aggressive vice-suppression drove some suffragists and more policy-oriented feminists to align with morality campaigns while others who advocated sexual rights and freedoms were prosecuted. Comstock's rigidly moralistic views expose two things about the era when Chopin was writing: moralists' misogynistic social panic held women responsible for the moral failings of society; yet their moral panic occurred during a widespread explosion of sexuality, sensuality, and birth control conversations in print. In literature and journalism, "Divorcees, prostitutes, kept women, and adulterers broke into the work of serious American writers in the 1890s, creating a considerable stir about the rise of the 'sex novel' during the decade" (Andrews 24). Questioning marriage or any of its

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<sup>26</sup> In the context of *The Awakening*, Creole refers to the ethnically French white people who reside in Louisiana. Chopin would have expected her readers to interpret Creole society as a thinly veiled analog for Anglo white society.

fundamentally sexist assumptions could be legally interpreted as obscene, so authors like Chopin had to frame such concepts in ways that other artistic and feminist-leaning readers might understand yet censors would ignore. The creole aesthetic and cultural context of *The Awakening* helps disguise Chopin's transgressive confrontation with sex, gender, and racial norms of her era. The narrator of *The Awakening* can draw attention to taboo subjects and scrutinize the impact of Edna's architectural surroundings under the pretext of regionalism.

Chopin's narrator draws the reader's attention to the novel's subtle politics through the relationship between Edna and the men in her life, the women artists who influence her, and her physical surroundings. In keeping with many nineteenth-century texts by women writers, the novel renders the details of the household as reflecting the interior identity of the characters. Chopin employs this literary convention for unconventional purposes; the narrator's descriptions deviate from typical white middle-class sensibilities and instead utilize Arts and Crafts aesthetics and politics to re-frame the interior and architectural features in the novel as either creatively and sexually stifling or liberating. Arts and Crafts ideals about the changing home environment, both the structure of buildings and their interior design coincide with women's changing relationship to the home and their desire for autonomy. Chopin herself enjoyed a summer home, a concept that had special meaning for the woman artist. During Chopin's era, resorts, tourist destinations, or retreats to America's quaint regions played a central role in the imagination of the literati and other privileged white people, especially women (Parmiter 1). Bourgeois women writers could be free of certain social expectations while on vacation away from their urban lives, staying in simpler, more rustic abodes. *The*

*Awakening* contrasts the intimate and inspiring experiences that Edna enjoys while away from home; the narrator's attention to architecture exposes women's emotional suffocation in their homes. Yet interestingly, the narrator's critical representation of this injustice represents the slow disintegration of the nineteenth-century norm of separate spheres that obligated women to embody a sense of self defined by their interior environments (Joslin 167). Understanding the changing definition of gender in Chopin's novel requires reading Edna's changing relationship with different domestic spaces.

This chapter interprets the narrator's focus on Edna's husband Leónce's obsession with his home as the center of his control over his wife as a criticism of such sexist attitudes. The plot of *The Awakening* follows Edna, a white Anglo woman from Kentucky who marries the Creole Leónce Pontellier and moves to New Orleans. The narrator begins by describing Leónce with a particular emphasis on his freedom to choose his company and his surroundings. In the first pages of the novel, the narrator pointedly observes Leónce's autonomy after describing the French Quarter surroundings and a few neighbors: "Mr. Pontellier had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining" (4). The narrator directs the reader's attention to Leónce's privilege by describing the way he moves through the world as he pleases; his privilege affords him the choice about whether to participate in society even on a whim if it suits him. In his first interaction with his wife, before she says anything, Leónce's perspective is further scrutinized through the narrator's use of free indirect prose, explaining that Leónce stood "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" because she got a sunburn at the beach. He can smoke, gamble, and choose his company, yet, as the narrator incisively explains, he believes his wife to

be a piece of property under his command. This was not an unusual assumption for a married man during the late nineteenth century or even later; however the narrator's use of free indirect discourse makes Leónce's sexist tendencies apparent to the reader within the first few pages of the book. Although the patriarchal hierarchy of the Pontellier household reflects unspoken social norms, open discussion of systems of social domination was taboo and sometimes even illegal. Chopin resists these gender norms yet evades direct confrontation with such taboos by using a feminist narrator who describes Leónce's attitudes in order to solicit the reader's scrutiny of his behavior.

Along with exposing Leónce's unspoken misogynistic thoughts, the narrator focuses on how he manifests such beliefs in his home. The narrator carefully describes the details of the Pontellier home; Leónce maintains control over everything:

Mr. Pontellier was very fond of walking about his house examining its various appointments and details, to see that nothing was amiss. He greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his, and derived genuine pleasure from contemplating a painting, a statuette, a rare lace curtain—no matter what—after he had bought it (41).

The narrator's observations focus on the way Leónce lords over the house then leaves it to his wife and servants to maintain: he enjoys the power of his possessions. His interest in interior décor like rare lace curtains does not conform to Anglo American conventions of masculinity, but just as the narrator leads us to imagine Leónce as a man with discerning tastes, she clarifies that the actual items matter less to Leónce than the fact that he bought them and therefore they are his. Chopin's description of the Pontellier home reflects the socially charged architectural changes around the city at the time. As New

Orleans's boundaries expanded during the late nineteenth century, wealthy creole people built fancy mansions on the Esplanade in an attempt to compete with the similarly opulent Anglo-American homes on St. Charles Avenue (O'Rourke 168). Chopin relies on the historical cultural tension between white Creoles and Anglo-Americans in New Orleans to create the appearance of cultural distance between her primarily Anglo-American readers and the white characters in *The Awakening*, allowing her greater opportunity to critique not just the gender but also class and race hierarchies that operated in both Creole and Anglo-American societies. The narrator engages readers with the slightly unrecognizable reflection of their own societies through highly detailed description of the Creole household. Critic Michael Gilmore attends to the material details of the novel, arguing that "the exquisite, detailed rendering of life among the affluent is what gives the book its distinctive texture, and Edna's growing sense of entrapment does not prevent her from taking pleasure in many aspects of leisure-class existence" (63). However, Gilmore overlooks the material luxuries of the house that remind Edna of Leónce's smothering ownership. The narrator carefully chooses how to describe the effect of all the costly goods filling the house, clarifying that they were "perfect after the conventional type. ... The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared upon the table were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier" (41). Edna does not enjoy the conventional material perfection of the Pontellier house, nor does she find it inspiring or beautiful. The narrator's use of the word "generous" to describe the way that Leónce purchases fine goods to adorn his own house for his own satisfaction offers further insight into his view of marriage. Rather than supporting the popular idea that the house and its fineries remain

a woman's sphere, the narrator makes it uncomfortably clear that the privilege of being a man like Leonce does not simply mean buying a household and everything in it, but controlling the people in it. Further, Leonce's attention to material goods degrades rather than elevates the aesthetic value of the house; the novel echoes with Morris's harsh description of the vacuous décor of the privileged:

Soon there will be nothing left except the lying dreams of history, the miserable wreckage of our museums and picture-galleries, and the carefully guarded interiors of our aesthetic drawing-rooms, unreal and foolish, fitting witnesses of the life of corruption that goes on there, so pinched and meagre and cowardly, with its concealment and ignoring, rather than restraint of, natural longings ("The Aims of Art" 91).

Morris concludes his critique with a plea for the value of natural longings, which he considered an innate human connection with both the beauty of the natural environment as well as sensual desires. To Morris, highly curated interior surroundings that focus on visual beauty rather than considering the artist and the materials destroy the potential for human connection. In Morris's eyes, a drawing room like the one in the Pontellier home cannot be beautiful because its décor reflects the desperation and corruption of consumerism. The corrupted home that Leonce provides defines the limitations of Edna's life. In the absence of meaningful relationships with any other characters, Edna's first expressions of selfhood appear in the novel as transgressive relationships with her physical environment.

The narrator further critiques the oppressive characteristics of the bourgeois domestic environment by focusing on the power dynamic between the privileged white

creole society and their African American servants in the Pontellier household. During a scene in which Edna cannot yet confront Leónce but feels stifled by her imprisonment in his household, she retires to her beautiful “rich and picturesque” bedroom, and during her moment of self-reflection, looked out the window “seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met her moods” (Chopin 43). Edna temporarily becomes enraged with her surroundings; tearing up her handkerchief, stomping on her wedding ring, and finally breaking a glass vase on the floor (43). With Leónce and Edna’s children gone, an African American maid alone witnesses Edna’s emotions. Edna tells her not to clean up the mess, but the nameless maid cleans the glass and hands Edna back her ring anyway (43). Edna’s small outburst does nothing to disrupt the household and the social rules within. Edna shares a moment of emotional intimacy with her maid, who like her, spends her days trapped in the house and beholden to the interior environment that Leónce controls. Compared to her liberated vacation at Grand Isle at the beginning of the novel, life at home suffocates Edna.

The narrator challenges Leónce’s right to authority over Edna by depicting their house as the problem. In spite of the fact that Edna enjoys time alone with the young middle-class society Creole Robert LeBrun on the beach during her vacation earlier in the novel, when she is at home Leónce condescendingly explains to her that she has an obligation to remain there unless she has a “proper” justification: “Why, my dear, I should think you'd understand by this time that people don't do such things; ... If you felt that you had to leave home this afternoon, you should have left some suitable explanation for your absence” (Chopin 42). For Leónce, what Edna does outside the house matters less than the fact that she dares to leave without an explanation. The narrator represents

Leónce as a man who considers his ownership and control of the house analogous to his relationship with his wife; her thoughts and desires matter less to him than her availability to comfort their children and please him. But as Edna increasingly discovers her desire to develop her own distinct identity, she increasingly refuses her sexual obligations to Leónce and instead sneaks out onto a porch where she can sense the outdoors and come to grips with her own feelings:

she slipped her bare feet into a pair of satin mules at the foot of the bed and went out on the porch, where she sat down in the wicker chair and began to rock gently to and fro. . . . There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night. (Chopin 6)

Edna does not yet have her own voice to resist Leónce, the gentle sound of the chair, the soft hoot of an owl, and the “voice” of the sea” must speak for her; according to the narrator the song they sing reflects a mournful and melancholy mood. The environment takes on the character of Edna’s emotionally, creatively, and physically imprisoned situation. Thus far in the novel, the narrator offers us access to Leónce through free indirect discourse, but leaves Edna’s interiority more obscure and tied to her surroundings with descriptions of her whereabouts and how she interacts with her environment. Edna can’t or won’t wander as far as the beach, but from what little personal space she has on the porch, she can breathe.

The narrator briefly describes Edna’s developing identity through the description of her connection with the melancholy environment on the dark porch, setting up the reader to interpret Leónce’s intrusion as a threat not just to her independence, but to her



sense of self. During Edna's moment of peaceful self-reflection, Leonce urges her to return to the house, and when she refuses, he expresses his dominance by contaminating the clear air and scenic view. Rather than go back inside to bed, he ruins the momentary relief that Edna experiences when she catches a breath of fresh night air on the porch by filling the porch with his cigar smoke:

He drew up the rocker, hoisted his slippers on the rail, and proceeded to smoke a cigar. He smoked two cigars; then he went inside and drank another glass of wine. Mrs. Pontellier again declined to accept a glass when it was offered to her. Mr. Pontellier once more seated himself with elevated feet, and after a reasonable interval of time smoked some more cigars. (21)

Edna has but a moment's peace to contemplate her sad existence and listen to the sea before Leonce comes outside to insist she return and then passive aggressively takes up as much space as possible on the porch. With his feet up on the rail, his several glasses of wine, and at least three cigars, Leonce claims the porch by spreading his already dominating presence out so that Edna cannot so much as breathe freely without a reminder of the limits of her suffocating marriage.

Their simmering power struggle erupts after a vacation to the nearby Grand Isle, a "kind of summer place where middle-class white women like Edna could escape their domestic responsibilities and revel in the lax gender rules that encouraged increased physical and emotional independence" (Parmiter 1). More than just the material and logistical ease that summer homes offered women normally expected to maintain a larger house, Edna's surroundings metaphorically inspire her growing self awareness: "On the boat trip to the island, Robert prompts Edna to a considerably more sensual fantasy than

that of the roaming spirit: he proposes a trip to Grande Terre” (Franklin 517). She cannot indulge such fantasies, but her first considerations of what such independence would mean make Edna acutely aware of her complete lack of love for Leónce.

