



“So We Die before Our Own Eyes”: Willful Sterility in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

HOLLY JACKSON

SARAH ORNE JEWETT's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), set in a formerly prosperous but now barren seafaring town, describes two funerals and notes a number of recent deaths among the elderly residents. The novel does not portray any children nor does it feature any young couples who might suggest the continuation of the community into a future generation. Jewett's literary depiction of this aging Maine town dovetails with contemporary sociological and political concerns about the diminishing reproductive output of New England and its relationship to the health of the nation at large. A tension between the celebration of nonprocreative women and an uneasy awareness of the demographic consequences of their lifestyle signals the novel's engagement with fin-de-siècle discourses concerning the end of American whiteness.

Expressing his concern about the falling white birthrate in 1894, Theodore Roosevelt declared, “unquestionably, no community that is actually diminishing in numbers is in a healthy condition . . . no race has any chance to win a great place unless it consists of good breeders as well as of good fighters.”¹ For Roosevelt, only adherence to the gendered roles of

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¹Theodore Roosevelt, “National Life and Character” (1894), *American Ideals and Other Essays, Social and Political*, 2 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 2:117. Quoted in Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 201.

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reproductive femininity and aggressive masculinity would safeguard the perpetuation of the white race and the national future. The decline of the white birthrate over the course of the late nineteenth century induced panic that “willfully sterile” white Americans would be outnumbered and overpowered by racial minorities. With the emergence of the “New Woman,” who had access to higher education and prospects outside of marriage and motherhood, and a mounting perception that American men’s masculinity was waning, the breakdown of traditional gender roles became a favorite scapegoat for those worried about white America’s diminished reproductive output as compared to people of color and recent immigrants. Coined by Edward A. Ross, the term “race suicide” came to describe the ultimate fear underlying this apocalyptic mix of anti-feminist and anti-immigration ideologies. Roosevelt used the term in print in 1903, and it became a household phrase, circulating widely in the press and even appearing in the title of a 1904 silent film, *The Strenuous Life; Or, Anti-Race Suicide*, which depicts a white middle-class man coming home from work to find his wife giving birth to multiple babies, a comic representation of Roosevelt’s national reproductive imperative.²

Although the term “race suicide” did not come into use until the first years of the twentieth century, paranoia that a combination of white women’s increased freedom and the influx of foreigners was depressing the white birth rate had been brewing for decades, especially in and around Boston. Massachusetts was in many ways the national vanguard of women’s education, but it was also home to reactionaries who linked this development to the end of reproduction. For example, in his popular *Sex in Education* (1873), Dr. Edward H. Clarke, an overseer of Harvard University and a physician at its medical school, argued that higher education not only made women unwilling to

²Laura L. Lovett (*Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007], p. 82) traces the term “race suicide” to a speech that Ross delivered before a labor audience on 7 May 1900 about the dangers of Asian immigration. Roosevelt used the term in his introduction to *The Woman Who Toils*, by Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903), p. vii.

marry but actually biologically unfit to give birth. Francis Amasa Walker, director of the 1870 and the 1880 United States Census and president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1881 until his death in 1897, was one of the most prominent nativist theorists of his time. His landmark 1891 essay "Immigration and Degradation" offered the first comprehensive account of relevant statistics, and it posited a causal relationship between immigration and the falling "native" birthrate, that is, that white couples did not want to bring children into the world to compete with foreign immigrants. In view of this theory, many New Englanders of the "old stock" increasingly asserted their "right" to control the flow of immigrants into the United States.³

Both antifeminists and nativists projected their fears onto New England, which came to be identified as the originary site of race suicide. As early as 1867, one commentator decried the deliberate suppression of white births as a problem stemming from the region's women's rights agitation: "The anti-offspring practice has been carried in New England and wherever New England ideas prevail. . . . These female reformers see that if they are to act the part of men in the world, they must not be burdened with the care of young children."⁴ The willful childlessness of "female reformers" was thought particularly calamitous because immigrant populations were steadily proliferating. In 1882, Nathan Allen, a New England doctor, revisited the 1860 census to argue that the foreign-born population of the region had long been producing more children than the native-born population.⁵ By 1907, it was no surprise when Ross reported that "the native married women of Massachusetts bear only seven-elevenths as many children as women coming

³Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 99–102. On Jewett's personal ties to the Immigration Restriction League, see Sandra A. Zagarell, "Country's Portrayal of Community and the Exclusion of Difference," *New Essays on the "Country of the Pointed Firs,"* ed. June Howard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 41.

⁴Quoted in Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 96.

