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# “LIKE ISLANDS IN THE SEA”: INTERMINGLED CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POLITICS OF THE SELF IN SARAH ORNE JEWETT’S LATE STORIES

CÉCILE ROUDEAU



This essay investigates Sarah Orne Jewett and William James’s shared interest in reconfiguring modes of relationality between “selves” at the turn of the century. It examines two of Jewett’s late stories, “The Foreigner” and “The Queen’s Twin,” as responses to a problem James also addressed in his interventions on the Philippine crisis, the imperial turn of US politics, and the ensuing changes in cognitive patterns of selfhood. Not unlike James, Jewett psychologized imperialism, but she did so through a *literary* reworking of the borders of her regionalist tales. To experiment with alternative modalities of transoceanic consciousness in her fiction, she used the language of regionalism as a privileged medium where such psychological, political, and cognitive reconfigurations could best be tried out.



... we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves [...] But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea, or reservoir.<sup>1</sup>

~ William James, “The Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher’” ~

... where the imagination stops and the consciousness of the unseen begins, who can settle that, even to oneself?<sup>2</sup>

~Sarah Orne Jewett, Letter to Annie Fields~

**A**mong the many admiring letters sent to New England regionalist writer Sarah Orne Jewett upon publication of her *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in 1896, was a word from William James. “It has that incommunicable cleanness of the salt air when one first leaves town,” he wrote.<sup>3</sup> James was apparently sensitive to Jewett’s attraction to the incommunicable and her explorations of the fringes of wakefulness that he had initiated as a “psychical researcher.” While much has been made of Henry James’s ambivalent praise of Jewett’s artistic achievement and the complex transfers between Henry’s novelistic style and William’s philosophical propositions, remarkably little has been said of the commonality of inquiry between Jewett and William James.<sup>4</sup> And yet, their work shared an interest in the crisis of their understandings of the self and new horizons of common experience amidst imperial expansion beyond national borders.

Sarah Orne Jewett, a local color writer who navigated between her family house in Southern Maine and the literary salon that she and her companion Annie Fields held in Boston, knew of “Dr. James’s” intellectual ventures.<sup>5</sup> She had attended his oration at the unveiling of Augustus Saint Gaudens’ Robert Gould Shaw relief at the edge of the Boston Common on May 31, 1897, and there is evidence that she held an epistolary correspondence with him from the 1890s onward.<sup>6</sup> As prominent Bostonians, both Henry and William James, as well as Jewett and Fields (the latter the widow of publisher James T. Fields), belonged to the same cosmopolitan artistic circle. This essay, however, does not attempt to trace a specific influence of William James on Jewett’s literary endeavors, nor does it purport to be yet another defense and illustration of the validity of the Jamesian “stream of thought”<sup>7</sup> for literary studies or its influence on modernist or proto-modernist narratives. Jewett’s turn-of-the-century stories are not taken here as illustrations nor inspirations; rather, they may be interpreted, I propose, as responses to a common problem, to take up a word that James would not have recanted: specifically, the imperial turn of US politics and the ensuing changes in cognitive patterns of selfhood in a world turned global.

While William James philosophically addressed the questions of his time, such as “The Philippine Question” or “The Philippine Tangle,” Sarah Orne Jewett used the tools that she knew best, those of literary fiction, and turned the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly* into a testing ground, taking up a task that James seemed to have renounced: namely, transforming aesthetics into an alternative practice of philosophy and politics. As Ross Posnock has recently emphasized, towards the end of his life the philosopher turned away from words themselves, as he had previously done with painting, believing that renouncing words was the only way out of the confinement of concepts and the condition of an otherwise impossible immersion into the flux of communal experience.<sup>8</sup> To read Jewett’s fiction alongside James’s revision of the politics of the self in a new imperial context, where the relations between self and other proved increasingly illegible,

is to test James’s somewhat hasty conflation of words with the definitiveness of concepts, in the hope of reaching outside language what he called “the feeling of relation.”<sup>9</sup> The language and form of Jewett’s turn-of-the-century fiction, I contend, was not complicit *per se* in the cutting up of the real into bodies, selves, and concepts; rather, her late artistic experiments partook, through words, of that incommunicable muchness that ever challenges the neat distribution of the sensible into fixed categories. Driven by the same impulse to combat “the desire of monistic imperialism to establish only one way of knowing the world,” Jewett’s late sketches, “The Queen’s Twin” and “The Foreigner,” might well have out-jamesed James himself, capitalizing on the powers of fiction so as to think, or shall we say, to feel and make us feel philosophically without the concept.<sup>10</sup> In that sense, her late stories invite us not only to shift the disciplinary register from philosophy to literature, but also to explore the unprobed efficacy of fiction in the Jamesian struggle with the fixities of concepts, the paradigmatic law of language, and the deludingly secure borders of the self.