As Edna develops her artistic identity, she turns to attachments to the people in her extended social circle. During a late-night gathering in the Pontellier house, Robert introduces Edna to the eccentric and homely Mademoiselle Reisz. The creoles consider Reisz a quirky aging piano player, yet the younger Edna responds to her with emotion. Edna’s imagination and artistic drives are related aspects of her personality, as a result she responds powerfully to Mademoiselle Reisz’s music with the feeling that the “very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body” (Chopin 22). The narrator again uses ocean analogies to express Edna’s growing sense of herself as a creative, sensual being. While Edna shuns the sexual advances of her husband, Reisz’s eccentric personality and impassioned piano-playing move Edna to a nearly orgasmic sense of her self. As Judith Fetteley and Marjorie Pryse explain, Reisz represents a queer artistic life as “alternative to Edna Pontellier’s oppressive marriage” (164). While the novel explores the desire Edna develops for Robert Lebrun, whose presence creates “throbbings of desire,” it also emphasizes that for Edna, love, sexuality, and art are inseparable (Chopin 25). However, before she can access those aspects of herself, she must extract herself from the suffocating domestic environment of her home. Mademoiselle Reisz acts as a role model in refusing domestic conventions: the narrator makes a point to describe the uniqueness of Reisz’s apartment:

There were plenty of windows in her little front room. They were for the most part dingy, but as they were nearly always open it did not make so much

difference. They often admitted into the room a good deal of smoke and soot; but at the same time all the light and air that there was came through them. From her windows could be seen the crescent of the river, the masts of ships and the big chimneys of the Mississippi steamers. A magnificent piano crowded the apartment. (50)

The narrator describes the simplicity and even grittiness of the apartment. But, each time she mentions some limitation of the space, she couples it with a romantic description of the freedom of an impoverished artist's life. The dingy windows stay open, the soot and smoke don't stain the appeal of the place because air and light come inside. The narrator attends to the details of the place just as she did with the Pontellier household; the small, rough apartment rests above a restaurant yet has an expansive view of the river, and the big ships coming and going. Mademoiselle Reisz lives in a place with minimal economic or social obligations attached to it. It exemplifies Morris's sentiment that "simplicity of life, even the barest, is not misery, but the very foundation of refinement" (*Hopes and Fears for Art* 379). Morris challenges the ethical and aesthetic assumptions of leisure-class luxury, favoring simplicity as the more authentically artistic way of life. What in this light might appear shortcomings of Reisz's apartment compared to the highly decorated Pontellier house make it more permeable and less demanding as a household. By comparison, the extensive curtains, doors, entryways, and other interior elements in Leónce's house demand constant attention and surround the inhabitants of the house with a decadent and far less permeable façade. Andrew DelBlanco describes Edna's pursuit of selfhood in the context of her physical surroundings: "Edna begins to understand that she can modify, if not transform, the scenes of her existence. Rooms, views, streets,

furnishings—in the full sense of the word, décor—are the realm of experience whose significance had once been lost on her” (95). Since Leónce defines Edna as a fixture of the interior décor of his house, in her desire for self-redefinition she rebels against his consuming aesthetic choices. When Edna drifts away from her family home, the bohemian, homely, and “self-assertive” Mademoiselle Reisz influences her most (Chopin 21).

The narrator describes Edna’s “awakening” first through depicting Leónce and his house as suffocating then offering the creative life as the escape. When Edna decides to develop her inner life through painting, she convinces Leónce to allow her an Atelier. With this studio, Edna seeks the arts and crafts creative ideal: autonomy from the stifling excesses of a life of luxury in favor of a more direct connection with her environment, which she considers more valuable than the time and resources to paint because it offers her a new identity. For Morris, art revival responded to uninspiring and unjust social conditions: “those who look widest at things and deepest into them are quite dissatisfied with the present state of the arts, as they are also with the present condition of society” (“Aims of Art” 46). Edna awakens artistically, emotionally, and sexually. Her need to paint and surround herself with creative people goes beyond an excuse to evade her house and husband; it becomes a crucial aspect of her changing identity. In order to attempt a compromise between her need to express herself as an artist and her social obligations to Leónce, she requests an Atelier in her house with Leónce:

“I feel like painting,” answered Edna. “Perhaps I shan't always feel like it.”

“Then in God's name paint! but don't let the family go to the devil. There's Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything

else go to chaos. And she's more of a musician than you are a painter.” (Chopin 46)

While Edna yearns to live more like Mademoiselle Reisz, an impassioned and odd single woman, Leónce chooses instead to compare her to the privileged Adele Ratignolle, the wife of a Creole society man who can play the piano at parties. As Xianfeng Mou observes, Chopin “does not want to scare off her readers by directly giving Edna a separate physical, spiritual, or artistic space. She writes cryptically, shepherding Edna until Edna comes to understand artistic creation and courage” (Mou 116). It would be unconvincing or prematurely alienating to begin the novel with Edna’s immediate departure from her stifling existence. Her struggle to articulate her desires contrasts to Leónce’s increasing conservatism. While Leónce’s comparison between Edna and Mademoiselle Ratignolle betrays the widening gap between his view of the world and Edna’s, he correctly observes that Edna’s artistic goals will come at the expense of her conventional wifely commitments. Edna’s attention focuses on aspects of life that Morris calls “wider and deeper”; she seeks to paint as an expression of her transforming discontent with her world (“The Aims of Art” 205).

What the narrator refers to as Edna’s “awakening” and “self-discovery,” Leónce considers a near mental breakdown. In search of psychological intervention, he consults a doctor named Dr. Mendelet who suspects Edna’s involvement with other transgressive women and asks Leónce if “she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings? My wife has been telling me about them” (53). While Dr. Mendelet’s comment belittles the significance of women’s intellectualism and spiritual pursuits, the narrator conveys that some women seek more

from life than the comforts of a well-adorned home and a family. As Helen Goodman explains, the fact that Edna chooses art demonstrates the “growing confidence she feels in her artistic talents as a result provides the foundation upon which she probes other of life’s possibilities” (13). Yet Leónce chastises Edna for her desire to paint rather than maintain his house full of things and their children. He tells her that it is “the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (Chopin 46). He creates a dichotomy between household and atelier, not adequately considering that this dichotomy also forces Edna to choose between having a sense of self and being part of her family.

The narrator’s position supports Edna’s growing feminist sense of agency by describing the conditions of Creole society and life with Leónce in a way that makes them intolerable. In spite of Leónce’s misguided attempts to contain her and against the advice of her Creole society friends, Edna decides to leave her husband and children to pursue an artist’s life. She decides to move from their large decadent house to the pigeon house. As their marriage dissolves, Leónce leaves more and more often yet continues to insist that Edna keep her responsibility to his house. Leónce’s letter to Edna disapproving of her plan to live in the pigeon house includes “the most minute instructions—to a well-known architect concerning the remodeling of his home. . . . And in an incredibly short time the Pontellier house was turned over to the artisans” (Chopin 3)<sup>27</sup>. Leónce’s plan to appropriate a more radical and forward-thinking aesthetic suggests that he cares little about his emotional and physical relationship to Edna yet he expects that since she is his wife, she will be a fixture at his home. He can only concede to her unhappiness by

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<sup>27</sup> A pigeon house is an Arts and Crafts style bungalow

transforming the appearance of the home. Edna's awakening suggests that such superficial changes in architecture ultimately fail to change her living conditions; by the time that she establishes an artistic identity Leónce's attempt to contain her with the right type of house no longer appeal to her. She leaves the luxuries of that life to live in a humble place of her own: the "pigeon house" stood behind a locked gate, and a shallow parterre that had been somewhat neglected. There was a small front porch, upon which a long window and the front door opened" (Chopin 74). The smallness and simplicity of the house offers a convenient escape less aesthetically beholden to Leónce's style of mass-produced décor; such a place represents a "middle-class woman's dream—systematically planned, filled with labor-saving appliances and stripped of nonessential dust-catching adornments" (Robertson 340). The small shallow parterre, or contained garden bed, requires little attention since its state of disrepair is the status quo when Edna arrives. Rather than the highly curated, stifling Pontellier household, the pigeon house appears as a place of openness and creative opportunity.

Permeability and openness in design suggests a connection with "nature."

Chopin's rendering of Edna's liberated relation to nature resonates with the views of Arts and Crafts artists:

In creating a relationship to nature distinctions between the house and the garden would often be blurred. Devised to extend the house such as piazzas, sleeping porches, terraces, patios, lattice work, planters, window boxes, and pergolas would bring nature and the occupants into close contact" (Wilson 102).

The ambience of a roughly kept front garden has a strangely inviting quality for an artist seeking to establish herself; either she might continue to neglect the yard with no

consequence, or she might invest herself in the modest project of improving it in her own way, with her own hands. Even though the house is small, it has some of the open characteristics of Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment: more windows and doors than walls. The simple cottage or bungalow plays an important role for Arts and Crafts architects since it symbolizes simplicity and offers material opportunities for single women and working class people to live with greater independence. Morris's ideals focus on the small and practical home:

My extravagant hope is that people will some day learn something of art, and so long for more, and will find, as I have, that there is no getting it save by general acknowledgement of the right of every man to have fit work to do in a beautiful home. (*Hopes and Fears for Art* 216)

As Morris argues, the excesses of a large, opulent house impede true understanding of art, and more significantly, of a meaningful life. He criticizes bourgeois opulence while also arguing that those who suffer in poverty can only know art if they are allowed their right to a beautiful house. The bungalow is a design that seeks to solve this aesthetic and social problem. As if following Morris's advice, Edna sets out to re-define herself in an unconventional domestic context as a woman living in a small house of her own design as the beginning of her artistic life.

The pigeon house offers Edna an escape from the scrutiny of privileged society. Leonce expects her to remain wed to his house like another of his possessions, and the privileged creole community upholds his expectations. When she seeks to free herself by moving out, it inspires her with



a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. (Chopin 76)

As Edna moves away from society into the simpler life in the pigeon house, she has new eyes to see the world, to understand herself. Her aesthetic sensibilities and sense of self grow simultaneously; as Joseph Church argues, “Chopin understands that ideally art works for the greater good to bring knowledge—especially self knowledge, self-clarification—to both artist and audience” (20). The spiritual idea the narrator describes results from Edna connecting with the “undercurrents of life”; she isn’t escaping by moving away from her husband and her cloistered life but instead embraces the inherently spiritual experience of relating to the world without so many social barriers in her way. This romantic ideal of the artist being unencumbered by society and expressing an intimate connection with the essence of life resonates with Morris’s description of meaningful art: “Just as art can flourish among oppressed peoples can create hope, art that has really been gripped by superstition, or by luxury, it has straightway begun to sicken under that grip” (Morris *Hopes and Fears for Art* 10). For Morris, art is not significantly hindered by oppression and limited resources but by a life of luxury and excess. He finds superstition a frivolous, fearful departure from spirituality, a socially-constructed set of beliefs rather than the more significant relationship with art and nature. Accordingly, *The Awakening’s* narrator describes Edna’s moving from a life of luxury and superstition into an artistic, sensual one (by Morris’s definition).

As Chopin's narrator develops Edna's sense of self, it becomes clear that her daydreams of an autonomous and awakened life expand beyond the scope of an atelier or house, beautiful, simple, or otherwise. She follows her desires to the openness of the outdoors. During one of her many long days at the beach, she recalls her childhood in Kentucky:

First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. (Chopin 14)

Edna remembers herself first as the same person, then the little girl she used to be becomes another person who she describes as an almost mythic distant memory. For her, learning to swim served not as a new experience but as an act of remembering a side of herself that she left long before her place as a wife and mother. She felt strong and deliberate while moving through what she recalls as a place of infinite possibility. This passage invokes Edna's association between bodies of water and the freedom she seeks by recalling the feeling of swimming through the sea of grass with no inhibition in her movements or vision. Her mood continues to embody themes of spacious bodies of water that for her symbolize sensual bodily experiences and an immersion in natural, creative inspiration.

Edna's artistic awakening and increasing desire to immerse herself in the openness of the beach and the sea correspond with her sexual awakening. While vacationing at Grand Isle, Edna becomes aware of her alternative desires, acknowledging to herself that she "was not a mother-woman.... They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (Chopin 8). Edna resists losing herself to mothering or wifely roles, instead enjoying the beach and nurturing her sexual desire for Robert. She adopts "a role of individuality and sexual freedom.... That provides a more fulfilling, developed sense of identity" (Gray 56-57). She physically connects to the natural landscape around her to make it possible to imagine the life she desires through symbolically more liberating surroundings. She loosens "the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (Chopin 12). Edna cannot avoid the allure of the artistic free lover's life, with a "sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (Chopin 12). When Edna perceives her narrow surroundings more carefully in search of beauty, she feels "as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (Chopin 68). Sexuality is not simply a vice or fleeting urge for Edna, it is part of her self-definition as a liberated artist.