⁵Cited in Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, p. 87.

in from Germany, seven-thirteenths as many as those from Ireland.” He blamed this state of affairs in part on women’s rights.⁶

Many New Englanders characterized their region’s perceived decline as particularly tragic in light of its proud role in national history, conceived of as a product of white homogeneity. In a patrifilial construction of American identity, Richmond Mayo Smith, one of Walker’s protégés, commented in 1888 on new citizens’ inauthentic relationship to the Founders: “One-half of the people of Massachusetts can no longer speak of the constitution as the work of the Fathers except in an adoptive sense; and it is scarcely possible to conceive of the Fathers adopting the mass of Catholic Irish and French-Canadians and beer-drinking Germans who make up the foreign-born.”⁷ Similarly, as Thomas Gossett explains, Barrett Wendell, a professor of English at Harvard, argued in his *Literary History of America* (1900) “that the greatness of New England letters from 1830 to 1860 was to be attributed to the fact that the region was then almost racially homogeneous.”⁸

By the time the “race suicide” panic peaked in the early twentieth century, New England was well established as the locus of the problem, and its documented decline was regularly cited as a signal of an impending national crisis. Taking stock of earlier work in 1917, sociologist Warren S. Thompson noted that “most of the evidence of race suicide comes from investigations made in New England.” “[T]hose familiar with conditions” in the region, he reported, “have borne almost universal testimony to the effect that the families of the older native people are smaller than those of the newer immigrant peoples.”⁹ In a 1930 article, Joseph J. Spengler, a professor of economics, concluded that “the native stock of New England was dying out in the latter half of the nineteenth and in

⁶Edward A. Ross, “Western Civilization and the Birth-Rate,” *American Journal of Sociology* 12 (March 1907): 607–32.

⁷Quoted in Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants*, p. 78.

⁸Thomas Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 134.

⁹Warren S. Thompson, “Race Suicide in the United States,” *Scientific Monthly*, (July 1917): 22, 23.

the early part of the twentieth century,” and during that period, “the fertility of native women has been lower than that of foreign women.”¹⁰ The academic discourse concerning New England’s decline in the late nineteenth century granted scientific credibility to the race suicide panic of the early twentieth and, thus, to subsequent programs to control both immigration and sexual reproduction with the aim of preserving and perpetuating white supremacy in the United States.

The imaginative literature of late-nineteenth-century New England displays unexpected affinities with the sociological discourse of regional and racial decline. As in the writings of early “race suicide” alarmists, a preoccupation with the composition and reproduction of populations animates the representations of seemingly homogenous white communities in local color fiction. Stephanie Foote has argued that in this genre “ostensibly coherent regions are the products of suppressed relationships between natives and strangers. Those suppressed relationships are themselves modulated interventions in a more general concern over origins and nativity.”¹¹ The most prominent author in this tradition, Sarah Orne Jewett, engages contemporary concerns about the decline of the region due to white reproductive failure. Balancing this nativist anxiety with feminist utopianism, her work offers a complex appraisal of what it would mean for American women to abandon the imperatives of the family and the racial teleology it was taken to support.



Jewett’s first novel, *Deephaven*, depicts “a quaint old place which has seen better days.”¹² Although “it was impossible to imagine any children” in this traditional New England town,

¹⁰Joseph J. Spengler, “Has the Native Population of New England Been Dying Out?” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 44 (August 1930): 639, 662.

¹¹Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 18.

¹²Sarah Orne Jewett, *Deephaven* (1877), in *Sarah Orne Jewett: Novels and Stories*, ed. Michael Davitt Bell (New York: Library of America, 1994), p. 8. Further page references will appear in the text.

populated as it is with elderly folks, the narrator pointedly observes that at least “there was no disagreeable foreign population” (pp. 14, 41). One characteristic scene describes the hobbling approach of “Widow Ware and Miss Experience Hull, two old sisters . . . under the shadow of the two last members of an otherwise extinct race of parasols” (p. 44). The comic description of their antiquated accessories cloaks the darker implication that the women are themselves among the few remaining relics of a dying race, a conclusion underscored by the repeated characterization of other elderly female townspeople as “the last of her generation” or “the last survivor of one of the most aristocratic old colonial families” (pp. 8, 126). Jewett’s depiction of the vanishing town, which clearly resonates with contemporary fears about the decline of New England’s “natives” and the putative loss of their way of life, is particularly interesting for its conflicted view of the role of unconventional women. Although Jewett’s fiction imagines women freed from reproductive obligations and thus capable of pursuing their own creative interests, it suggests that the achievement of personal productivity at the expense of familial reproductivity is not without its costs to the community.

The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) extends *Deephaven*’s concern with the relationship between New England’s decline and the empowerment of childless women. With the exception of the middle-aged narrator, the town seems to be inhabited solely by elderly people, particularly unmarried women. Reflecting the classic critical consensus, Werner Berthoff pronounced in 1959 that the book leaves “an indelible impression of a community that is inexorably, however luminously, dying.” Jewett’s New England towns, peopled only by “the old, the retired, the widowed, the unmarried, the sick, the mad, the ‘uncompanied,’” exhibit the effects of a “creeping decay.”¹³ Ann Douglas Wood found the stories to be so overwhelmingly bleak that she disparaged Jewett and other regionalist writers for reveling in abnormality and portraying women as

¹³Werner Berthoff, “The Art of Jewett’s *Pointed Firs*,” *New England Quarterly* 66 (March 1959): 33, 37, 34.