Reading Jewett with James, and assuming her “imperial sketches” to be one fictional exploration of the impact of US imperialism on conceptions of selfhood in the context of the Jamesian challenge to the bastion of a sovereign and self-possessed consciousness, is not a covert attempt to clear the New England regionalist writer from her unpalatable—and well-established—complicity with the Bostonian elite’s blindness to (at best), and support of (more likely), the nation’s imperialist ventures across the seas.<sup>11</sup> In “The Queen’s Twin” and “The Foreigner,” published in the *Atlantic*—and never included in *Pointed Firs*, however much they revisited the place and characters of Jewett’s well-acclaimed oeuvre—empire comes to prominence in two ways: in the unlikely guise of a New England widow convinced that she and Queen Victoria are twins, and in the fascinating, if tragic, fate of a West-Indies sea-captain’s wife stranded in the tight-knit community of Dunnet Landing. These two stories stand out in Jewett’s legacy because they are not content formulaically to conjure up a

community of women on the rural edge of urban America, but venture to telepathically or extrasensorily pair and interlace consciousnesses that would have been unlikely to commune but for Jewett's fictional imagination. "The Queen's Twin" conjoined an old eccentric from the Maine backwoods to the Queen of England and Empress of India; "The Foreigner" conjured up a spectral sympathy between a mulatto from the French Indies and the very pillar of the community of Dunnet, the New England village *par excellence*. Taking up James's cue when, in the first installment of his "Talk To Teachers on Psychology," published in the same issue of the *Atlantic* as "The Queen's Twin," he defended "divination and perception" as tools of a national pedagogy, Jewett did more than just use a séance-like dramaturgy in her turn-of-the-century stories. I propose that she challenged the integrity of selves across divides social, racial, national or imperial. Not unlike William James, then, Jewett psychologized imperialism,<sup>12</sup> and did so within the borders of her regionalist tales as an attempt, I argue, to experiment in fiction with alternative modalities of the commons in a world where gender affinities were increasingly feeble correctives to the binary logics of war, and at a time when issues of national allegiances and racial differences made it ever more difficult to perform the work of (national) sympathy. In that sense, and *pace* James, Jewett's fiction did not so much attest to the incommunicable cleanness of a pleasant local color excursion; rather, it was a complex testimony to the incommunicable messiness of the times.

### **Regionalism, Imperialism, and the Politics of the Self**

The August 1900 issue of the *Atlantic*, in which Jewett's "The Foreigner" was published, also featured an essay by Talcott Williams entitled "The Price of Order," which emphasized an unexpected transatlantic kinship between Britain and the United States, while acknowledging their former differences when it came to expansiveness:

The United States, it is scarcely necessary to remind an American, for the first time in its history, finds itself with possessions—whether rightly or wrongly won is of no consequence for this phase of the problem—which it cannot assimilate, and which it cannot admit to that full share of mutual and associate rule which is the essence of the federal system. In some way the American republic in its new possessions has to use the experience of the British Empire, and learn to pay its price for order.<sup>13</sup>

In 1900, the United States had newly spread outside its continental bulk as a result of the Spanish-American War, and was in the midst of another imperial conflict in the Philippines. This turn in American politics, in the words of English geographer Halford Mackinder, contributed to transforming the world into an echo chamber where “every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe.”<sup>14</sup> Put differently, what used to be an ever-expanding world had yielded to a still uncertain conception of space as closed, intensive, and relational. Such a paradox had multiple repercussions and fostered many anxieties among those who were at a loss to envisage a national continuum when “there is no point of view absolutely public and universal” any more, and for whom the “universe” was a result of the crisscrossing of strange perspectives.<sup>15</sup> The price of the imperial turn of the 1890s was high and its cash-value yet to be set. For others, like William James, the new political climate offered unheard-of possibilities to test out the boundaries separating the individual self from society and those separating different individuals within a world turned global.<sup>16</sup> If space had indeed become intensive and relational, then, the time had come to envision interactions between monistic selves that, unlike those of the isolated trajectories of classical liberal thought, embraced porosity as the condition of solidarity.

For U.S. regionalists, including Jewett, the question of how “to make people acquainted with each other” was not a new one, but

its meaning in the new imperialist context suddenly needed disambiguating.<sup>17</sup> The political, ethical agenda of regionalist literature as devised by William Dean Howells, influential editor of the *Atlantic*, consisted in warding off the fear of cognitive failure between townspeople and country people, or inhabitants of distant parts of the nation. The other, in this vision, was geographically and linguistically marked, yet remained compatible with the construction of a national commons, as he or she belonged to what Howells called “our kind.”<sup>18</sup> “Men are more like than unlike one another,” he declared in his September 1887 Editor’s Study. “[L]et us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity.”<sup>19</sup> Jewett’s Maine herbalists, the Tennessee mountaineers of Marie Noailles Murfree, were not the genteel readers of the *Atlantic*; yet regionalist fiction could make them “acceptable” by teaching us “to see the inner loveliness and tenderness ... of those poor, hard, dull, narrow lives, with an exquisite sympathy.”<sup>20</sup> Howells’s agenda was not transformative. “Sympathy” was to teach the genteel readers of magazines like the *Atlantic* what was going on inside the hearts and minds of others without eluding their difference or particularity. Knowing the other meant knowing the other as such; doing away with the fear of cognitive failure did not mean questioning the notion of selfhood as bounded. More importantly, however pluralistic, Howell’s agenda for regionalism did not envisage a racial or ethnic plurality of selves.<sup>21</sup>