Chopin's analogy between the sensual, beautiful qualities of the ocean and the creatively satisfying aspects of sexual freedom invoke the "sensuous, passionate quality of Morris's love for 'the earth'" (Mann 316). Morris's love poem "Love is Enough" describes the Arts and Crafts ideal that unifies uninhibited love and nature:

Love is enough: though the World be a-waning,  
And the woods have no voice but the voice of complaining,

Though the sky be too dark for dim eyes to discover  
The gold-cups and daisies fair blooming thereunder,  
Though the hills be held shadows, and the sea a dark wonder,  
And this day draw a veil over all deeds pass'd over,  
Yet their hands shall not tremble, their feet shall not falter;  
The void shall not weary, the fear shall not alter

These lips and these eyes of the loved and the lover (*Love is Enough* 42)

Morris employs the ballad, a historically middlebrow communalistic poetic form, to express his philosophy that lovers can experience the wonder of the world<sup>28</sup>. He resists any reference to gender, to marriage, or to the roles or rituals that define polite society relationships, and instead writes of the taboo “lovers” relationship as the bond that can triumph over even the vastest darkness of the earth. The poem juxtaposes unusual subjects for a love poem; the kiss of two lovers stands out against the backdrop of the mysterious and apocalyptic forces of the world. Morris’s poem invokes a romantic yet tragic ideal that even if the darkness of the night or the vastness of the sea eclipse human existence, love is enough to make the world beautiful and meaningful. To lovers what would be a terrifying world becomes wonderful, in spite of its uncertainty. Edna’s uncertainty about herself yields to her desire for creative and sensual experiences of the open air and sea at Grand Isle. The narrator describes the dark and rustic environment, full of

strange, rare odors abroad—a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp,  
new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms

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<sup>28</sup> The poem is a ballad/musical interlude he wrote in his play *Love is Enough* published in 1897 by Kelmscott Press.

somewhere near. But the night sat lightly upon the sea and the land. There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and the softness of sleep (Chopin 23)

For the narrator, like for Morris, though darkness exists it doesn't cast a shadow on the life of the lover and artist who can dismiss the trappings of society to embrace the mystery and openness of the natural world. When the narrator finds the smell of Grand Isle strange and rare and the moonlight mysterious and shadowless, it foreshadows Edna's realization that she can only thrive in physically limitless environments.

As Edna increasingly lives like woman artist, invoking the radical ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement, she defines herself based on her awakened sexual and romantic desires. However, her muse and object of desire, Robert, ultimately fails to comprehend true love as Edna and Morris understand it. While Edna seeks greater emotional connections and independence through a simpler, more open home that nurtures her artistic identity, Robert still wants to entice her to accept a life in a conventional marriage with a conventionally gendered household. During much of the novel, Edna idealizes Robert as the person who can affirm her need for a passionate love unencumbered by bourgeois society norms. Tragically, Robert cannot imagine a relationship with Edna without picturing her in the domestic context: "Robert had never known the house, and looked at it with interest. "I never knew you in your home," he remarks to Edna, who responds curtly "I am glad you did not"' (Chopin 73). While Edna dreams of a free relationship with Robert, outside of marriage the only romantic relationship he finds meaningful is a conventional domestic one. Donald Pizer posits that Leónce and Robert ultimately share the same values, believing that "love is not

unbounded and free in its expression but must rather exist within the social norms and expectations of the community” (11). Edna’s beguiling ways inspire a kind of love in Robert that the narrator describes as a “longing to hold her and keep her” (Chopin 87). While both Leónce and Robert dine out, venture to Mexico if they please, go to dinner clubs and leave without letters or warning, they both desire that Edna will remain a wife attached to a home. Mou finds that the narrator’s use of free indirect discourse establishes the growing tension between Edna’s “emotional, spiritual, and artistic awakening” and the social norms that the men in her life reinforce (104). While Robert clamors for Edna to settle into a conventional life, she continues to awaken to wilder and more transgressive impulses. The narrator describes Edna’s growing belief in liberated passions, considering “the motives which no doubt explained Robert's reserve. They were not insurmountable;...they could not hold against her own passion” (83). Although their romance develops on the beach, in boats, on walks along the shore, Robert ultimately abandons swimming lessons, symbolically choosing safety rather than embrace Edna’s new life (23). When Robert fails to commit to a life of love and freedom, Edna’s dream of an artistic identity founded on free love and a perfect Arts and Crafts home fails. Yet, she refuses to return to a life of aesthetic and sexual repression.

The narrator holds up the Arts and Crafts ideals of beautiful surroundings and passionate love, only to describe the circumstances that make free love and an artistic life impossible for Edna. Robert considers such liberated desires insane, lamenting the time when he indulged Edna’s fantasies: " I was demented, dreaming of wild, impossible things, recalling men who had set their wives free " (Chopin 86). While Robert might travel to Mexico on a whim, decide whether or not to marry or where to live, even decide

who to have an affair with and not suffer many consequences, he cannot fathom Edna having the same freedoms. He spends more time away from Edna than with her, leaving a final letter explaining to her that he loves her: “Good-by—because I love you.” (Chopin 90). Although Robert justifies his rejection by ironically calling it love, his definition of love is to uphold white creole social expectations about sexuality and gender even though Edna wants to be free of them. While Chopin explores the character of a woman who loses herself to passion, creative inspiration, and rejection of social codes rather than compliance with oppression, the social world in the novel will not permit such a liberation; “Edna realizes that the two men, even Robert who claims to be in love with her, view her as an object” (Gray 71). Robert’s rejection exemplifies the tragedy of moral constraints that made a sexually-liberated, artistic life impossible for women.

Edna embodies the tension between the politically venerated independent woman and the stigmatized sexually liberated free lover. Early feminists like Chopin were often divided between their suffragist predecessors and an increasingly puritanical, moralistic agenda among mainstream feminists toward temperance and women’s sexual repression. The narrator commits to feminism from the outset of the novel; even before Edna understands her own character, the narrator explains her yearnings for passion and creativity and her contempt for Léonce’s controlling sexism. Erik Margraf describes this point of view as distinctly feminist, arguing that “Chopin set out to revise the dominant conviction, cherished by men and women alike, that women are constitutionally passive, submissive, and lacking sexual appetite” (104). Edna becomes less and less passive about her life throughout the book, explaining to Arobin during a passionate moment of her desire to re-invent herself: “I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think—try

to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (Chopin 66). While Edna frees herself of the notion that shirking social expectations is evil, she can never actualize her love for Robert since he and everyone else she knows are beholden to a repressive society. Edna’s musings about her rebellion from gender codes imply that she might not fall into any established category of woman according to the norms of her society. As John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman observe in their history of American sexuality, “By the 1890s, social purity had become a broad-based national movement that included suffragists, temperance workers, and clergy from every denomination” (156). Edna’s struggle to understand her sexual impulses occurs in the context of such debates among women whose visions of the New Woman grew more diverse at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, “Since the wife’s role was primarily controlled by her husband, the adulteress’s transgression is a symbol of social destruction and anarchy” (Higgins 196). Edna has some characteristics of an extremely radical woman in her transgressions, characteristics so radical she cannot develop a sense of self in relation to her society. In the absence of relationships that support her desires for creativity and sensuality, she allows herself to melt into her surroundings, gravitating to the outdoor environments that nurture her need for beauty and space.

At the conclusion of the novel, Edna symbolically immerses herself in sensuality and limitlessness by nakedly swimming as far from shore as she can before disappearing into the ocean. Most scholarship about *The Awakening* focuses critical attention on the tragedy of Edna’s drowning (Martin 14). Peter Ramos considers the ending a warning to readers about what can happen to a protagonist who is unwilling to conform to social



roles “in favor of an enticing yet ever-elusive freedom” (147). He argues that Edna gives up during a historical moment when many women went on living and persisting in their more gradual pursuit of the freedoms their society would allow. Donald Ringe considers Edna’s death in the sea as the price she pays for seeking escape, escape that he argues completely dissolves her agency and identity (587). In his argument about *The Awakening’s* naturalist tendencies, Erik Margraf argues that “naturalists believed that a human being is substantially determined by its milieu, both exterior and interior” (Margraf 101). Even optimistic scholars of *The Awakening* propose that death for Edna is the “only escape from the struggles of a human existence” (Glendening 48). Rosemary Franklin similarly argues, “The magnetic Gulf of Mexico beckons her to a world of dreams and then destruction” (510). These scholars all interpret Edna’s final act as the ultimate failure of her ideals. However, at the end of the novel, the narrator focuses only on Edna and all the ways that she symbolically sheds her social milieu because it oppresses her. Her disappearance has a critical force beyond the text.

Edna’s final decision formally enacts the social problem that stifled women like her faced, denied access to the kind of life that would allow them to fully develop an identity as emotionally, creatively, and sexually alive. For a moment prior to her disappearance in the Gulf of Mexico, Edna enjoys the kind of sensual, liberated, and imaginative sense of agency she craves:

But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her (92).

Edna is at her most physically and emotionally aware of herself at the moment that she takes her clothes off at the beach. She finally actualizes the kind of sensual, artistic identity she craves when she stands naked as the Venus de Milo, the embodiment of free love and art. Rather than enjoy intimacy with a lover against the backdrop of an awesome and expansive environment as in Morris's poem, Edna completely avoids relationships of any kind since they all deny her some crucial aspect of her life. In her last moments, Edna finds her place in a vast power of nature a meaningful alternative to the stifled life of a society woman.

The narrator of *The Awakening* concludes the novel with Edna's last sensory experiences of the world as a feminist statement not just that Edna cannot exist in the world of the novel, but that the form of the novel cannot exist without her. In the last line of the novel, Edna and the narrator are closer than at any other moment: "There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (93). The narrator does not describe Edna's death or continue the narrative to explain what the world is like when she is gone. The analogous texts of failed women's independence and adultery, *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, both describe the death of the protagonist and its impact on the other characters. Yet by contrast, Edna's final perceptions shift the narrator's previously omniscient perspective to one identical to Edna's, the narrator sees and feels only what Edna experiences. The narrator's disappearance with Edna terminates the novel both literally and symbolically rather than allow it to continue once it becomes clear that free women artists cannot exist in the world it portrays. This formal statement expresses Chopin's clearest protest against aesthetics emptied of their politics. The title *The Awakening* refers to Edna's developing sense of self, but also refers to an awakening

in the audience's awareness to the impossibility of Edna's—and Chopin's—radical aesthetic ideals in a world that prevents so many women from accessing the autonomy they need to truly live.

Chopin's poignant conclusion to *The Awakening* resists the ways that gradual political reform or commodified arts and crafts aesthetics undermine feminist aims. *The Awakening* imagines a woman embracing ideals about an artistic life and beautiful, inspiring surroundings who has no material or psychological means to transform her situation adequately. But she will not settle for individuality at the cost of her ideals. At the end of the nineteenth century, the reforms Chopin foresaw for women approached as “a new public femininity displaces domestic femininity, changing the coordinates of individuality” (Gillian Brown 197). Edna lives as a woman of leisure and luxury, yet she cannot over the course of her life become an artisan or craftsperson with the autonomy to design and build an independent identity and life so she destroys the narrative of the novel just as she destroyed the decorative vase in the Pontellier home when she realized that its vacuous aesthetics came at a great price. *The Awakening* unsettles the dream of the liberated Arts and Craftswoman as a viable critique of the individualistic capitalist forces that commodified Morris's creative productions as meaningless decoration for the privileged, still locking women into stifled lives.

## CHAPTER V

### THE UNRAVELING OF REGIONALIST SELF-FASHIONING

#### IN MARY WILKINS FREEMAN'S *THE PORTION OF LABOR*

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman is best known as a regionalist author who writes of independent, resourceful New England women. Her publications appeared in magazines and continued to appear in *Harper's Monthly* over the course of a career that began in 1883 and lasted more than forty years (Eppard 268). She primarily wrote short stories and her prolific work made her one of the most widely read American authors of her time. Feminist interpretations of her literature began in the 1970s and questions of gender remain central to the scholarship. Carol Holly summarizes Freeman's feminism by arguing that Freeman's short fiction subtly resists women's gender norms and confronts the ways that communities enforce them to allow women characters a little more space to find themselves (95)<sup>29</sup>. In comparison to the extensive scholarly attention given to Freeman's more popular short stories of headstrong women, few scholars or reviewers take on *The Portion of Labor*, known for its lengthy emphasis on the material world of a factory town, the protagonist's political rhetoric, and her regrettable submission to heterosexual marriage with the quintessential capitalist. A sad testament to industrialism's corrosive effect on New England local color, the novel failed to captivate most readers and critics in the same way Freeman's quainter short stories did; regionalist scholar Donna Campbell explains that "*The Portion of Labor* is not an extended local

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<sup>29</sup> Fetterly and Pryse's *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* offers the most comprehensive context for Mary Wilkins Freeman's feminism alongside other many major regionalist authors, citing the "regionalist standpoint" as the basis for their feminist perspective.

color story but a regional novel set in a mill town....Freeman's portrayal of the laboring poor" (Campbell 155). The novel was written during a time when naturalists railed against regionalism, femininity in literature, and sentimentalism. Unfortunately for artistically ambitious regionalist authors, their professional lives depended on complying with the popular demand for these characteristics; it was not possible as a woman author making a living primarily from women readers to be a member of a male-defined literary elite, and "Freeman herself understood the significance of these class distinctions that debarred her from the ranks of high culture" (Blum 87). As Edward Foster argues, the complexity of the novel makes it "Miss Wilkins' most ambitious and least successful novel" (154). *The Portion of Labor* rigorously explores the limits of regionalism as a popular literary category.