“barren and childless . . . alone, superannuated, almost deformed.”¹⁴

In a complete reversal of the traditional critique, feminists subsequently reclaimed *The Country of the Pointed Firs* for its celebration of vigorous women inhabiting “a realm of mystical female powers.”¹⁵ That generation of feminist critics lauded the text’s emphasis on women’s community and natural healing, its circuitous narrative structure, and its departure from heterosexual gender norms.¹⁶ In the 1990s considerations of gender were supplanted when Jewett scholarship took an important turn toward reevaluating the novel’s racial politics. In her introduction to *New Essays on the Country of the Pointed Firs*, June Howard explains that the collection “deliberately revisit[s] the familiar landscape of Jewett criticism” to expose “how deeply racialized and nationalist are the categories through which Jewett constructs her local solidarities,” a project that aims to temper earlier feminist zeal.¹⁷

Gauging the excesses of this swing of the scholarly pendulum, Marjorie Pryse contends that “critics who fault Jewett for racism and classism have attempted to ‘overwrite’ feminist criticism of her work.”¹⁸ Indeed, renewed attention to the analytics of gender and sexuality in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* can help clarify the novel’s confounding racial politics. In reconsidering Jewett’s conception of community, critics attentive to her chauvinisms have diagnosed the novel’s affirmations of racial dominance and American imperial strength while

¹⁴Ann Douglas Wood, “The Literature of Impoverishment: The Women Local Colorists in America, 1865–1914,” *Women’s Studies* 1 (1972): 24–25.

¹⁵Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women’s Tradition* (New York: Ungar, 1983), p. 110.

¹⁶See Elizabeth Ammons, “Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16 (Fall 1983): 83–92; Sandra A. Zagarell, “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” *Signs* 13 (Spring 1988): 498–527.

¹⁷June Howard, “Introduction: Sarah Orne Jewett and the Traffic in Words,” in *New Essays on the Country of the Pointed Firs*, ed. Howard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 4.

¹⁸Marjorie Pryse, “Sex, Class, and ‘Category Crisis’: Reading Jewett’s Transitivity,” in *No More Separate Spheres!* ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 150.

ignoring its strangely decrepit representation of whiteness. If we consider what Karen Sanchez-Eppler calls the “analogy between nation and nursery” in the nineteenth century, that is, the “similitudes between the national projects of raising good, white, middle-class, Christian, American children and that of raising an economic and cultural American empire,” then Dunnet Landing’s elderly, uncoupled population takes on ominous political significance.¹⁹ Positioning whiteness as simultaneously preeminent and exhausted, this overwhelmingly barren novel is a dystopic vision of demographic crisis, a forecast of imperiled American political futurity through reproductive sterility.

The nativist sympathies of first-wave feminists have been well established, but Jewett’s depiction of an aging women’s community suggests that increased autonomy from the family contradicted the reproductive imperative of white nationalism. Feminist critics have rightfully rejected misogynist associations of local color fiction with pathological spinsterism and sterility, but when considered alongside contemporaneous writings about the decline of white New England, the emphasis on social decay in older readings of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* takes on new meaning.²⁰ Wood notes that in local color writing, “women appear a breed destined to extinction: the possibility hovers . . . that after the death of the last old lady in the last old house, there will be no women at all.”²¹ If we consider women not as themselves a separate “breed” but rather in terms of their duty to breed for the continuation of races and nations, their impending extinction in the region’s literature bears striking similarities to the nativist paranoia that New

¹⁹Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “Raising Empires Like Children: Race, Nation, and Religious Education,” *American Literary History* 8:3 (1996), p. 399. In this way, I suggest that Jewett’s regionalism, while characteristically nostalgic and invested in enshrining the past, is deeply interested in the American future and in some ways positions itself as prophetic.

²⁰See Caroline Gebhard, “The Spinster in the House of American Criticism,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 10 (Spring 1991): 89.

²¹Wood, “Literature of Impoverishment,” p. 32. Although I agree with Gebhard that Wood’s evaluation of local color fiction pathologizes women, her readings of the theme of decline are useful to this discussion.

England's unconventional, unproductive women would bring about the extinction of racial whiteness.²²



The Country of the Pointed Firs focuses on solitary older women who are engaged in pursuits beyond the family's orbit. The narrator, a writer who has traveled to Dunnet Landing from Boston to spend the summer practicing her craft, is an unmarried New Woman who describes herself as "no longer young." She lodges with Almira Todd, a hardy, long-widowed herbalist of advanced middle age. Other characters include Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, a spry, elderly woman living on a nearby island even more remote than Dunnet Landing, and Susan Fosdick, "a serious-looking little bit of an old woman," a prolix visitor and the last member of a large seafaring family.²³ Far from an unmitigated celebration of these resilient women, however, the text's anxiety about their nonreproductivity suggests that their unconventional social order is valiant but not viable. Defiance of patriarchal, heteronormative gender differentiation and marriage allows women unprecedented personal freedom but does not ensure the continuation of families, races, or society itself. The novel depicts a community "actually diminishing in numbers" due to its lack of "good breeders," just as Roosevelt feared.