The turn-of-the-century massive immigration of an ethnically diverse population, as well as the imperialist ambitions of the nation, challenged the regionalist utopia of a unity-in-manyness based on the literary performance of a universal acquaintance between regional white selves, however singular. While the emerging science of sociology investigated the notion of a “social self,” and the young science of psychology, with William James at its head, explored the margins of consciousness, others turned to an individualist self as the last bastion against the overwhelming homogenizing forces of capitalism and the “invasion” of foreigners. The idea of an autonomous, circumscribed self,



however, became more and more impracticable, and new inquiries into the idea of an open self with leaky, or at least porous, contours, more urgent. Literary fiction, in the guise of the utopian experiments of an Edward Bellamy (to cite but one among the many authors who pushed the moment to its crisis), but also, more unexpectedly perhaps, in a specific avatar of the language of regionalism like Jewett’s, turned out to be a privileged medium where such social, political, and psychological reconfigurations could best be tried out.

### **Tales of Relation**

In the frame of Jewett’s sketch entitled “The Queen’s Twin,” the narrator and Mrs. Todd, the pivotal character of *Pointed Firs* whom the reader again meets in this later story, decide to visit an old eccentric who live in an “out-o’-the-way place,” and thinks of herself as Queen Victoria’s twin sister:

Our visit to Mrs. Abby Martin seemed in some strange way to concern the high affairs of royalty. I had just been thinking of English landscapes and of the solemn hills of Scotland with their lonely cottages and stone-walled sheepfolds and the wandering flocks on high cloudy pastures. I had often been struck by the quick interest and familiar allusion to certain members of the royal house which one found in distant neighborhoods of New England; whether some old instincts of personal loyalty have survived all changes of time and national vicissitudes, or whether it is only that the Queen’s own character and disposition have won friends for her so far away, it is impossible to tell. But to hear of a twin sister was the most surprising proof of intimacy of all.<sup>22</sup>

Going to see the Queen’s Twin involves a disorienting experience that forces the two travelers to lose their footing (Mrs. Todd has literally got in deep crossing the swamps). Space, time, and hierarchy are shaken up and redistributed along new axes. The New England countryside is oddly reminiscent of English and

Scottish moors; and not only is space displaced, time also is out of joint: in order to visit the Queen's Twin, Mrs. Todd and the narrator must take chronology backwards. Literalizing Disraeli's figure of "distant sympathies" as the foundation of the British Empire, Jewett's text moves "beyond [the] national vicissitudes" of the American Independence to re-instantiate "personal loyalty" and "intimacy" between Old and New England.<sup>23</sup> And it is not yet clear, at this stage in the story, what will come out of this renewed assertion of kinship between an old and a newer empire.

A decade or so before, Jewett had already—infamously—harped on the same historical tie in her *Story of the Normans*, published in Putnam's series "The Story of the Nations" in 1886, when she wrote of the "kindred ties" between England and North America via the "Norman."<sup>24</sup> As both Mitzi Schrag and Sandra A. Zagarell have shown, in the sketches published after *The Story of the Normans*, Jewett indexed the post-Reconstruction "healing work" of regionalist literature on her theory of Norman superiority, suggesting that an infusion of Norman blood into the collapsing southern aristocracy would result in a resurgence of national unity.<sup>25</sup> The rapprochement with Britain serves here and elsewhere as a strengthening of national and international prominence, as in a letter dated 20 January 1900, the logic of which might recall that of Talcott Williams in the aforementioned *Atlantic* piece:

It is a delightful winter here as to weather, and yet the shadows and sorrows of war make it dark enough. The questions of our difficult Philippines are half forgotten—it is almost strange to say so in the anxiety about South Africa; but I like to take comfort from this, and other signs, and remember how much closer Old England and New England have come together in the last two years. That is good, at any rate. I had a most delightful proof of it in the way that many quite unexpected persons felt about a sketch I wrote (and meant to send to you!) called "The Queen's Twin."<sup>26</sup>