In spite of the novel's ambitions, it was not just unpopular with readers of its time, but remains unpopular among critics today. Unlike Freeman's more optimistic feminist regionalism, *The Portion of Labor* exposes the oppressive forces of industrial capitalism that force women into influencing reform "through subordinate alliances with men" (Marchand 70). A year after its publication, a 1902 *Saturday Evening Post* review by Lillian Bell encapsulates the novel's frustrating contradictions: "the book has left me floundering. To my mind it would appear as if Miss Wilkins herself had mercilessly blue-penciled her own free-born creations in order to fit anarchy into a Fifth Avenue setting" (Bell). The few scholars who have taken up the novel wrestle with its formal contradictions: a grim naturalist text with a feminist regionalist narrator who ultimately resigns to a bitter end to the plot. Freeman was the most popular and prolific regionalist author of her time, and her dismantling of regionalist and Arts and Crafts ideals is not a

critique of those forms but a formal resistance to the changing social circumstances that make feminist regionalism impossible in the future. Freeman's reluctant yet well-publicized late-in-life marriage took place around the time she wrote this novel of resignation into capitalism and heterosexuality. Campbell argues that throughout Freeman's fiction she employs the trope of New England self-sacrifice in the service of community, and *The Portion of Labor* is no exception (120). However, while the protagonist Ellen Brewster's sacrifice benefits her biological family, it undermines the communities of working class women and artistic educated women whom she identifies with. W. L. Courtney's 1922 review of the novel observes that "It is not the enduring love of maid and man with which [Freeman] is occupying herself. That is only the excuse for the narrative" (1). Courtney's review suggests that beneath the superficially sentimental and popular romantic plot, *The Portion of Labor* has more complex political and literary potential. Courtney posits that Freeman's narrator presents a sentimental plot in order to justify the themes of political protest to mainstream audiences. However this account does not adequately explain the narrator's position in negotiating the plot and the material surroundings of the novel.

The narrator's knowledge and detailed description of feminine community, housework, textiles, and desire for beautiful surroundings, all reflect Freeman's regionalist style, but the grim naturalistic fatalism about poverty and gender deviate from the escapist idealism in other regionalist texts. Within the hundreds of pages of the novel, a regionalist narrator describes a material world and women's communities that entrap characters in feminine roles through descriptions of the clothing that the characters wear and make. The novel's intensive attention to fashion betrays distinct yet concurrent

themes that would have been obvious to women readers of the time. As early and current critics observe, the novel relies on attention to material surroundings characteristic of naturalist narration, but it does not employ a naturalist determinism at the level of plot until the tragic end; thus the tragic final “twist” makes the novel more poignant in its thesis about industrial capitalism: Ellen comes so close to agency and individualism only to surrender tragically it to an economically inescapable situation.

Although many histories of American naturalism cite Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser as the quintessentially naturalist authors of the turn of the twentieth century, female protagonists and a number of women writers play a significant role in transatlantic naturalist literature (Ainsworth 2007). Ann Douglas concludes her literary history of nineteenth-century American literature with the assertion that literary naturalism responded to the feminization of American culture with the “brute instinct and force” of hypermasculinity (327). Donald Pizer complicates the assumption that naturalism belonged to “crass, youthful, male authors” by observing that these claims were fraught with questionable accusations that naturalism could never be a refined, feminine, or artistic form due to its confrontation with society’s harshness (156). Although Douglas and Pizer define American literary naturalism as a genre concerned with gender, they don’t elaborate on the role that popular regionalists like Freeman played in shaping American naturalism and adapting it to feminist themes and women’s material culture. *The Portion of Labor* portrays the dehumanizing aspects of women’s lives as they struggle for acknowledgement beneath layers of clothing foisted on them by market-driven gender roles. It becomes possible to discern Freeman’s criticism of bourgeois aesthetic ideals by analyzing how *The Portion of Labor* formally anticipates

the cultural shift away from regionalism toward naturalism. Freeman's regionalist narration criticizes the heterosexual femininity defined by industrial capitalism while the naturalist fashion plot concludes that it is inevitable.

Although attention to the social significance of material circumstances is a marker of American naturalism emerging at the turn of the twentieth century, women's regionalism attended to these details earlier. During the time *The Portion of Labor* was written, women had to be aware of fashion and dress fashionably to participate in society and comply with prevailing gender norms. They were constantly besieged with changing trends that they accessed through their social connections and increasingly available fashion magazines. They could no longer rely on local dressmakers and their own handicrafts, but were forced into relationships with a global market of "ready-made clothing" and internationally distributed designs.<sup>30</sup> Fashion and fiction were interconnected cultural productions within the texts of popular stories and within the periodicals that published them. Women readers relied on popular fashion magazines for direction like *Harper's Bazar* (later *Harper's Bazaar*) and *Godey's Lady's Book*. Both magazines had women editors and primarily women contributors during the majority of their publication and featured substantial literature sections, including serial novels, poetry, and short stories. By the last few decades of the nineteenth-century, both *Harper's Bazar* and *Godey's Lady's Book* described and advertised for trends and products spanning the globe. A January 1890 issue of *Harper's Bazar* advertised embroidered home goods from India, fashions from Paris, thread from Scotland,

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<sup>30</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, "as the demand for ready-made clothing grew and further mechanization of the industry occurred, it was increasingly based in large-scale factories" (Peiss 39). Ready-made clothing replaced individually crafted milliner's shops with what we would now call mass-produced designs.



cashmere from Australia, and lambs' wool from Mongolia, to name a few international products. The days of the local dressmaker were all but gone by 1890, as the magazines prove, giving way to a globalized economy of fashion that was highly gendered.

Freeman herself was interested in fashion, attending the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition and visiting Boston with her housemate and companion Mary John to shop; She followed fashion closely....she bought Parisian hats; soft dull silks in brown or rose; and guimps<sup>31</sup> of fine lace to soften the sharp line of her profile. Later she would write: "A man may write something that will live for the sake of something ignoble, and a woman may write something for money with which to buy a French hat." (Foster 61)

Freeman's complicity in the fashion world did not silence her criticism of its impact on the working classes and its gendered implications; her words above expose her slight remorse for the relationship that bourgeois women have with fashion luxuries that don't meaningfully enrich their lives. Freeman did not always celebrate her feminine materialism; women (especially women writers who remained for years unmarried like Freeman) were socially pressured to be fashionable, which meant relying on an international marketplace instead of one's own homemade goods. Freeman projects naturalism onto her protagonist Ellen Brewster, who abandons her interest in writing in order to marry comfortably. This feminine materialism was defined by what Lori Merish refers to as "benevolent' care taking and 'willing ' dependency --suited to a liberal-capitalist social order that privileged individual autonomy and, especially, private property ownership" (3). Freeman confronted the dilemma that women faced in defining themselves more freely with the financial resources to procure fashionable clothing yet

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<sup>31</sup> Detachable lace collars

confining themselves in marriage and work in order to pay for the expense. Such self-definition trapped women. It encouraged them to disconnect themselves from handcrafted items and disregard the labor injustices inevitably involved in clothing production. In a world where capitalism determined so much of women's lives, naturalist fiction refuses to suggest that women might have the choice to escape in a beautiful outdoor environment, and instead exposes the unjust suffering of women characters like Ellen, Fanny, and Eva who lack agency at the outset of the novel and are then caught in "plots of decline"(Fleissner 6). The women spiral downward as their environment compels them to invest in their own diminishing agency.

As a result of fashion's centrality to women's self-definition, Freeman and most women of her era in the United States would have had a particular knowledge of fabric, sewing, and needlework of many kinds as well as understanding what different trends and fashions meant about someone's class status; "learning to sew and read textiles was a standard element of women's formal and informal education, in all classes" (Kortsch 33). The work of writing and the work of creating fashionable dress were not mutually exclusive for Freeman and her literary peers. While they primarily consumed popular fashion, their feminist and intellectual communities gave them access to fashion reform aesthetics and politics. Oscar Wilde maintained the intersection of literature, fashion, and politics during his 1882 tour throughout the United States promoting his interpretation of Ruskin's aesthetics as they applied to fashion. He helped popularize the tea gown as a beautiful and practical garment (Fischer 163). Fashion remained the focus of philosophical conversations, but Arts and Crafts ideals no longer offered women alternatives to a world in which fashion determined one's fate, marked social class,

rewarded those who complied with feminine norms, and drew negative attention to women who deviated from the norm.

While women's literary regionalism often portrays supportive communities of women telling stories while they hand sew quilts, lace, and other decorative crafts, as in Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* represents the class tensions that strain women's abilities to maintain such a life. During the time she wrote *The Portion of Labor*, she moved from a queer life sharing a house with Mary Wales for nearly twenty years to a widely publicized marriage to Doctor Charles Freeman. Refusing to marry, she endured constant scrutiny for her avoidance of marriage and when she settled for her late in life marriage, she soon after had to have her entitled husband committed for alcoholism. During that time of her life, Freeman took sedatives every night to cope with her aversion to her husband (Glasser 40). Her social world and her popularity as a regionalist writer could not protect her from the economic and social pressure to conform.

Freeman's hybrid between naturalism and regionalism in *The Portion of Labor* borrows many aspects of American literary regionalism that she used to validate transgressive women in her short fiction, such as an emphasis on women's community, their gathering and telling stories while working on handicrafts, the recounting of regional customs and ways of thinking. Yet instead of describing unconventional women thriving in the quaint green woods of mythic New England, Freeman in *The Portion of Labor* examines how women's communities suffer and eventually fail under the dismal conditions of industrial capitalism. As globalized fashion, social mobility, and heterosexual rather than homosocial relationships became more centrally important for

young women, regionalism increasingly failed to offer a convincing imaginative space for alternative women to develop their identities.

Freeman's novel unsettles the troubling relationship between women's interior identity and their clothing. Feminist tracts like Julia Cruikshank's 1902 "An Economic View of Fashion" and dress reform editorials like those written by proponents of the short-lived anti-fashion movement in the 1870s had been concerned with fashion's impact on women's health and selfhood several decades prior to the publication of *The Portion of Labor*. The domestic sphere that previously defined women was no longer stable during an era when young women throughout New England were out in public working in factories, shopping, and generally being seen moving around more and more (Robertson 75). A woman's clothes were the exterior container reflecting her interior self, a mark not just of wealth but of morality and femininity. Nearing the turn of the century, decadent and elaborate fabrics, hats, and underclothes weighed women down in sometimes more than fifteen pounds of textiles, covering and containing almost their entire bodies. The physical burden of such garments matched the psychological significance. Freeman's narrator exposes Ellen's acute awareness of the norms of femininity and class; women's "quaint costumes, and old-fashioned coiffures, and simpers were of overwhelming interest to Ellen. Even at that early age she had a perception of the advantages" (182). The narrator describes Ellen's girlish interest in fashion with scrutiny; rather than an innocent or even socially appropriate interest, Ellen notices fashion for the advantages it has to offer her. The young Ellen speaks infrequently, but readers gain greater insight into the novel by investigating how and why she expresses herself as luxuriously as possible through fashion. As Rita Felski explains,

female protagonists like Ellen might decide what to wear, but ultimately they lack agency; their appearance marks them with “acquiescence, dependency, and powerlessness” (137). Freeman intervened in cultural debates about the meaning of fashion in order to unveil the stifling aspects of the “sophistication of women’s literacy in dress culture” (Kortsch 14). That Ellen admires not just adult women’s costumes and hair, but their simpering coyness reveals how she internalizes codes of middle-class femininity that pair fashionable dress with a reticence to speak intelligently.

Although the world of women’s fashion was not without resistance even within the forward-thinking Arts and Crafts Movement, the bourgeois and sexist trappings of the world of women’s fashion were conspicuous. Father of the Arts and Crafts Movement, John Ruskin idealized artisan women and working-women as symbols of his anti-capitalist aesthetics. He acknowledged that the conditions of fashion production and the consumption of luxury items were interconnected, with negative implications for both the woman laborer and the woman consumer. In his most popular book in the US, *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin explains the cost of fashion:

Bitter must be the feelings of many a French woman whose days of luxury and expensive habits are at an end, and whose bills of bygone splendour lie with a heavy weight on her conscience, if not on her purse! With us the evil has spread high and low.... Living beyond one's means became habitual--almost necessary.