Many scholars have posited the alliance of turn-of-the-century feminism with racist national futurism, particularly in reference to thinkers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and

²²As Allison Berg notes, "the perception that each woman had a hereditary obligation to advance her own race's destiny, in a process understood to be inherently competitive," was not limited to white women. "The specter of white race suicide and the imperative of black racial uplift made motherhood both a cultural ideal and a racial duty, for black and white women alike" (*Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002], pp. 4-5). The larger project from which this essay is drawn compares *The Country of the Pointed Firs* to Pauline Hopkins's treatment of white women's role in national reproduction in *Hagar's Daughter*.

²³Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (1896) (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000), p. 57. Subsequent page citations will appear in the text.

Margaret Sanger.²⁴ Rather than offering *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as another straightforward example of this insidious coalition, I want to suggest instead that this text portrays the demands of white nationalism and feminism as conflicting and not easily reconcilable. While some feminist discourses of this time asserted the centrality of the maternal function to civilization and seized upon the political significance granted to reproduction in eugenic thought, Jewett imagines women empowered by curtailing reproduction. Racial nationalism characteristically stresses the importance of fecundity to ensure a political future. Thus, a community that allows women to live alone without having children is in opposition to this project. In cataloguing contemporary rejoinders to the condemnation of feminists for their perceived role in the declining white birth rate, Linda Gordon concludes that “the most radical response to the race-suicide attack was one that reinterpreted woman’s role and ‘duty’ altogether” and asserted elective childlessness for women who wished to be socially useful in other ways.²⁵ Jewett’s vision of women’s advancement resembles this model more so than the eugenic ideologies of feminists like Gilman.²⁶

It would be possible, however, to overstate the radical intentions of Jewett’s antinatalist feminism. Returning to Caroline Gebhard’s discussion of local color’s association with spinsters, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have recently suggested that in the context of Roosevelt’s America, “we might understand the refusal of white women regionalists to place their fiction in the service of reproducing ‘true Americanism’ or white

²⁴As Dana Seitler argues, “feminism and eugenics during this period were not only compatible but were mutually constitutive, each inextricably rooted in the constitution of the other” (“Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Regeneration Narratives,” *American Quarterly* 55 [March 2003]: 64). See also Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; and Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁵Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, p. 94.

²⁶According to Bederman (*Manliness and Civilization*, p. 145), Gilman argued that “excessive sex distinctions” threatened “racial survival,” so gender equality was presented as “a racial necessity.”

Anglo-Saxon masculinity as a form of antiracist work, a form of white critique.”²⁷ I maintain that the convergences of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* with nativist discourse limit the extent to which we can consider it resistant to racist ideologies. This novel neither advocates a childless women’s community to undermine whiteness nor promotes a revised gender scheme to revitalize white America’s future. Rather Jewett conceives of a world in which unmarried and childless women like herself are happy, productive, and more powerful than the men in their community, but she is clearly less celebratory when she registers that lifestyle’s inconsistency with the reproductive demands of white national futurity.

The narrator’s ambivalence about the female culture she temporarily inhabits is perhaps most obvious in her treatment of “poor Joanna.” In one of the many storytelling sequences that structure the novel, Mrs. Todd shares with the narrator the tale of Joanna, a woman who lived and died alone in self-imposed exile. Having moved into a tiny cabin on deserted, inhospitable Shell-heap Island after her plans for marriage collapsed, Joanna shunned human contact for the rest of her life. The novel’s attitude toward Joanna, who carries the New Woman’s ethos of independence to the extreme, oscillates between encomium and cautionary tale. Although Mrs. Todd is appalled that Joanna would have chosen to live out her life in conditions of physical and emotional deprivation, the narrator, reflecting “upon a state of society which admitted such personal freedom,” is at first captivated by Joanna’s heroism (p. 69). Soon, however, the narrator challenges her own initial assessment: “My thoughts flew back to the lonely woman on her outer island; what separation from humankind she must have felt, what terror and sadness” (p. 73).