In his article on “The Foreigner,” Jewett’s other imperial sketch, Patrick Gleason notes how Jewett’s letter “connects imperial wars in the Philippines and South Africa by consolidating the American and British Empires, the Old England attempting to retain its massive colonial territories at the close of the Victorian era and a New England (a synecdoche for the United States) building an expanding global empire.”<sup>27</sup> He rightfully and censoriously points out that “this union of the old and new becomes possible through the destruction and subjugation of colonial bodies and the concomitant purposeful forgetting of their histories, something from which Jewett can ‘take comfort.’”<sup>28</sup> What this interpretation ignores, however, is how the “the Queen,” in Jewett’s sketch, is also—above all—the distorted reflection of an odd New England woman’s fantasy of love, not the Queen and Empress of India. “[T]was a very remarkable thing; we were born the same day, and at exactly the same hour, after you allowed for all the difference in time. My father figured it out sea-fashion. Her Royal Majesty and I opened our eyes upon this world together; say what you may, ’tis a bond between us,” begins Miss Abby Martin (alias the Queen’s Twin), who spends her day framing and reframing the official portraits of Victoria and insists on patterning her life on the life of the monarch, naming her children after the royal scions, even if it meant “ma[king] excuse to wait till I knew what she named her[s].”<sup>29</sup> Kinship is made up; it is a fiction that thrives more than it suffers from distance and difference.

Jewett was not alone in exploring the possibility of a common consciousness across distances. This had been one of the objects of study of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) founded in England by Frederic Myers, which William James joined in 1884.<sup>30</sup> Even if she eventually stopped going to séances after the numerous scandals that threw suspicion on spiritism, she remained deeply convinced of, and fascinated with, the possibility of mind communication “independently of the recognized channels of sense,” to quote from Myers’ definition of telepathy.<sup>31</sup> If “The Queen’s Twin” does not stage a séance proper, we do witness a case of community of sensation across space or ESP (extrasensory

perception).<sup>32</sup> “‘I’ve often walked out into the woods alone and told her what my troubles was, and it always seemed as if she told me ’t was all right, an’ we must have patience [...]. We do think alike about so many things,’ said the Queen’s Twin with affectionate certainty.”<sup>33</sup> A veritable “stream of thought” is established between Abby Martin and her “twin.” The ocean that it took weeks to cross is turned into a bond, a way of “holding hands”: “An’ I dream about our being together out in some pretty fields, young as ever we was, and holdin’ hands as we walk along. I’d like to know if she ever has that dream too.”<sup>34</sup> By the turn of the century, the telepathic dream had been established as a common fact in psychology as one of these moments, not unlike mystical experiences, where, to quote James, “the sense of relation will be greatly enhanced.”<sup>35</sup> But Jewett’s tale goes further. Neither reciprocal nor symmetrical, such “sense of relation” inaugurates a subversive affectionate commensurability in which “fundamental differences in wealth, position, family, and geography are emphasized yet never neutralized.”<sup>36</sup> In Jewett’s tale of relation, difference and individuality abide even as intimacy allows for a common consciousness across class and national disparities.

Jewett—and this, too, she shared with William James—had evinced an early interest in the writings of Swedenborg through her friendship with Theophilus Parsons, a professor of Law at Harvard who believed in the “transmigration of consciousness,” or occult communication with the spirit world. Jewett, however, like James, progressively distanced herself from Swedenborgian doctrines and became more interested in the new technologies of communication—electricity and the telephone—as palpable ways of implementing on a larger scale what had been already telepathically experienced. “All this new idea of Tesla’s,” she wrote to Annie Fields, in the 1890s, “must it not, like everything else, have its spiritual side, and yet where imagination stops and consciousness of the unseen begins, who can settle that even to one’s self?”<sup>37</sup> Not too long before her death, she harped on the same electrical theme, convinced that wireless telegraph or telephone merely systematized the telepathic communication between kindred

spirits: “I have never been able to believe that wireless telephones were a new discovery; if you love people enough you can be your own battery, the only thing is to teach us how to use it,—so often it seems to go off by accident only.”<sup>38</sup> If electricity was about to unify the world, annihilating time and abolishing space, Jewett certainly favored this new human achievement—not, however, from the disembodied and abstract point of view of science and empire. “The truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that mind be dubbed the ‘Absolute,’ to know the whole of it,” James wrote in his preface to *Talks to Teachers*.<sup>39</sup> “There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over, and the worst of it is that those who look for them from the outside never know *where*.”<sup>40</sup> In Jewett’s tale as well, the silencing of the Queen and Empress’ voice, the erasure of her focus, discards the absolute viewpoint that once constructed a global geography on clocks and compasses. Unlike Gleason, then, I do not read the sketch as part of Jewett’s manifest imperialist agenda. Even if regionalism cannot be seen as “merely reacting against, but actively participating in, imperial projects,”<sup>41</sup> the interest of Jewett’s sketch lies rather in the extent to which it complexifies the articulation between regionalism as a reenactment of an imperial femininity and regionalism as critique of a masculinist form of empire relying on the “*vi and armis*” of Theodore Roosevelt’s America.<sup>42</sup>