(68)

The weight on the conscience Ruskin speaks about refers to the exploitation of laborers, but he goes beyond championing the rights of the working class to criticize the effects of fashion on women consumers. Ruskin was very interested in women’s skills in making

their own goods, and elevated the value of their handiwork alongside conventionally male-dominated fine arts. Yet he chastised women of privilege for their participation in what even he considered a socially necessary world of luxury fashion. Ruskin's most well-known protégée, William Morris, participated in adopting Ruskin's aesthetics to women's fashion, designing and depicting women in artistic dress alongside his Pre-Raphaelite cohort of painters. Early aesthetic dress and dress reform were involved in the world of visual arts, especially the emphasis on naturalism in the arts (Wahl 1). Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti created portraits of working-class beauties clad in non-restrictive, flowing medieval-style gowns. They sought to "educate" working-class women in aesthetics and craft skills in order to enable them to live without the same moral and fashion restrictions as other women. Yet Morris and Rossetti's pressure on the women they admired to live as nonconformists complicated their relationships with other women (Callen 105). Early dress reformists like this anonymous 1874 advocate for the anti-fashion movement hoped that it was possible for "American women to break from the thralldom of foreign fashion-makers, and originate their own modes of dress, according to their own ideas of health, economy, and propriety" (227). Aspiring to give life to Ruskin's similarly lofty ideals, the Pre-Raphaelites recruited women to their artistic enclave and even taught them to sew their own artistic creations (Kortsch 81). Initially, only bohemian and radical women dared wear such non-traditional clothing. However, once actresses and other pop icons of the era appeared in the artistic garb, it became available to wealthy women who had the privilege of procuring it.

In spite of Ruskin and Morris's original intentions, however, artistic dress was rarely economically or socially available to most women and became just another popular

fashion for wealthy New Women<sup>32</sup>. In Freeman's personal life and in the life of her characters, the dream of living as an outwardly queer woman artist was never economically or socially viable. The ideals of Arts and Crafts fashion pressured women to make political decisions about their clothing as a means to liberate themselves from social constraints. Yet as Anna Barron Hunter's 1897 article "The Ethics of Dress" argues, the "woman who disregards fashion runs the risk of losing her influence, even with those who most deplore frivolous and costly display" (Barron 600). As feminist essayist Julia Cruikshank explains in her 1902 article, "Rapid changes of fashion are undoubtedly a great evil...In vain did Ruskin and Morris tell how a woman should dress" (387). Some queer women and woman artists of the era could afford to live outside of heterosexual marriage or avoid having children in order to pursue their goals. But for those with limited economic resources, nonconformity posed a greater risk.<sup>33</sup>

Freeman herself experienced the tension between her desire to live as an independent artist and the social pressure to conform: she held out against marriage and conformity until shortly before she wrote *The Portion of Labor*; she writes her bitter disappointment about her desire to identify with Ruskin and Morris's philosophy and economic and social inability to express herself according to their ideals into the novel. Ellen fails to dress her doll and herself according to her political beliefs. But, prior to her family's total financial ruin, she writes a novel and illustrates it herself, in the fashion of a regionalist book with the same decorative elements as the gilded book covers of Sarah

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<sup>32</sup> "Founded by William Morris in 1875, the company designed and produced their textiles using hand loom jacquard weaving, hand-blocked prints, and vegetable dyes. But the process was expensive, and only the wealthy could afford Morris's celebrated designs. As a result, Morris's goal of merging socialist labor with traditional handiwork went largely unrealized" (Kortsch 83).

<sup>33</sup> A significant number of Arts and Craftswomen either resisted marriage as long as they could or avoided having children, which was increasingly possible if they could afford contraception (Callen 218).

Orne Jewett's friend Sarah Wyman Whitman: "At the head of every chapter of Ellen's novel were birds and flowers done in colored inks, and every chapter had a tail-piece of elegant quirls and flourishes" (446). However, when she finishes her idyllic work of art that reaches beyond the soot-covered brown buildings of her factory town, she finds it "impossible with its pen and ink birds and flowers" (447). Ellen acknowledges that she cannot afford to support herself as a writer and decorator. The aesthetic ideals of a beautiful, natural environment do not allow her meaningful escape; they only remind her of her own desperate lack of agency.

Freeman's narrator criticizes the negative impacts of fashion through recounting Ellen's life as caught between the worlds of bourgeois gender roles and textile and shoe factory workers. While consuming fashion had its material and psychological impact on the women who were compelled to assimilate, its consequences were more serious for the working women in New England who labored in factories to produce shoes and clothing. Ellen constantly faces the trials of class injustice, largely as a result of her life in a factory family. In her 1900 essay "Prisoners of Poverty," Helen Campbell describes the impact of fashion on working women:

as one woman selects, well-pleased, garment after garment, daintily tucked and trimmed and finished beyond any capacity of home sewing, marveling a little that a few dollars can give such lavish return, there arises, from narrow attic and dark, foul basement, and crowded factory, the cry of the women whose life-blood is on these garments. (56)

Through the eyes of a young factory girl from her birth until her marriage, Freeman captures the invisible perspective of working class women in industrial urban New



England. Nearing the end of the nineteenth century, the fashion industry was booming and few women sought out locally made custom-dresses (Kortsch 33). Shoes and clothes were ready-made, with shoemaking being a dominant industry in Essex County, Massachusetts. As early as 1855 in Essex County alone, 20,000 women worked sewing shoes in a vastly female-dominated labor force (Blewett 5). The fashion, shoe, and textile industries employed tens of thousands of women in New England and inspired some of the largest and most dramatic instances of women's union organizing and protest. Labor organizing gained momentum, with a depression beginning in 1893 pressuring them with lower wages and harder work. In response, a regional strike began in 1895 and created the basis for a Boot and Shoe Workers' Union, headed and primarily supported by women members (Blewett 14). Freeman represents the experience of so many women pushed into factory work to support themselves, striving for some readerly sympathies for the struggling Brewster family by using a regionalist narrator that elaborates on their family culture. Unlike some regionalist stories that emphasize certain ethnic groups or cultures, Freeman reflects some of the ethnic diversity among Ellen's family and co-workers; the people of a "gray manufacturing town with its snow-clogged streets, its offensively garish shopping areas, its clanging streetcars, and its population of Yankees, Irish, Swedes, and Slavs, all merged beneath the shadow of the monolithic mills" (Westbrook 96). Just as the mills and factories of the story threaten to eclipse local color, they also exploit the labors of various ethnic groups, who eventually rise up at young Ellen's suggestion.

From the beginning of the novel, Freeman's narrator establishes that class conflict should be considered inextricable from gender and romantic relationships. The reader

first understands this through the tension between Ellen's mother, Fanny Loud, and her Grandmother Zelotes Brewster: "Mrs. Zelotes Brewster had considered that her son Andrew was marrying immeasurably beneath him when he married Fanny Loud, of Loudville. Loudville was a humble, an almost disreputably humble, suburb" (10). The narrator uses free indirect discourse to expose Ellen's grandmother's disparaging opinion of the quaint small town where Fanny, Ellen's mother, comes from. The town bears the family name of Fanny Loud, a reflection of the regionalist ideal of small communities where people formed closer knit bonds. By contrast, the Brewsters' urban life and the classism that comes with it threaten their regional sense of self. Rather than simply portraying a mass of working class people all in solidarity against upper classes, Freeman explores the subtle tensions between the once-lower middle class Brewster family and the poor, rustic Louds of Loudville. The condescending Grandma Zelotes constantly reminds the rest of the family about the importance of the aesthetic aspects of class hierarchy; although she has no more economic wealth than her daughter-in-law, she maintains a feeling of superiority from her city of origin and knowledge of the tastes of society. The wheedling lawyer, Lyman Risley, reiterates Grandma Zelotes's notion that aesthetics still mean something when society woman Cynthia Lennox expresses her concern about the ratty little Ellen who meanders into her home:

The Louds, on the other side—the handsome aunt is a Loud—are rather below caste, but they make up for it with defiance. And as for riches, I would have you know that the Brewsters are as rich in their own estimation as you in yours; that they have possessions, which entirely meet their needs and their aesthetic longings. (96)

Risley condescendingly acknowledges the dwindling ideal of Ellen's grandmother, that a family with nice heirlooms and a cultured sense of themselves might believe themselves of the same station as a wealthy lady of leisure like Cynthia. Grandma Zelotes instills this sense of the aesthetic distastefulness of poverty in Ellen, even from very young. Yet Ellen learns that household items and deportment are hardly an adequate replacement for the material luxuries that higher incomes afford.

The narrator makes it clear in describing the circumstances of Ellen's life from birth through adulthood that she suffers with a constant awareness of class struggle and changing expectations of femininity. The stress of poverty creates conflict between the young Ellen's parents and grandmother, leading to her brief escape to the upper-class home of Cynthia Lennox. Cynthia lives as a bohemian, childless, single woman who develops feelings for the young Ellen and keeps her for several days. Later, Ellen's adolescent years focus on her growing awareness of class stratification in her factory-centered town. When her father gets laid off, without any discussion with her parents, she first feels that a "sense of calamity oppressed her" and after considering the temporary closure of the factory and her father's unemployment, "her imaginings were half eclipsed by a shadow of material things" (114). But her own sense of selfish loss soon gives way when she quietly listens to her father's co-workers rant about the situation, blaming the very luxuries that Ellen longs for:

It's for the rich folks to look out betwixt their lace curtains and see if it looks lowery, so they sha'n't git their gold harnesses and their shiny carriages, an' their silks an' velvets an' ostrich feathers wet. The poor folks that it's life and death to

have to go out whether or no, no matter if they've got an extra suit of clothes or not. (117)

The midwinter financial crisis of the Brewster house tempers Ellen's childhood delusions of grandeur temporarily, reminding her that while "rich folks," as her father's co-worker calls them, consider fashion an expression of their station in life, "poor folks" are marked by their need for rough, sturdy clothes that are more practical for enduring work and weather. In keeping with regionalist and local color fiction, Freeman upholds a specifically working-class New England dialect; which deepens the divide between the characters of different classes. Rather than focus the novel on the story of poor factory workmen, however, Freeman emphasizes the perspective of lower middle-class young girls, raised to be acutely aware of an upper-class femininity defined by pointedly excessive and frivolous adornments. This wealthy material world defines their compulsions to assimilate. In describing Ellen's inescapable relationship to material femininity, the narrator clarifies, as Susan Fraiman explains, that the "myth of bourgeois opportunity has little place for the middle-class female protagonist" and instead of Ellen growing up to become an artist and intellectual, she eventually compromises her sense of self (5). The women characters in *The Portion of Labor* learn from a very young age the difference in social meaning between silk and cotton, and how the impractical texture of fabrics like velvet and lace offer tactile and visual reminders of privilege. The ostrich feather's delicate luxury, marked by its fragility and distant origins, appeals to the young girls' imaginations. The girls know the meaning of ostrich feathers not because they've ever seen an ostrich, but because its plumage signifies wealth.

In spite of the Brewster family's financial hardship, Ellen's aunt and mother devote significant energy to ensuring that Ellen can maintain a reputation as a beautiful young girl. Rather than allow her to live with less and risk being plain, they decide that her appearance matters most to the family. When her father can no longer afford custom-made dresses, her mother and aunt hand-make fashionable garments from expensive fabric typically worn by upper-class ladies. They cloak every aspect of Ellen's life with the appearance of wealth and conventional feminine beauty, disregarding her thoughts or feelings. When Ellen brings a fancy doll home from her visit with Cynthia Lennox, her mother immediately notices it because the doll itself symbolizes privilege, an expensive doll that only someone like Cynthia could afford. Although Ellen's parents don't know where the doll came from, her mother cannot ignore its status as an upper class object. When Ellen requests a piece of plain brown calico to make a dress for her dolly, her mother explains:

Why, that ain't fit for your dolly's dress. Only think how queer that beautiful doll would look in a dress made of that. Why, you 'ain't thought anything but silk and satin was good enough for her. I'll give you a piece of my new blue silk to make your doll a dress. (134)

Ellen's mother and aunt fuss over the doll, setting aside precious materials to honor its upper-class appearance. Following Ellen's father's unemployment, when Ellen becomes aware of their financial struggles, she punishes the doll for her luxuries, putting her in the closet "like a very scullion among dolls, in the remnant of the dress in which Fanny Brewster had done her house-work all summer" (134). Although the adults in Ellen's life shroud her in luxury fabrics in an attempt to soften the impact of their poverty, Ellen

must confront the injustice of their struggle from a very young age. She does not speak up against Cynthia or her family, but instead secretly tells the doll: “you look more like the way you ought to....Think of all the poor children who never have any silk dresses, or any dresses at all” (135). As a child, Ellen projects onto her doll a hope for herself she can never actualize: that she will be faithful to her politics and avoid the aesthetic and material future the adults in her life force on her. Although this fantasy works for her doll, Ellen invests in maintaining her own feminine beauty and never neglects or resists it. Sadly, because “fashionable society works against the very kind of deep connection that ... women seek, Ellen cannot develop her sense of self in a supportive community with the maternal figures in her life; they fashion their existence around consumable goods” (Van Slooten 251). The very aspirations of luxury and social advancement that her family pushes on her become the reason for her alienation.