The narrator’s contradictory interpretations of Joanna’s behavior mirror myths concerning the island’s earlier inhabitants, as conveyed by Mrs. Todd: “Some said ’t was a great bangeing-place for the Indians, and an old chief resided there once that

²⁷Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 28.

ruled the winds; and others said they'd always heard that once the Indians come down an' left a captive there without any bo't, an' 't was too far to swim across to Black Island, an' he lived there till he perished" (p. 63). Joanna is both the chief, a powerful figure with the ability to control nature, and also the captive, a prisoner removed from his community and left for dead on the isolated island. These descriptions reiterate the narrator's indecision about whether Joanna's exile is an act of protest that affords her admirable autonomy or one of social exclusion, which she must painfully endure to the end of her days. The narrator concludes her reflections on Joanna with the puzzling assertion that in every person "there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness" (p. 83). Again, the balanced contradictions assure that both interpretations of Joanna remain actively in play.

The key to this interpretive ambivalence might be found in Joanna's alignment with Native Americans, the people who once populated her island but who are now, in the characters' imaginations at least, an extinct race, replaced by the white townspeople.²⁸ Joanna, who dons moccasins and adorns her cabin with the relics of Indians' stone tools, recalls an unconventional old woman in *Deephaven* who "wore a man's coat, cut off so that it made an odd short jacket, and a pair of men's boots" and was "so wild and unconventional . . . that it was like taking an afternoon walk with a good-natured Indian" (*Deephaven*, pp. 108, 112). The confluence of Jewett's "native" white women and Native Americans symbolizes an imagined relationship between the two groups as theorized by Walter Benn Michaels, who argues that Indians typify an American identity that is both natural and authentic, unlike the merely technical citizenship of naturalized immigrants. In nativist works, "the Indian, embodying an American identity that explicitly antedated his own legal citizenship, could figure as an exemplary

²⁸The symbolic appropriation of New England's native inhabitants in this scene, as well as the assumption that they had been exterminated, illustrates Foote's observation that "traces of history and conflict score [the] narrative surface" of the communities depicted in regionalist writing (*Regional Fictions*, p. 19).

counterinstance to these aliens.” Moreover, the “extinction” of Native Americans represents a defiant and extreme form of racial purity insofar as their “disappearance” poses a noble alternative to interracial mixing and propagation. As Michaels argues, marriage is always fraught in the nativist imagination with the fear of interracial mixing because “the exogamous requirements of marriage (that the woman leave her family) conflict with the endogamous requirements of the race (that the woman be kept in the family).”²⁹

We can understand, then, why the narrator finds Joanna’s lifestyle both frightening and admirable. Her radical break from the social order marks her as the type of woman who occasioned fears about the end of whiteness. Although her “willful sterility” would make her a “race traitor” according to Roosevelt, her radical departure from marriage may also be interpreted as a sacrifice on behalf of blood purity, a guard against the threat of contamination, even at the cost of racial extinction.³⁰ Her figurative status as a Native American is loaded with both anxiety that she is a harbinger of racial annihilation and also with a pervading pride in whiteness, even in this enervated form, as racially pure and natively American.

Celibacy is not the only form of willful sterility *The Country of the Pointed Firs* explores; it also hints at other methods of deliberately avoiding childbirth. Dunnet Landing’s thriving older women inhabit a luxuriant natural world. Beyond its titular trees and crashing ocean, the novel catalogues an abundance of herbs, flowers, and vegetables. Many readers have observed that the herb pennyroyal seems to be particularly abundant, most notably in the patch on Green Island, which, as Howard

²⁹Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 45, 41. Michaels sees this relationship to the Indian as necessarily modernist and a break from turn-of-the-century regionalism: “identification with the Indian could function at the turn of the century as a *refusal* of American identity,” but “it would come to function by the early 1920s as the *assertion* of an American identity that could be understood as going beyond citizenship” (p. 44). *The Country of the Pointed Firs* demonstrates a link between local color and nativist modernism in its oscillation between these uses of the figure of the Native American.

³⁰See Lovett, *Conceiving the Future*, p. 92.

notes, “takes on virtually sacred significance.”³¹ Pennyroyal is, in fact, a natural abortifacient, as Maine’s white settlers had learned from Native Americans.³² Early in the novel, “the Indian remedy” is named as one of the herbal medicines that Almira Todd dispenses to townspeople who “came at night as if by stealth” to hear the “whispered directions” for its use (p. 4).³³ The plant’s ubiquity, especially insofar as it is associated with a race the text figures as extinct, raises the specter of race suicide and serves as a pervasive reminder of the community’s failure, or refusal, to reproduce. As Gordon notes, “nearly all those involved in the race-suicide controversy, on all sides, asserted or assumed that birth control practices were widespread.”³⁴ Although the women of Dunnet Landing have seemingly aged past the need for contraception, the novel’s intimation of this controversial issue signals its engagement with the natalist issues at the heart of contemporary racial politics.

Although Jewett’s fictional world is peopled primarily by women, it also acknowledges cultural fears that the nation’s men were becoming effete, a condition Roosevelt and others linked to race suicide. In *Deephaven*, the young female protagonists attend “a free lecture on the Elements of True Manhood.” During its delivery, they are barely able to contain their laughter because the talk “was directed entirely toward young men, and there was not a young man there” (*Deephaven*, p. 82). Indeed, the most prominent male in the audience is “a deaf little old man with a wooden leg” (p. 81). Although the scene seems to ridicule the contemporary cult of true manhood, it also illustrates precisely the situation advocates like Roosevelt were seeking to address, namely the absence of true men.