The melodrama of mutual recognition, which has been characterized as the phantasm of colonial domesticity, is only part of Jewett’s tale;<sup>43</sup> its climax and denouement conjures up the “unity-in-manyness” that was to be the hallmark of a pragmatic modernism. Indeed, the sketch dramatizes a triangulation of sympathies: the closeness between Mrs. Todd and Abby serves as a mediation for the budding friendship between Mrs. Todd and the city-dweller, the condition of this triangulation being that the narrator and the Queen’s Twin also get along together. Somewhere at the intersection of these multiple focuses and linkages, the truth of an affective space is delivered to the reader, whose own point of view is conjured up as yet another set of coordinates in this new

relational geography that can only be shared and constructed from the inside of this female New England triangle. Gradually, what had been first advertised as timely entertainment loses its triviality and the figurative performance of the Queen's Twin, staged by Mrs. Todd for her host, comes to create a new, and rather unexpected, bond. While enjoying the show, the narrator agrees to take Abby's kinship with the Queen for granted. Casting off her ethnographic/colonial stance and her "interest" in the Martin case, the narrator is willing to take part in the telepathic game conjuring up the Queen's presence in that poor New England parlor; Mrs. Todd herself gradually discards her showwoman's apparel and, forgetting about the incongruity of it all, "with a sudden impulse" proposes to show the Queen around when she arrives.<sup>44</sup> At the end of the story, "one" has yielded to "we," and from this common viewpoint, both the narrator and Mrs. Todd know intimately that they are not leaving the Queen's Twin alone. A relational space has been delineated, conflating scales, shrinking distances, and performing a manner of global consciousness that eschewed the complications of war.

#### **Intermingled Consciousnesses: What Literature Can Do**

"I don't really feel able to explain, but she kind o' declared war, at least folks thought so," says Mrs. Todd about Mrs. Captain Tolland, the unnamed title character of Jewett's "The Foreigner."<sup>45</sup> Published eighteen months later in the same magazine as "The Queen's Twin," in the context of the Philippine-American War, Jewett's other imperial sketch undertook yet again to challenge the turn-of-the-century insensibility to the inner significance of alien lives—of lives, that is, that the New England community of Dunnet, standing as a synecdoche of a white nation, was at a loss to integrate, let alone commune with. Reflecting on "our American greenness in problems of armed conquest and colonization" apropos of the Philippines, William James lamented: "We meant no special trickery, but just handled our new problem after the pattern of the situations to which we were accustomed, viewing it as a new business enterprise. The Filipino mind, of course, was the

absolutely vital feature in the situation but this, being merely a psychological, and not a legal phenomenon, we disregarded it practically.”<sup>46</sup> “The Foreigner” of Jewett’s story is no Filipina. We come to learn her story bit by bit—how she claimed to be of French ancestry and came from “one of the Wind’ard islands.” Left alone in Kingston to take care of herself after the yellow fever had killed all her relatives, she was “rescued” in the 1840s by three Dunnet sea-captains as they routinely took their part of the traffic in Maine timber, Caribbean sugar, and human bodies.<sup>47</sup> However different the colonial context, the writing and publishing of “The Foreigner” while the U.S. was “entangled” in the Philippines pushes us to read Jewett’s sketch as her own way of dealing with the Philippines question, or, more accurately, of trying to “practically,” that is fictionally, in her case, address the “vital feature” of the mind of the racial other.

An unrelated story of sorts (it had to wait more than half a century to be republished), “The Foreigner” is a story of and about relation.<sup>48</sup> On a stormy night, Mrs. Todd, worrying about her mother who lives away on a lonely island, invites herself in the narrator’s apartment for a comforting chat. As the night grows old, reminiscences creep in of another stormy night when “old Miss Captain Tolland” (alias “the foreigner”) died—a strange night that ended with the apparition of the foreigner’s mother’s phantasmal appearance to both the dying woman and Mrs. Todd. This hallucination, to take up the contemporary psychical terminology, could have contributed to further ostracizing the mulatto from the French Isles, as the “dark” figure of the mother reiterated the racial otherness of the so-called “foreigner.”<sup>49</sup> Instead, Mrs. Todd, who had promised her own mother, however half-heartedly, to take care of the stranger, suddenly found herself holding hands with the dying woman, bonded with her by their common experience of the beckoning of the occult. As Mrs. Todd remembers that strange night and the intimate relation between mother and daughter across the great divide of death, the threatened link between herself and her own mother is restored, as her intimacy is strengthened with

the narrator, who finds herself participating in this border experience of “join[ing] worlds together.”<sup>50</sup>