While Ellen values and upholds the politics of her working class community, her fashionable dress contradicts such politics. The more fashionable clothes were produced in industrial conditions that, for political and aesthetic reasons, Arts and Crafts and Pre-Raphaelite painters avoided. Their progressive politics about morally superior women’s clothing were bolstered in popularity by women’s labor uprisings. Even though working class women could not actualize Morris and Ruskin’s politics in the context of fashion, the politics themselves evolved into the aesthetics of artistic clothes, employing empty yet appealing moral ideals. Morris’s ideal of handcrafted, individual, organic beauty and aesthetic dress accompanied his belief that “the workers will find themselves compelled to combine together to change the basis of Society” (“Art and Labour” 98). He considered labor unions the inevitable result of class hierarchies and a necessary step on

the road to a working class “revolution of labour” culminating in the worker’s realizing that “they are the real necessary part of society” the outcome of which would be truly beautiful garments (Art and Labour 27). Morris’s practical explanation for working class rebellion ends with the somewhat utopian hope that artistic self-actualization can lead to revolution. In his utopian work *News from Nowhere*, he describes the characteristics of artistic dress; the fictional women he imagined

were decently veiled with drapery, and not bundled up with millinery; that they were clothed like women, not upholstered like armchairs, as most women of our time are. In short, their dress was somewhat between that of the ancient classical costume and the simpler forms of the fourteenth century garments, though it was clearly not an imitation of either: the materials were light and gay to suit the season. As to the women themselves, it was pleasant indeed to see them, they were so kind and happy-looking (38).

Morris’s description betrays the belief that if women can simply dress in a way that authentically represents their inner beauty, their bodies and minds will be happy and free. He embraced many ideas about the New Woman, hoping that all women could make themselves free of the oppressive aspects of fashion.

Cynthia Lennox makes the most sense when read as an artistic New Woman character. Her clothing goes beyond expressing her privilege and conformity; it expresses her privilege to dress as she pleases. Not only that, but she has the privilege to remain single and independent, an educated and cultured woman resisting the trappings of heterosexual marriage. Even from Ellen’s first encounter with Cynthia, Cynthia’s aesthetic qualities tempt Ellen to consider the possibility that she might become an artist,

intellectual, and unmarried woman. Every description of Cynthia makes her appear elegant and commanding: “Cynthia came down the walk with a rich sweep of black draperies, and the soft sable toss of plumes” (141). The narrator doesn’t just describe Cynthia’s clothing as a static visual element, it almost has a life of its own in its movements and textures. The narrator’s sensual description suggests that she feels attracted to Cynthia and, as she imagines Cynthia through Ellen’s eyes, that the commanding and dramatic flowing garments capture Ellen’s attention as well:

The child cast a timid glance up at the tall, slender figure clad in a dressing-gown of quilted crimson silk which dazzled her eyes, accustomed as she was to morning wrappers of dark-blue cotton at ninety-eight cents apiece; and she was filled with undefined apprehensions (49).

While a cotton wrapper might be just as comfortable as a silk dressing-gown, its color, shine, and soft texture would pale in comparison. Ellen’s ambivalent feelings are suggestive; she fixates on the clothing and her attraction causes her to feel apprehensive. Risley notices Ellen’s attention on Cynthia, and he assumes it cannot be an attraction to Cynthia herself but instead that Ellen dreams about impossible fineries like other desperate poor girls: “artistic accessories, such as Royal Sèvres, which is no better than common crockery for the honest purpose of holding the tea for the solace of the thirsty mouth of labor, is beneath their attention” (84). Cynthia’s aesthetic influence on her inspires Ellen’s imagination to reach beyond her means. But tragically, the dream of the New Woman cannot be realized for Ellen.

The narrator sympathizes with Ellen’s queer, artistic, and political goals, yet the material circumstances of Ellen’s life determine her fate. Ellen does not just have feelings



for women and desire intimate relationships with them, she dreams of a queer life that would remove her from heterosexual gender and sexual expectations and challenge the social systems that she can perceive but do nothing about. The narrator describes Ellen's increasing distance from her community by continuing to maintain a silk and cotton contrast throughout the novel, most noticeably in contrasting descriptions of Ellen's family and Cynthia Lennox. The reader can identify the shortcomings of Eva and Fanny Loud; their crassness becomes perceptible through the narrator's observations about their clothes. While attending Ellen's valedictory speech, in the presence of the factory owners and the wealthy Cynthia, Ellen's mother "wiped her forehead with a cheap lace-bordered handkerchief" (228). Her aunt "Eva's hat was trimmed with a draggled feather and a bunch of roses which she had tried to color with aniline dye" (228). Her visibly handmade fashions lack glamour and political force when they attempt to emulate mass-produced fashions. The narrator's description laments that capable and caring women like Eva and Fanny will never be able to escape their class status. Ellen's mother appears raggedy, sweating, and tired from work:

flushed and perspiring, clad in a coarse cotton wrapper, revealing all her unkempt curves her hair was still in the fringy braids of yesterday, and her cotton blouse humped untidily in the back. Her face was red and her lips swollen; she looked like a very bacchante of sorrow (Freeman 37).

She wears coarse cotton fabrics that appear cheap compared to Cynthia's silk and velvet clothes. Freeman's narrator disparages Fanny's clothes rather than reflect well on her ability to hand sew all of Ellen's fine dresses along with cotton wrappers that she sells to support the family. The clothes tell the story of the struggle, labor, and sadness of the

Louds through depicting their pitiful garments, which preclude the possibility of their individual agency in the novel. Fanny understands fashion, yet cannot economically participate so she focuses her material hopes and ambitions on Ellen.

The narrator depicts conditions of poverty in an industrial town, yet still attends to communities of women and their handcrafted goods as a regionalist narrator would.

However, rather than upholding the Arts and Crafts ideal that aligns so well with more idealist regionalism, the narrator of *The Portion of Labor* criticizes the system that makes such ideals impossible, leaving only elitist aesthetics. The unjust economic realities of homemade needlework for women contrast the luxury of artistic fashion. Ellen observes her aunt “Eva was crocheting hoods for fifteen cents apiece for a neighboring woman who was a padrone on a small scale, having taken a large order from a dealer for which she realized twenty cents apiece” (188). Eva’s handiwork, not sold individually for a fair wage but purchased by the dealer or middleman to sell in bulk, reduces her potential skill and creativity to underpaid labor. Later, Ellen’s mother takes up a similar job

finishing women's wrappers of cheap cotton. The hood industry had failed some time before, since the hoods had gone out of fashion. The same woman had taken a contract to supply a large firm with wrappers ... paying them the smallest possible prices. (215)

Ironically, the wrapper was a tea-gown made popular by the bohemian aesthetics originally promoted by Ruskin and Morris. Once a celebrated expression of fashion alternative to the more constrictive clothing of the era, the wrappers that Ellen’s mother makes might offer wealthy ladies an opportunity for fashion reform but at the expense of the lower class women who must labor to make them in bulk (Cunningham 4). Based

loosely on the flowing gowns of Pre-Raphaelite portrait paintings, wrappers also called tea-gowns offered the aesthetic promise of progressivism invisibly tainted with the exploitation of its seamstresses, like most other fashions. Wilde advocated the tea gown or wrapper on his lecture tour as the most practical, comfortable garment for women who sought to uphold an Arts and Crafts ideal. As Wilde argues in his essay “Philosophy of Dress”, changing fashions are not related to utility or “true artistic beauty”:

Fashion is ephemeral. Art is eternal. Indeed what is a fashion really? A fashion is merely a form of ugliness absolutely so unbearable that we have to alter it every 6 months! It is quite clear that were it beautiful and rational we would not alter anything that combined those two rare qualities. (9)

Cynthia Lennox embodies the ephemerality of fashion; she briefly influences Ellen’s sense of self, offering her the illusion of individual stylishness and social advancement without considering the practical material impact it will have on her. Journalist Julia Cruikshank argues in her 1902 editorial that frequent “changes of fashion are caused by the self-interest of the vast industrial and economic organization upon whose existence the army of workers depend” (387). The whims of fashion oppress women of different social classes in different ways, denying women consumers and producers the opportunity for autonomy by dictating their desires and imposing economic pressures.

Freeman’s narrator represents Ellen as a character who understands all the other characters better than anyone else because she is both working class yet materially privileged: Ellen’s unique position allows her to learn about the exploitive production of fashion while also relying on it to express herself. Freeman depicts the young Ellen as a girl who struggles to conform to impossible social norms regarding class and femininity.

Through Ellen's role as a somewhat distant and innocent observer, Freeman gains the reader's sympathy for Ellen's eventual response to the dilemmas that confront her. When Cynthia Lennox offers to send her to college, Ellen eventually declines, considering the chastened experience of her friends and family and their financial needs. While at the dressmaker's getting ready to leave for college, she "looked at her pretty new things and tried them on, and felt guilty that she had them. What business had she having new clothes and going to Vassar College in the face of that misery?" (349). Only the narrator knows about Ellen's guilt because the other characters don't understand Ellen's double perspective. Before she even realizes that her family needs her to go to work, Ellen analyzes the impact of her ambitions on her community.<sup>34</sup> Her financial obligations to her family give way to final years in high school and first few years at the main employer of her town, Lloyd's shoe factory. Although Ellen yields to economic pressure, pursuing work as a factory girl, her insight about society compels her to observe class injustice more carefully than others.

Ellen's awareness of her family's class struggle in combination with her interest in art and intellectualism lead her to confront the privileged owning classes in her town as a member of the working-class community. During her high school valedictory speech, attended by her schoolmaster, her teacher, Robert Lloyd and his parents, Cynthia, Mr. Risley, and her parents, Ellen explodes in protest. Before she begins to speak, the narrator explains to the reader that the subject of Ellen's speech was 'Equality,' and she had written a mostly revolutionary valedictory....She gave the laborer, and the laborer only, the reward of labor" (229). The narrator spends only a few sentences describing Ellen's

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<sup>34</sup> When she was younger, Freeman considered pursuing a career as an artist, but on account of her mother's low income as a housekeeper, she couldn't afford the supplies. She understood firsthand the cost of a creative or intellectual career (Foster 39).

motives and presentation, taking on her voice to establish for the reader that Ellen and narrator share views. Her schoolmaster eventually becomes concerned as he observes factory owner and school-board member Mr. Lloyd's reaction.

Mr. Lloyd leaned towards Lyman Risley, who sat beside him and whispered and laughed. It was quite evident that he did not consider the flight of this little fledgling in the face of things seriously. But even he, as Ellen's clearly delivered sentiments grew more and more defined—almost anarchistic—became a little grave (230)

The belittling sexist Mr. Risley chastises her teacher afterwards, mockingly asserting “I didn't know that you taught anarchy in school, Mr. Harris” (237). The narrator chooses sides carefully during the speech scene by only granting dialogue to the crass and condescending men of privilege, not because they deserve to be heard but in order to represent the speech and impressions of other audience members as the truth and by contrast, to expose the reader to the harshness and distaste of Risley's rhetoric in particular. While Risley denigrates the speech, the narrator describes Ellen “quite innocently throwing her wordy bomb to the agitation of public sentiment. She had no thought of such an effect. She was stating what she believed to be facts” (229). The narrator focuses on the perceptions of the audience and Ellen's appearance; along with family, the Lloyds, and other students, the audience was “composed of factory employees and their families, as most of the graduates were of that class of the community. Many of them were of foreign blood, people who had come to the country expecting the state of things advocated in Ellen's valedictory” (230). Ellen's specific analysis and insight means less to the narrator than the reaction of those who witness the speech: The narrator aligns

with the working class-audience members and Ellen. The narrator avoids using Ellen as an individual mouthpiece for politics and instead describes the situation through the regionalist view of the immigrant and working class members of an industrial New England community. Yet for Risley and Lloyd, Ellen's politics are unthinkable and non-threatening because they are incongruous with her appearance: "Lyman Risley, ... was clapping energetically. 'She may have a bomb somewhere concealed among those ribbons and frills,' he said to Lloyd when the applause was waxing loudest, and Lloyd laughed" (232). Lloyd suffers later in the novel for doubting Ellen's potential as a political leader, but Risley foreshadows her tragic relegation to the role of silently beautiful wife.