³¹Howard, introduction to *New Essays on the Country of the Pointed Firs*, p. 21.

³²Ron Welburn, “The Braided Rug, Pennyroyal, and the Pathos of Almira Todd: A Cultural Reading of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” *Journal of American Culture* 174 (Winter 1994): 75–76.

³³Historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman note, “in the early nineteenth century, and in rural areas for many later generations, herbal and home remedies for terminating unwanted pregnancies continued to be passed on through oral tradition” (*Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997], p. 63).

³⁴Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, p. 100.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is similarly devoid of young men. In the town cemetery, the narrator notes, most of the “graves were those of women,” since many of the town’s men died away from home, “some lost at sea, and some out West, and some who died in the war” (p. 99). The observation, ostensibly about the town’s dead, soon turns to those who have elected to live and die elsewhere, thus aligning other forms of depopulation with death. In his 1917 article on race suicide, Thompson claimed that in rural New England, “the more active, wide-awake, and ambitious men and women have either gone west to new lands or they have migrated to the cities to seek their fortunes. This has had a detrimental effect upon country life and is probably responsible in large measure . . . for the decadent population now to be found in the rural districts of these states.”³⁵ With the Civil War long over, the closing of the frontier proclaimed by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, and the shipping industry greatly diminished, the narrator’s allusion to the men of Dunnet Landing who had once pursued such masculine activities as fighting wars, settling the land, and fishing the seas resonates with the 1890s fear that white men, with no arena remaining in which to test their masculinity, were contributing to the decline of white American culture.

The images the narrator sketches of the elderly men she encounters in the tale’s rural Maine setting support Roosevelt’s fear that men’s lack of opportunity for exerting their masculinity would render them effeminate and sterile. She finds Captain Littlepage to be “delicate.” Elijah Tilley cries and knits; he assumes his departed wife’s gendered behaviors, like keeping house and showing the tea things to visitors. William Blackett, described as “son an’ daughter both” to his mother (p. 39), is criticized by his sister, Almira Todd, for lacking “snap an’ power” (p. 48). Not surprisingly, in this nonheterosexual, indeed noncoupling, world, the narrator reports that “he ain’t disposed to be very social with the ladies” (p. 40). Noting the narrator’s ambivalence about these enervated characters, Susan Gillman observes, “their pathetic lives suggest that such gender

³⁵Thompson, “Race Suicide,” p. 28.

reversal, and the freedom imagined along with it, are disturbing in the context of present social and economic conditions in Dunnet Landing.”³⁶

The town’s pitiful pinnacle of masculinity is on display at the Bowden family reunion. Enacting a militaristic ritual, the family marches through the woods, led by one of the Bowden men. “He was imperative enough,” the narrator says of the marshal, “but with a grand military sort of courtesy, and he bore himself with solemn dignity of importance” (p. 101). This dignified leader turns out to be the alcoholic Sant Bowden, who has a reputation of being “good for nothing” (p. 102). Despite the military bearing that so impresses the narrator, Bowden has never been a soldier. He tried repeatedly to enlist in the Civil War, but according to Almira Todd, “he ain’t a sound man,” and the army “wouldn’t have him” (p. 102). The real veterans, she explains, do not object to him wearing the uniform, and they “invite him to march on Decoration Day, same as the rest, [because] he comes of soldier stock.” From his lineage, Bowden has inherited the appearance of authority, but it is his only qualification for participating in military-style parades. The family parade, which Elizabeth Ammons describes as “a bunch of white people marching around in military formation ritualistically affirming their racial purity, global dominance, and white ethnic superiority and solidarity,” is strangely headed up by an emasculated, laughable, and mentally unsound man, an empty figurehead of white dominance.³⁷ The best that Dunnet Landing has to offer by way of “true” masculinity, Bowden is clearly not the kind of “good fighter” that Roosevelt hoped to enlist in the struggle to subjugate the nonwhite races. The contrast between Bowden’s commanding appearance and his underlying inadequacy serves to deflate the ritual, showing it to be an empty display of a once powerful whiteness, now spent.

³⁶Susan Gillman, “Regionalism and Nationalism in Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” in *New Essays on the Country of the Pointed Firs*, p. 110.

³⁷Elizabeth Ammons, “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” in *New Essays on the Country of the Pointed Firs*, p. 97.