“The Foreigner,” along with other sketches by Jewett, has been read as the construction of a feminist utopia (Pryse), as a spiritualist, Swedenborgian-inspired story (Heller), and more recently, as a meditation on social and racial exclusion (Schrag, Foote) via the use of the Gothic and the genre of the ghost story as tools of imperialist amnesia and nostalgia (Gleason).<sup>51</sup> But it may also be useful to go back to her sketch in the more specific context of turn-of-the-century U.S. imperialism that raised the question of the boundaries of selves anew when they were no longer of “our kind.” Unlike “The Queen’s Twin,” “The Foreigner” did not content itself with pairing two consciousnesses through extrasensory perception. It shattered the partition between selves and attempted to imagine a commons, indexed on the binding of permeable particularities and the agency of subliminal selves across a racial and imperial rift. Making the most of the possibilities of fiction, the sketch tried out another of the research topics of the newly founded American branch of the SPR—the occult correspondence between the living and the dead that enabled the linkage of selves through the sharing of mystical or hallucinatory experiences of connection across the metaphysical divide of death. “All of a sudden she set right up in bed with her eyes wide open, an’ I stood an’ put my arm behind her; ... an’ I looked the way she was lookin’, an’ I see someone standin’ there against the dark,” confides Mrs. Todd in her own dialectal tongue – “the way,” as “in the direction of” or “in the same manner as.”<sup>52</sup> What is happening is a conjoining of selves through an intermingling of viewpoints.<sup>53</sup> To catch a glimpse of the “dark face,” Mrs. Todd has to discard the position of the external spectator which condemns us to remain blind to the “inner significance” of the lives of others, to quote James in *Talks to Teachers*.<sup>54</sup> James explains:

We are but finite and each one of us has some single specialized vocation of his own. ... only in some pitiful



dreamer, some philosopher, poet or romancer, or when the common practical man becomes a lover, does the hard externality give way, and a gleam of insight into the ejective world ... the vast world of inner life beyond us, so different from that of outer seeming, illuminate our mind. Then the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then *our self is riven and its narrow interest fly to pieces, then a new center and a new perspective must be found* (italics mine).<sup>55</sup>

When apperceiving the “dark face” of the foreigner’s mother, Mrs. Todd’s “whole scheme of customary values” indeed gets “confounded.” Her self, because of love, or because of “the poet or romancer[’s]” art of fiction, is riven, and “its narrow interest fly to pieces.” No longer focusing on her own troubles, the New Englander becomes aware of a new center, or, more technically, her own center of consciousness shifts to its indeterminate margins: the penumbra of the self where, according to James, things of which we are dimly aware or even unaware suddenly beckon us. In the chiaroscuro of the death chamber, something happens around the unlit edges of perception. If we follow James’s topology, Mrs. Todd’s shift of focus allows the marginal, or subliminal, regions of her consciousness to come momentarily to the fore; open as these regions are to the influence of other consciousnesses, what happens in this mystical moment of interaction is the performance of an odd continuity between formerly discrete selves. In *Human Immortality*, published in 1898, James inserts a graph displaying one horizontal line (the threshold between the subliminal and the superliminal) cutting through a wave that represents a stream of consciousness.<sup>56</sup> “The graph,” says critic Francesca Bordogna, “illustrates not only the threshold of consciousness of one individual but also the fact that different ‘organisms’ could intermingle below the threshold of consciousness. ... If the threshold ‘sank low enough to uncover all the waves,’ the consciousness (or consciousnesses) surfacing above the threshold line might also become continuous.”<sup>57</sup> In the

shared hallucinatory experience described in Jewett's tale, Mrs. Todd and the foreigner's selves are no longer circumscribed and insulated. They have become porous, permeable not only to the influence of the departed spirit—which, according to James, may have a subliminal consciousness of her own—but open also to each other's influences within what he calls a "cosmic consciousness" or a "mother-sea."<sup>58</sup> Plunging into a mother-sea, indeed, Mrs. Todd and the foreigner mingle their selves for a moment across divides at once racial, cultural, imperial, and metaphysical. Never does Mrs. Todd lose her self entirely, however. The first person pronoun "I" abides and recurs in her narrative. She and the foreigner remain different even as they "ha[ve] hold of hands."<sup>59</sup> Thus Jewett's late sketch also takes place in the unstable space of confluence *cum* difference that fascinated James in the last years of his life. Offering the reader a series of triangulations between consciousnesses—Mrs. Todd, the foreigner, and "Mother"; Mrs. Todd, the narrator, and the foreigner; the reader, the foreigner, and the narrator—the text implements the self-compounding of consciousnesses so dear to James, in which continuity is established without doing away with difference, and "pulses of experience" throb in sync and in defiance of selfishness and exclusion.<sup>60</sup>

Such intermingling of selves—that of the mixed-raced woman from the West Indies, who, the story suggests, may have tried to run away from slavery in Martinique, only to be caught up by the fate of the tragic mulatta on the cold New England coast<sup>61</sup>—only happens in death, which may be—and has been—interpreted as an ultimate safeguard against cultural or literal miscegenation. Something remains, however, that cannot be too easily dismissed: the persistence within the community, in its very heart—Mrs. Todd's garden—of "some strange and pungent odors that roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past. Some of these might once have belonged to sacred and mystic rites, and have had some occult knowledge handed with them down the centuries; but now they pertained only to humble compounds brewed at intervals with molasses or vinegar or spirits

in a small caldron on Mrs. Todd’s kitchen stove.”<sup>62</sup> What has been read as a survival of New England witchery begs a new interpretation once the reader has been acquainted with the “other” story of Dunnet Landing. In the distorted mirror of Mrs. Todd’s self, there lurks an “Africanist” presence, to take up Toni Morrison’s phrase, that will not pass.<sup>63</sup> The foreign, in the end, does not abide as a ghost only, but as a throbbing presence within the fantasmatic New England self.