The narrator of *The Portion of Labor* uses a regionalist perspective, invoking the queer feminist perspectives like those in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and *The Land of Little Rain*. Ellen understands and at times speaks out against the social ills of capitalism, however, unlike more idealistic narrators in the works of Jewett and Austin, Freeman's narrator doubts the power of regional community to resist it. From the narrator's perspective, the men of the story are all a constant disappointment. Either incapable of adequately financially supporting the women of the story or dimwitted and morally underdeveloped, they are nonetheless inescapable and even desirable to the women; "Freeman uses the ensuing love story to dramatize the differences between the male and female perspective on the tensions between labor and capital" (Marchand 70). Ellen speaks out against Robert Lloyd while she instigates a strike, shouting that she doesn't "care to accept favors from a man who oppresses all my friends," yet she eventually abandons her allegiance to the factory girls in favor of the compromise and

comfort of marriage to the very same man (570). Ellen's resignation is not a surrender of her values, but a bitter resignation to economic circumstances, which the narrator foreshadows by describing Ellen's critical perspective about Robert's privilege. The women in the story fail to support each other because their materialism gets the better of them. From early in the novel the two Loud women have a dispute over Ellen's clothes, "Eva was taking her sister to task for cutting over a dress of hers for Ellen, Fanny claiming that she had given her permission to do so, and Eva denying it" (14). Grandmother Zelotes looks at both Eva and Fanny Loud with "scorn and disgrace" and wishes at least Eva "will marry and go away" to rid her family of any additional feminine influence (14). The narrator exposes the material and class-driven conflicts between the women characters, which undermine their relationships and oppose the Arts and Crafts ideals "of women's creativity, sexuality, and spirituality" (Elbert 192). Beginning with Ellen's class-conscious grandmother and ultimately ending with Ellen's submission to social climbing through marriage, Freeman makes clear the divisive impact of industrialism on women and its subsequent redefinition of femininity.

The anti-industrial and anti-elitist aspects of *The Portion of Labor* are veiled behind a heteronormative romance plot describing the most efficient way for a young woman to achieve material comfort which her family defines as the ultimate goal in life. Leah Glasser argues that Freeman's reliance in the novel on fashion norms and elaborate domestic scenes simply disguise her radicalism, "thereby satisfying *Harper's* goals while subtly defying them" (Glasser 39). While true, Glasser's argument minimizes the more complex meanings of fashion within the novel and their diverse effects on the characters and form. Christopher Diller slightly diverges from Glasser's description of material

things as a clever ploy for publication, and suggests that women's social role was not so distinct from the isolated domestic environments they are portrayed in: women "were aestheticized (like fine-art objects) because they exemplified the cultural and moral values that compensated for the social and economic contradictions of capitalist society" (Diller 372). Ellen's double awareness of working class morals with bourgeois aesthetics makes her a desirable fiancée to the rich Robert Lloyd because he believes her radicalism will assuage his social responsibility and her fashion sense will conform to society standards. Lloyd can reduce her to a pretty and inactive object of unique beauty and celebrate her political ideals since they assuage and obscure his moral trespasses as a rich factory owner. Both Glasser and Diller, in their interest in the affiliation between women and material objects in nineteenth-century fiction, overlook the diverse cultural meanings of the different things themselves. As fashion magazines of the time demonstrate along with closer reading of the textiles and clothing of the women in the novel, the material world of women's clothing captures women consumers in the paradox that a woman's worth as an individual relies on her compliance with fashion trends. Yet Ellen's compulsion to conform with such trends suggests that she exists at the mercy of a capitalist system (Blum 85). She is simply acting as if she has free choice over her body to uphold social expectations.

Along with eventually sacrificing her political radicalism and her college career, in agreeing to marry Robert, Ellen sacrifices the ability to pursue her romantic feelings for women. Although Ellen experiments with her potential as a writer, a political organizer, and even a possible queer woman, she must ultimately assimilate to the world of feminine materialism. Freeman's narrator makes clear that Ellen's eventual social



climbing originates with her belief that her understanding of the class hierarchy of fashion makes her different from her peers. When Ellen attends high school as a teenager, she sees

herself in her clean, light summer frock, slight and dainty, with little hands like white flowers in the blue folds of her skirt, with her fine, sensitive outlook of fair face, and her dainty carriage; and she saw others—those girls and women in dingy skirts and bagging blouses, with coarse hair strained into hard knots of exigency from patient, or sullen faces. (Freeman 271)

The narrator expresses two distinct yet simultaneously oppressive material conditions that the uplifted Ellen and her peers face. In a typically naturalistic manner, the narrator describes the ways that the industrial environment marks and defines the factory girls' bodies. Their circumstances determine the course of their lives. Ellen, like her less glamorous peers, suffers in a pre-determined social role only hers reflects the cloistered life of a privileged white woman burdened with firsthand knowledge of working class life. Ellen's are the yards of lace and colorful fabric that clothe her and ultimately define her: "There was an immaculateness about her attire and her every motion which seemed to extend to her very soul, and hedged her about with the lure of unapproachableness" (314). The narrator speculates about Ellen's inner life; although she makes clear that Ellen's identity hides beneath all the clothes by claiming that the clothes only "seemed" to reach all the way into her soul. The narrator suggests that Ellen's embodiment of fashion's superficiality makes her alluring, implying that a beautiful woman with no sense of self beyond lace and silk earns more privileges in society. Ellen resents her station in life, assigned to her by the clothes imposed on her. She sees her body, her

beauty, and her fashion as inseparable and self-defining; she considers her own “hands, which were very small and as delicately white as flowers, and reflected with a sense of comfort, of which she was ashamed, that she would not need ever to stain them with leather”(297). Ellen does surprisingly choose to stain her hands with leather in spite of her opportunity to go to college, but every character in the novel finds her out of place in the working environment. Queerness, education, and politics fall victim to capitalist heteronormativity, which for Freeman are always related.

Freeman explores women’s admiration and feelings for each other as well as their critique of marriage at length in *The Portion of Labor*. Prior to marriage in her forties, Freeman lived among women and resisted heteronormativity as long as possible. She writes to a friend in a letter that the “tenderness of one woman for another is farther reaching in detail than that of a man, because it is given with a fuller understanding of needs” (Glasser 182). She remains true to this assertion with her descriptions of Ellen’s love for Cynthia, after Ellen has grown into an adolescent. Her affections begin as emotional, with a suggestion of physical affection; she “was more in love than she had ever been in her life, and with another woman. She thought of Cynthia with adoration; she dreamed about her; the feeling of receiving a benefit from her hand became immeasurably sweet” (303). Ellen’s privilege of Cynthia’s hand could represent physical affection and material wealth, in the context of the novel they are equally powerful expressions of connection. Later, Ellen makes her excited feelings for Cynthia more explicit; she “trembled at the thought, that possibly Cynthia might kiss her when she came or went. She had felt, with a thrill of spirit, the touch of Cynthia's soft lips on hers, she had smelt the violets about her clothes” (323). Here the narrator herself unveils queer

perceptions of Cynthia; looking at her through Ellen's eyes, she describes the softness and excitement Ellen might feel kissing or touching her. Previous scenes that focused on clothes only implied the interest of the narrator and Ellen in Cynthia's body, but this passage points to the role the clothes play in imagined tactile experience rather than just a visual one. Ellen's desire for Cynthia does not go unnoticed; the perceptive and degrading Risley attacks her feelings as unnatural:

Yes, she has one of those aberrations common to her youth and her sex. She is repeating a madness of old Greece, and following you as a nymph might a goddess.... but don't be alarmed, it will be temporary in the case of a girl like that. She will easily be led into her natural track of love (338).

While dismissive, Risley makes clear that he objects to Ellen's "aberrant" love for Cynthia. Risley's commentary jealously pushes Ellen out of the way of his courtship, unlike his more dismissive remarks toward Ellen. The narrator so often opposes Risley's offensive statements that it seems clear that the reader should find him contemptible. Risley attempts to rattle Cynthia with his homophobic description of queerness as the madness of old Greece. Then offering consolation and comfort to Cynthia, he plays the role of the heterosexual man who can uphold order and control the environment. The narrator makes Risley the most objectionable character in the novel, so that when he speaks to the moral panics and sexism of his era by focusing on Ellen's clothing, it appears under a critical light. Sadly, Ellen's clothing is the source for much of her suffering.

Ellen's lifelong fashionable dress separates her so thoroughly from her peers that marrying Robert Lloyd is the only reasonable option. His perception of her makes all the

difference. Freeman portrays the social perception of Ellen by both working-class and upper-class ladies as conventionally feminine with great potential to be fashionable. In spite of the many other variations in Ellen's self-conception, this aspect of her personality remains stable throughout the novel. Her mother aspires for her to climb out of poverty through embodying feminine glamour, and the wealthy fashion authorities of the novel deem this possible. Relatively early in the novel, Robert Lloyd's mother discusses Ellen's appearance with Cynthia, observing that Ellen was unusual for a working-class girl because she

“had beautiful eyes, and the softest light curls, and she was dressed so pretty, and the flowers on her hat were nice. The embroidery on her dress was very fine, too. Usually, you know, those people don't care about the fineness, as long as it is wide, and showy, and bright-colored.” (90)

Mrs. Lloyd identifies Ellen's human potential in her judgment that Ellen appears beautiful and well dressed in spite of her class status. Throughout the very long novel, Mrs. Lloyd expresses no opinions except distant appreciation for aesthetics; the narrator shares her view of the decorative vines at entrance to the factory: “Mrs. Lloyd often used to look at them and reflect upon them with complacency” (490). She remains committed to keeping up appearances, even amid tragedy. Following the grisly shooting of her husband, after losing sleep and food, she is compelled to arrange the flowers in her house (531). Rather than question the classist assumption that poor and working-class people are all crude and dress garishly, Mrs. Lloyd and Cynthia resolve that Ellen's exceptional beauty proves that she must end up in wealthy comfort. Ellen's suitor and eventual husband, Robert Lloyd reaches the same conclusion, that since Ellen “was a beautiful

girl, an uncommon girl. She was going to be thoroughly educated. It would probably be quite possible to divorce her entirely from her surroundings” (353). Offering to pay for college or marry Ellen into wealth does not aesthetically transgress against class boundaries for any of the characters. The narrator does not avoid describing the class system defined by rigid aesthetic norms that the characters all quite faithful to. However, the narrator’s stance makes the marriage appear to be a tragic resignation on Ellen’s part. Although the marriage is a material success for Ellen, it still reflects Freeman’s ultimate critique of the system that pressures women into choosing heterosexual compliance rather than a life of economic limitation. The form of the novel fails to convince the reader that Ellen’s marriage is the happy conclusion to a feminine social protest novel because the narrator maintains Ellen’s independent thoughts.

Freeman’s more typically regionalist literature approaches queerness by occasionally representing women’s affection for each other and frequently narrating the life of single “spinster” women. The young Ellen desires her teacher and Cynthia. As she grows older she continues to challenge objectification of women’s bodies in a heterosexual system, but rather than committing to a woman love object, she simply avoids heterosexual marriage. Even after Ellen’s love for Cynthia becomes impossible, she still insists with her friends who goad her about Robert Lloyd that she doesn’t want to get married at all: “Why have I got to get married anyway? Why do you all talk so about me?”(368). Nonetheless, Ellen’s queerness and aversion to marriage fail, yielding to her submission to heterosexual marriage in order to maintain material stability for herself and her family. Although the narrator presents a hetero-normative and materially-driven world, she relates to her audience as regionalist narrator might, giving attention to the

special intimate relationships between women and the things they care about. She extends the form of regionalism to critique the interwoven systems of class and gender hierarchy that also make homoerotic and sisterly bonds impossible.

Ellen's ultimate decision to marry Robert in spite of her artistic, queer, and radical inclinations reflects her embittered resignation to the circumstances of capitalist modernity. Freeman takes away the illusion of Ellen's individual freedom, but doesn't completely obliterate her voice against injustice. In the final pages of the novel, Ellen considers that "All the griefs of her short life, she had told herself, were directly traceable to the wrongs of the system of labor and capital, and were awakening within her as freshly as if they had just happened" (591). Freeman eclipses the possibility of a utopian or escapist regionalism in a beautiful environment because these modes of literary radicalism are no longer tenable. Rather than empty regionalism of its aesthetic and political resonance for queer women artists, Freeman uses a more naturalist plot to describe the tragic failure of regionalism, which is among the griefs the narrator boldly attributes to the wrongs of the capitalist system. The narrator criticizes the ugliness of industrial setting of the novel as a factor that might pre-determine Ellen's fate as a representative of her factory town:

when the child had been taken by one of her elders past the factories, humming like gigantic hives, with their windows alert with eager eyes of toil, glancing out at her over bench and machine, Ellen had seen her secretly cherished imaginings recede into a night of distance (19)

Freeman focuses the instability of modern industrial life on this young working-class girl, still a child. The monstrous machine-filled factory steals Ellen's potential for humanity;

her environment denies her the opportunity to create the world she desires where beauty and affection are untainted by industrialism. Freeman exposes the gendered aspects of factory work, perpetuating the sentimental dream of working class girls that “marriage is relief from the trouble and toil of labor” yet exposing the cost of marriage on women (Peiss 45). The novel ends before the wedding or any description of Ellen’s life with Robert; a 1902 review questions the validity of such a marriage:

Let us hope that Miss Wilkins will write a sequel and show us Robert Lloyd and Ellen Brewster married; show us how the headstrong girl of the working class and the impetuous strong man of the aristocratic class work out their salvation.