The revelation of Sant Bowden's insufficient masculinity introduces the novel's culminating apocalyptic vision. Ammons argues that "the Bowden reunion is about racial purity and white cultural dominance. It celebrates white ethnic pride, the extended Bowden family's Anglo-Norman lineage, which is militantly asserted and religiously affirmed in all the orderly marching and solemn worshipping."³⁸ Gillman similarly declares, "the Bowden family might as well be one of the many fraternal organizations—among them the Knights of Columbus and the Ku Klux Klan—that flourished during this period."³⁹ The scene certainly commemorates the white family, although not by asserting its strength, as these critics suggest, but rather by eulogizing its former greatness and symbolically enacting its decline and eventual demise.

The white family was nineteenth-century American racism's most powerful naturalizing metaphor. Insidiously manipulating the paradigm of kinship, white supremacist ideology characteristically appealed to white ancestral purity, blood-based sympathy and solidarity, the policing of reproduction, and the politicization of hereditary traits. The family was both the distillation of racial pride and also the site of racial vulnerability, the point of possible intrusion, pollution, and degradation. Indeed, allegations of the white family's weakness were at least as effective in mobilizing support for racist agendas as were assertions of its strength. By precisely this mechanism, popularizing the notion of white decline through infertility, nativists cast subsequent state actions to control both immigration and rates of reproduction as defensive strategies for the protection of the endangered white family.

Perhaps surprisingly, *The County of the Pointed Firs*, despite its focus on childless and solitary women, endorses the belief that the family is the natural basis of the social order. "Clannishness is an instinct of the heart,—it is more than a birthright, or a custom," the narrator maintains, and the most powerful adhesive for any group is its "claim to a common inheritance"

³⁸Ammons, "Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett's *Pointed Firs*," p. 96.

³⁹Gillman, "Regionalism and Nationalism in Jewett's *Pointed Firs*," p. 113.

(p. 110). By defining the community's insiders and outsiders in terms of blood relatedness, the novel renders the health of the family equivalent to the health of society. Almira Todd explains, "when you call upon the Bowdens you may expect most families to rise up between the Landing and the far end of the Back Cove. Those that are n't kin by blood are kin by marriage" (p. 98). Sandra Zagarell claims that the text "actively produces Dunnet as a pure and homogenous community" in part by "mapping 'community' onto 'family.'" Moreover, the correlation between this particular family and the nation is made explicit when the narrator compares the reunion to "the great national anniversaries which our country has lately kept" (p. 110). Zagarell comments, "America itself, in this formulation, is a 'clan,' both familial and racial. Citizenship, by implication, is natural and inborn."⁴⁰ Because the perpetuation of a homogenous community relies on the reproduction of its constituent homogenous families, the climactic family reunion depicts the consequences of individual infertility on larger social formations, specifically the nation.⁴¹

The consumption of family identity enacted in the reunion scene is not limited to the Bowdens' funereal march but extends to and becomes literal during the community's ingestion of desserts with "dates and names . . . wrought in lines of pastry and frosting on the tops" (p. 108). The Bowdens celebrate their whiteness by publicly recording, and then eating, their genealogy.⁴² The narrator and Mrs. Todd together consume an

⁴⁰Zagarell, "Country's Portrayal of Community and the Exclusion of Difference," pp. 44-45, 46. In a more recent treatment of the construction of community in this tradition, Foote (*Regional Fictions*) argues that the instability of the identities of "the stranger" and "the native" is "the defining textual economy of regionalism" (p. 19). In *Dunnet Landing*, she observes Jewett's "inability to imagine a past not already animated by a heterogeneous population" (p. 17).

⁴¹In response to readings of this scene as evidence of "regionalism's complicity in the nation's move toward empire," Fetterley and Pryse have recently countered, "Jewett's text proposes region as a site of resistance to empire and offers the region's values as alternatives to those of the nation" (*Writing Out of Place*, p. 235).

⁴²*The Country of the Pointed Firs* was published in 1896, the same year in which the Supreme Court officially decreed, in its decision in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, that "African blood" in any proportion excludes an individual from the distinction of racial whiteness. Whiteness was thus formally constituted as exclusive, legally protected family property.

apple pie decorated with the words “Bowden Reunion.” At the height of the family’s gustatory revels, the women present a cake formed into a “model of the old Bowden house made of durable gingerbread, with all the windows and doors in the right places, and sprigs of genuine lilac set at the front.” The narrator reports, “there was a general sigh when this fell into ruin at the feast’s end, and it was shared by a great part of the assembly, not without seriousness, and as if it were a pledge and token of loyalty” (p. 108). After spending the day affirming its pure white lineage, the family symbolically enacts the falling into ruin of their own ancestral home. If, as Wood observes, the “empty, nearly pestiferous old house which dominated the Local Colorists’ imagination” holds “iconographical links with the diseased and barren womb,” the Bowdens’ ravaged familial home is linked to the community’s decline.⁴³ With no prospect of a future generation, the Bowden line will come to an end.⁴⁴

Furthermore, this scene calls to mind a striking image from Walker’s 1891 “Immigration and Degradation,” a foundational work of the nativist movement. Walker represents “native” white New Englanders’ superior quality of life through the metaphor of a house “kept in order, at whatever cost, the gate hung, the shutters in place, while the front yard had been made to bloom with simple flowers.” Jewett’s account of the

⁴³Wood, “Literature of Impoverishment,” p. 28.