Apropos “The Philippine Question,” James complained in 1899: “If ever there was a situation to be handled psychologically, it was this one. . . . [W]e have treated the Filipinos as if they were a painted picture, an amount of mere matter in our way. They are too remote from us ever to be realized as they exist in their inwardness.”<sup>64</sup> Jewett’s “foreigner,” as we remember her, is not “a painted picture,” but an eloquent inwardness brought close to us in the mother-sea of intermingled consciousnesses. Handling the situation “psychologically,” I suggest, may even be what Jewett purposed to do in her late sketch—to use the possibilities of fiction to try out alternative solutions to the “problem” raised by the intrusion of a foreign inwardness in the community of Dunnet.

### CONCLUSION

It may not be mere chance that Jewett never included “The Queen’s Twin” nor “The Foreigner” in *Pointed Firs*. They are “with” her other sketches, yet never quite made it into an all-inclusive whole, or *œuvre*. They are tales of relation, of conjunction across geographical distances and unbridgeable differences that do not however preclude intimacy and love—or, vice versa, tales of intimacy and love that never quite dismiss difference. “Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes,” James wrote in *A Pluralistic Universe*.<sup>65</sup> “The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom,” he adds.<sup>66</sup> When consciousness is no more a substantive entity but “a particular sort of relation towards one another”—and

Jewett's "foreigner," after all, even her "Queen," are nothing but relations, stories that are shared and used as links conjoining regional and national and imperial porous selves—there emerge new possibilities of interaction that can never be circumscribed within the neat boundaries of a system or an empire.<sup>67</sup> Jewett's late sketches do participate in this search for, and more importantly in this practice of, shattering the essential foundations of the self; because they require readers to try out new perspectives and ask us to experience the multifariousness of truth in the making, they are experimental spaces where frontiers tremble and words lose their fixed referents to become deictics. The Queen's Twin and the foreigner are not stand-alone units; those substantives are deceiving inasmuch as, to take up a Jamesian phrase, neither of them exist as "substantive parts."<sup>68</sup> Both only acquire meaning in and as relation—to other characters, to the reader. Such an aesthetic tour-de-force, I propose, is Jewett's way of doing philosophy and politics—turning substantives into empty signifiers, fragile spaces to be inhabited; sentient non-essences that also, however, and disturbingly so, tend to possess, or invade, or conquer, one's self. This should not be dismissed. Reading Jewett's tales of the compounding of selves does not erase the anxiety that somehow goes unacknowledged in James's description of a self that could actually step out of the body and invade physical space. Neither in Jewett nor in James does the thrill of such intimacy of consciousnesses across difference go without the fright of (com)penetration, the ambivalent excitement of possession. We are puzzled and should remain so, left as we are to trust that "something [which] always escapes," the "unclassified residuum" of experience that defies interpretive closure and the confines of Jewett's ever unsettled *œuvre*.<sup>69</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James, "Confidence of a 'Psychical Researcher,'" 374.

<sup>2</sup> Jewett, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, 110-111.



<sup>3</sup> Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> On Henry and William, see Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, and Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*. Henry James’s esteem for Jewett’s work is well known; see Bishop, “Henry James Criticizes the Tory Lover.” Their literary friendship, though possibly begun as early as 1881, did not flourish until September, 1898, when she and Annie Fields visited James at Lamb House. Soon after, in his notebook entry for February 19, 1899, he acknowledged that her story “A Lost Lover” in the *Tales of New England* had provided him with the germ of an idea for a story. In “Mr. and Mrs. Fields,” he famously and ambiguously hailed *Pointed Firs* as her “beautiful little quantum of achievement.” See Henry James, “Mr. and Mrs. Fields,” 278.

<sup>5</sup> Jewett, *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, 225.

<sup>6</sup> See “Sarah Orne Jewett Correspondence.”

<sup>7</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*, 224 and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> See Posnock, *Renunciation*, 67-73.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*, 244; 248.

<sup>10</sup> Carette, *William James’s Hidden Religious Imagination*, 182.

<sup>11</sup> Jewett’s contribution to American letters, once hailed as the work of sympathy, has been revisited as complicit in the turn-of-the-century racist imperialism that was not uncommon among the New England elite. The turning point in Jewett’s reception is June Howard’s edited collection *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs*, in particular Sandra Zagarell’s “Country’s Portrayal of Community and the Exclusion of Difference” and Susan Gillman’s “Regionalism and nationalism in Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*.” In “Sarah Orne Jewett’s ‘The Foreigner’ and the Transamerican Routes of New England Regionalism,” Gleason also points to Fields and Jewett’s friendship with Thomas Aldrich, a well-known Bostonian nativist, and their 1896 cruise in the Caribbean, during which they dined with Haitian president Florvil Hyppolite. Jewett’s letters from the Caribbean are fraught with a racialized rhetoric reminiscent,

Gleason contends, of the nostalgic plantation literature of the 1850s.