(Anonymous 371)

The marriage resolves nothing. The conclusion of the novel focuses on Ellen’s tragic acquiescence as the end to her meaningful life. Disillusioned from the unsettling urban environment of her early childhood, Ellen is not a naïve victim of circumstance but a highly aware and resigned woman protagonist in a predetermined literary form.

Freeman’s novel ultimately resigns itself to the impossibility of an aesthetically-centered revolution benefitting working-class women. *The Portion of Labor* deviates from the trend among Freeman’s other more idealistic regionalist works which imagine a mythic past where women could enjoy each other’s company, free from the suffocating material world of urban industrialism. Although the world Freeman lived in included economically self-sufficient women artists and queer women, such fashion rebels needed means to support themselves and were in some ways pariahs. Freeman bitterly renders the Arts and Crafts dream of the artistically adorned New Woman a privilege of only the middle and upper classes. In spite of Morris’s ideals, women making their own clothes

had become socially unfashionable and economically untenable. Ellen's near final exclamation against capitalism makes clear Freeman's critique of gender injustice: "If I were a man," said she, "I would go out in the street and dig—I would beg, I would steal—before I would yield—I, a free man in a free country—to tyranny like this!" (590). By suggesting that she would do anything rather than yield and emphasizing that she would have to be a free *man*, Ellen makes clear that the limits of gender are her greatest obstacle to standing up against capitalism.

Rather than lead labor uprisings, Ellen consents to a relationship that economically saves her family. But her insightful assertion demonstrates that the norms of femininity ultimately deny her the life she desires. In the final pages of the novel, Robert proposes to her at the fair with her family standing by. He begins the discussion by forcing her to interact to him, standing in the way of her leaving in spite of her reluctance to speak to him: " 'Won't you speak to me?' he asked 'Good-evening, Mr. Lloyd,' returned Ellen. Then she tried to move on again, but Robert still stood before her" (693). While Robert is oblivious to Ellen's feeling and perceptions, the narrator makes the readers aware of her aversion to his entitled behavior. He begins his proposal like a business deal, pursuing Ellen as if she can be purchased. He attempts to appease her by claiming that "Business has so improved that I feel justified" (693). Ellen quietly acquiesces to his request, saying nothing. The narrator avoids voicing her feelings and instead describes her family's approval as they notice the developing union; her aunt Eva notices Ellen and Robert and approves: "Eva looked away from the fireworks after the retreating pair, then meaningly at Fanny and Andrew. 'That's settled,' said she" (695). Freeman's narrator describes the romantic union that Ellen's friends and family eagerly



await as little more than a financial exchange to Ellen. She never changes her mind or embraces Robert, she never observes any significant change in his character. But while her family watches, she agrees to his terms. The narrator removes all affection and excitement, denying the reader the pleasure of the actual proposal, instead describing Ellen's submission and her family's distant relief. While many of Freeman's short stories invoke women who refuse marriage, live with their female friends, revolt from their unreasonable husbands, *The Portion of Labor* represents a narrator and main character with the same feminist regionalist perspective, but who are powerless to resist the pressures of the urban environment.

As the fictional regionalist world Freeman helped build over her career grew threatened by changing social and economic circumstances, she responded with unchanged disdain for the ugliness and oppression of urban industrialism. Her mood represents the tragedy of an economic marriage along with the ultimate meaninglessness of fashion aesthetics to allow women the self-expression they desire. *The Portion of Labor* reflects the dwindling of certain overlapping ideals that more typical literary regionalism shared with the Arts and Crafts Movement. In its ultimate defeatism, the novel offers a critique of one of the most disingenuous aspects of the Arts and Crafts Movement: fashion aesthetics. As Van Slooten argues, the increasingly ethereal fashion trends of the turn to the twentieth century allowed for the illusion of democratic aesthetics while they fragmented the relationship between the interior self and the exterior appearance (252). What Morris would have considered radical aesthetics became commodified, eliminating the possibility of fashion-centered social change for working-class women in the textile and shoe factories. Although privileged women might wear

artistic or reform dress and working-class women wear popular Paris fashions, both showed their compulsion to participate in commodity culture. Read through the lens of historicist analysis of women's fashion and Arts and Crafts aesthetics, *The Portion of Labor* offers a unique insight into the disappearance of regional culture and the suffering of the working classes in the service of women's clothing. The organically beautiful kind of fashion that Morris advocated was no longer possible by 1903: women could not clothe themselves in accordance with their inherently beautiful, bodily natures; their bodies were marked by obligatory participation in commodity culture. Though Ellen Brewster resists other conventions of gender, she hardly deviates from conventional women's fashion, making her eventual marriage as inevitable a compulsion as her pre-determined consumption of fashionable clothing. Against the utopian dreams of more popular New England regionalism, Freeman leaves her readers with the ugly harshness of a naturalist resignation to a world pre-determined by gendered material circumstances.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: PATHWAYS TO AND FROM REGIONALISM

This study of regionalism in the context of Arts and Crafts ideals and the literature of queer feminist social and aesthetic critique exposes the tenuous status of distinct literary and aesthetic categories. Some literary histories claim that regionalism lost its popularity when it was aggressively supplanted by the masculinist forces of naturalism and modernism. Literary critics like Hsu make clear that such gestures are simply more attempts by emerging male authors to disavow their connection with their own place in literary history; Naturalist authors like Norris set themselves apart from local color. However, “Norris's oft-cited condemnation of literary realism singles out literary elements - smallness, everyday life, femininity --that are also characteristic of most works of literary regionalism” (Hsu 174). Similarly, some later modernists, in their pursuit of avant-garde and confrontational aesthetics distinguished themselves by disparaging the popular fiction of their predecessors. However hypocritical and inaccurate, their anti-feminine assertions attempted to draw a boundary around regionalism, relegating it to the past. However, this dissertation shows that some regionalists intentionally turned away from the most popular aspects of regionalist form in order to re-assert their politics.

I prove that for regionalists at the end of the nineteenth century, the flexible qualities of regionalism offered them popular and widespread appeal along with the opportunity to radically confront “traditional” gender and sexual roles while also resisting the economic and aesthetic limitations of capitalist modernity. Continued focus on regionalists’ aesthetic influences allows scholars to re-imagine the literary history of late-

nineteenth century “as a bumpy cultural topography that shows political and social life with new detail” (Castronovo 8). The “bumpy” topography Castronovo describes refers to regionalism’s simultaneous resistance to and compliance with gender and sexual roles as well as its implications in industrial capitalism and modernity. The analogy of bumpy topography or uneven terrain describes the way that Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman’s aesthetics express themselves: instead of clear, direct narrative roads, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *The Land of Little Rain*, *The Awakening*, and *The Portion of Labor* avoid straightforward development or plot incidents, emphasizing the minute details of each moment. The narrators intentionally heighten the reader’s awareness of the lack of linear plot, resisting investment in finite conclusions. There is a path for today’s readers into the remote regions, but it is not a clear and simple path; it requires a narrator as a mediator between the outside “modern world” and the regional community.

Regionalism confronts the problems of capitalist modernity through narrative self-awareness; what appear to be distinct social categories and spaces in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *The Land of Little Rain*, *The Awakening*, and *The Portion of Labor* are all permeable with the help of critical feminist narrators. Like the productively ambiguous line between romance and realism, the divide between regionalism and later literary movements is most interesting when most complicated and blurry. Regions themselves are indistinct as geographical or cultural entities; Hsu clarifies that “when viewed as dynamic and flexible units of production rather than as permanently delineated areas, regions are neither isolated nor fixed” (166). For Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman, their feminist visions for the future were purposefully transient because women artists were only able to develop if they could avoid the oppressive dichotomies of public

versus private, quaint and cosmopolitan, rural and urban. Ongoing debates that began in the 1970s and continue in today's scholarship struggle to define regionalism using strict generic definitions or singular political agendas; I interpret regionalism's ambivalences and complexities as an intellectual opportunity for further inquiry into the radically queer anti-capitalist potential of a literary movement that formally avoids the uniformity and conventionalism associated with industrial modernity.

The Arts and Crafts Movement encompasses similar internal conflicts. Once a radical movement, some aspects were commodified and became vacuous luxury-items that validate bourgeois cultural elitism and were neither radical in their aesthetic nor production. Ongoing consumption "of nostalgia for a simpler time that probably never existed has led many to conclude that the Arts and Crafts Movement was deeply conservative and anti-modernist" (Kaplan 59). Morris chairs symbolize these problems: made in a factory, reproduced, distributed globally out of whatever materials were available for the least money rather than handcrafted local materials. Nothing about their purchase is politically meaningful, but their hand crafted appearance can create the illusion of respect and fair compensation for the skilled laborer. Some more radical communal experiments endured; Arts and Crafts communities supported themselves as artisans, and many women and bohemian individuals continued to support themselves by selling local handcrafted goods made with every attempt to connect artist, nature, and community. Yet these goods were often exported from communities into stores and homes across the country, exhibited at world fairs and expositions and eventually in high-end art galleries. People stopped reading Ruskin and Morris, but they still haven't stopped buying the arts and crafts that bear the faint mark of their creators' distant ideals.

Among the thousands of craftsman houses with arts and crafts artifacts from Morris in California, one peculiar example complicates any single argument about the politics of the Arts and Crafts aesthetics: The Craftsman Club Concierge Lounge at Disneyland in the Grand Californian Hotel. A beautiful stone hearth, Morris chairs, Mission-style lamps, original Roycroft artifacts, and stained glass collaborate in perfect aesthetic harmony<sup>35</sup>. The club promises an escape from the hustle and bustle of Disneyland along with storytelling by the fire. Built in 2001, the hotel is an island of “Northern California” style Arts and Crafts décor, next door to Disneyland in the heart of strip-mall and asphalt-covered town of Anaheim.<sup>36</sup> However objectionably capitalistic this frenzied appropriation of the Arts and Crafts Movement appears, it upholds an aesthetic of resistance; with rooms and patios named Sequoia, Trillium, Mariposa, White water, and Redwood, along with the quaint family-room atmosphere of the lobby, the natural and Arts and Crafts theme oppose the highly-built and over-stimulating Disneyland environment. The hotel reminds people of the woods with forest-themed names and invites them to spend time together in a communal room with no TV, no radio, and an old-fashioned hearth where they gather to listen to stories. In a state so defined by thousands of acres of state and national parks, national forests, and wilderness areas, regional residents, and living histories, people of North and South are still compelled to pretend that they are close to nature and history. While Jewett and Austin held up the possibility that such a connection could happen, their version of connection with nature required rigorous resistance to capitalism. Chopin and Freeman anticipated the emptying

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<sup>35</sup> Roycroft was an arts and crafts pottery company and communal experiment in upstate New York.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to Professor Pyle for his recent firsthand perspective on this architectural curiosity.

of meaningful politics from regionalism and the Arts and Crafts Movement, confronting readers with tragic conclusions for women who bought into materialistic fantasies.

Interpreting regionalist literature through the lens of Arts and Crafts influences offers a path forward for re-interpreting regionalists texts published after 1910. Like the Arts and Crafts Movement, it's likely that regionalism splintered into diverse lineages rather than the seemingly closer-knit enclaves of queer and sexually radical women of the late-nineteenth century. Heike Schaefer proposes characteristics of regionalism made famous by Jewett, Austin, Chopin, and Freeman that could have literary successors; that "regionalism developed in reaction to the technological advances and social developments of modern America that furthered social homogenization, cultural standardization, and a general sense of dislocation" (7). Some paths forward for regionalism might have continued beyond the border of the United States, much like so many popular Arts and Crafts products. As Schaefer suggests, pursuing regionalism means continuing to define it as a movement of dislocation as much as location; a tension between the discreet and distant region and the constant encroachment of urban industrial capitalism.

This dissertation proves the value of re-considering regionalism as a transatlantic, aesthetically and politically significant movement. This dissertation shows that regionalism of the late nineteenth century was engaged in resisting the increasing pressures of industrial capitalism and the forms of gender and sexual oppression that accompanied it. Jewett and Austin write hopefully of the mythic relationships that are possible if women seek out feminist anti-industrial ways of life. Their embrace of Ruskin's theories about meaningfully interweaving aesthetics, nature, and the role of the

woman artist offer both writers a context to revise regionalism as the written form of Arts and Crafts ideals. Chopin and especially Freeman respond to Morris's later articulations of Arts and Crafts politics and aesthetics with skepticism, employing regionalist narrative strategies to critique the socially and economically unattainable life of a creative woman. In light of their success as popular writers and their literary adaptation of well-known Arts and Crafts ideals these authors' contributions stand out among the feminist visionaries of late nineteenth-century America.



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