⁴⁴The consumption of this house-shaped cake has been a fruitful episode for critics interested in material culture, including Ammons and, more recently, Bill Brown. Brown notes, “This is an image of incorporating the particularity of place into the body itself; an image where person, place, and thing converge in the moment of physical consumption; an image not of occupying a material environment but of being occupied by it. It is the narrator’s opportunity not to reach inside an object or space, but to internalize built space itself” “Regional Artifacts (The Life of Things in the Work of Sarah Orne Jewett),” *American Literary History* (Summer 2002): 212. Ammons (“Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Pointed Firs*”) observes that Jewett establishes an “architectural vocabulary” in which the houses of “small-town New England” represent the “Yankee values of ingenuity, pragmatism, cautiousness, good humor, and visual simplicity.” She argues, “All those tiny, tidy, white, fenced, tree-nailed, and wedged houses staring up and down the coast do articulate a vision of preindustrial matrifocal harmony, health, and happiness. But they also stand for white colonial settlement and dominance” (pp. 84, 97). Whereas Ammons reads the cake’s communal consumption as the moment when we as readers are asked to “swallow” these meanings along with the narrator and Mrs. Todd, I read it as the most explicit threat of the self-destruction of these meanings.

gingerbread house mimics Walker's characterization of the proper New England home. Her observation that "all the windows and doors [were] in the right places" echoes his concern that shutters and gates be neatly hung, and the cake's sprig of "genuine lilac set at the front" of the home reproduces his image of a front yard "made to bloom with simple flowers." In Walker's report, the influx of foreigners drags down New England's traditional standard of living, and as a result, the formerly tidy homes degenerate into "houses that were mere shells for human habitations, the gate unhung, the shutters flapping or falling, green pools in the yard."⁴⁵

The metaphor of the American nation as a white family home vulnerable to foreign interlopers had been circulating for years when *The Country of the Pointed Firs* was published. An 1888 article entitled "Our National Family" declares, "here is our great American home; it is a big establishment, three thousand miles from front door to back; but it is our home; and under God it belongs to us Americans." The author addresses the problem of "hordes of foreigners flocking to our shores," "entering our doors without knocking, and lounging in our parlors and making familiar with our furniture." He speaks for Americans who "regard with undisguised aversion" the consequence of "our national home cluttered up and its sacred privacy dishonored by a mass of foreign stuff." Making his xenophobic ideology explicit, he states, "we want one seamless garment, not a coat of many colors; one integral people, not tribal patchwork nor ethnological crazy quilt."⁴⁶ In light of works like "Our National Family," Jewett's representation of an American home falling into ruin, not corrupted by foreigners but rather devoured by the white population, provides an evocative climax to her tale of white decline.

The novel concludes with additional symbolic enactments of the characters' and the community's demise. At the end of the summer, as the narrator prepares to leave town, she anticipates

⁴⁵Francis Amasa Walker, "Immigration and Degradation," *Forum*, August 1891, quoted in Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants*, p. 76.

⁴⁶*The Congregationalist* (Boston, Mass.), 1 March 1888, p. 10.

her own death. Looking around her bedroom, once again empty as she had found it, she reflects, “so we die before our own eyes” (p. 129). Dunnet Landing is a community dying before its own eyes, obsessively recounting in its twilight years memories of a stronger, more glorious past. In the final sentence of the novel, Dunnet Landing suddenly disappears from sight as the narrator’s boat rounds a bend, headed for Boston. The moment recalls Captain Littlepage’s tall sea tale of “a strange sort of country ‘way up north . . . and strange folks living in it . . . a place where there was neither living or dead . . . a kind of waiting-place between this world an’ the next” (pp. 22–24). The New England Jewett portrays is just such a place, a strange northern country with “fog-shaped” people suspended between life and death (p. 22). Although in many ways *The Country of the Pointed Firs* privileges a lifestyle that defies the traditional insistence on marriage and childbirth, Dunnet Landing’s disappearance from sight, heralding the disappearance of its people and their way of life, embodies whites’ anxieties that the racial order so intrinsic to America’s national identity might fail to reproduce itself. The novel’s pairing of a nostalgic vision of vanishing homogeneity with a progressive portrayal of female independence not only reveals meaningful links between the tradition of New England local color literature and contemporary sociological writings from and about the region but also complicates our understanding of the relationship between turn-of-the-century feminism and racist discourses of the national future.

Holly Jackson is Visiting Assistant Professor in the English Department at Skidmore College. Her essay is drawn from a larger study of the relationship between the American novel and political anxieties about the decline of the institution of the family in the second half of the nineteenth century.