<sup>12</sup> Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, "The Price of Order," 219.

<sup>14</sup> Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot," 422.

<sup>15</sup> James, *Talks to Teachers*, v.

<sup>16</sup> Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 191.

<sup>17</sup> Petrie, "'To Make Them Acquainted,'" 104. On the cultural and political work of "acquaintance" in postbellum U.S. regionalism, see Petrie's full article.

<sup>18</sup> Howells, "Editor's Study," 639.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 638-39.

<sup>21</sup> See Roudeau, "Geographies of difference," 130-131; 143-149 and Wonham, "Writing Realism, Policing Consciousnesses," 702-706.

<sup>22</sup> Jewett, "The Queen's Twin," 238.

<sup>23</sup> Disraeli, "The Maintenance of Empire," 272.

<sup>24</sup> "To-day the Northman, the Norman, and the Englishman, and a young nation on this western shore of the Atlantic are all kindred who, possessing a rich inheritance, should own the closest of kindred ties." Jewett, *The Story of the Normans*, 366.

<sup>25</sup> See Schrag, "'Whiteness' as Loss," 189; 195 and Zagarell, "Crosscurrents," 358.

<sup>26</sup> Jewett, *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, 168-169.

<sup>27</sup> Gleason, "Sarah Orne Jewett's 'The Foreigner,'" 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Jewett, "The Queen's Twin," 242; 243.

<sup>30</sup> "James's interest in supernormal phenomena has been traced back to the late 1860s, but he started more actively investigating psychic phenomena in the 1880s. In 1884 he joined the SPR of London, serving as president of the society in 1894-5, and as vice president for the subsequent decade. He was also one of the

founders for the American SPR, established in 1884.” Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> On Jewett and spiritism, see Heller, “Living for the Other World,” 80-81; 88-90 and Myers, *Human Personality*, xxii.

<sup>32</sup> It is also the case in other stories by Jewett, most notably in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* between Mrs. Todd and her mother. See Folsom, “‘Tact is a Kind of Mind-Reading,’” 68-70 and also Solomon, “‘The Queen’s Twin,’” 359.

<sup>33</sup> Jewett, “The Queen’s Twin,” 244.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>35</sup> James, “A Suggestion about Mysticism,” 87.

<sup>36</sup> Solomon, “‘The Queen’s Twin,’” 365.

<sup>37</sup> Jewett, *Letters*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Jewett, *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, 242.

<sup>39</sup> James, *Talks to Teachers*, v.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Gleason, “Sarah Orne Jewett’s ‘The Foreigner,’” 40.

<sup>42</sup> James uses the expression “*vi et armis*” to characterize “the pretension of our nation to inflict its own inner ideals and institutions *vi et armis* upon Orientals.” James, *Talk to Teachers*, vi.

<sup>43</sup> Rafael, “Colonial Domesticity,” 661.

<sup>44</sup> Jewett, “The Queen’s Twin,” 245.

<sup>45</sup> Jewett, “The Foreigner,” 157

<sup>46</sup> James, “Diary of a French Naval Officer,” 685.

<sup>47</sup> See Walsh, “Sugar, Sex, and Empire,” 313-314.

<sup>48</sup> Green was the first to include “The Foreigner” in his 1962 edition, *The World of Dunnet Landing*.

<sup>49</sup> Jewett, “The Foreigner,” 166.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>51</sup> See Pryse, “Woman at Sea,” 247-250; Heller, “Living for the Other World,” 79-80, 88-89; Schrag, “‘Whiteness’ as Loss,” 188-190, 199; Foote, “‘I Feared to Find,’” 51-56; and Gleason, “Sarah Orne Jewett’s ‘The Foreigner,’” 24-25, 29-39.

<sup>52</sup> Jewett, "The Foreigner," 166.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>54</sup> James, *Talks to Teachers*, 242.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 240-241.

<sup>56</sup> James, *Human Immortality*, 64.

<sup>57</sup> Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 207-208.

<sup>58</sup> James, *Human Immortality*, vi.

<sup>59</sup> Jewett, "The Foreigner," 166.

<sup>60</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 282. He wrote, "On the principle of going behind the conceptual function altogether, however, and looking to the more primitive flux of the sensational life for reality's true shape, a way is open to us, ... The concrete pulses of experience appear pent in by no such definite limits as our conceptual substitutes for them are confined by."

<sup>61</sup> Gleason, "Sarah Orne Jewett's 'The Foreigner,'" 34.

<sup>62</sup> Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6; Schrag, "'Whiteness' as Loss," 195.

<sup>64</sup> James, "The Philippine Question," 159.

<sup>65</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 321

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 321-322.

<sup>67</sup> James, "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?," 478.

<sup>68</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*, 246.

<sup>69</sup> James, "The Hidden Self," 361.