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READING FREEMAN AGAIN, ANEW

STEPHANIE PALMER, MYRTO DRIZOU,
CÉCILE ROUDEAU

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930) is best known, read and taught today as the author of short regionalist fiction, and true enough, her literary production is largely set in rural New England, a region she depicts in its period of economic decline or marginalization after the US Civil War. A New England nun, however, she was not.¹ Reading Freeman with and against the grain implies unlearning what we think we know about her and her oeuvre. Freeman’s work frustrates our attempts to situate her in clearly delineated categories because her prolific production spanned over nearly fifty years, from the early 1880s and well into the modernist era; because she experimented with a diverse array of forms and genres, writing poems and novels and sketches, children’s tales, sentimental stories, and protest novels; because her biography tells us that she straddled social classes; because, and most importantly perhaps, her work ultimately resists many of the very frames that have brought her back to visibility (transcendentalism, sentimentalism, realism, naturalism). Her literary production is robust and varied enough to bear the weight of a profound critical rethinking which questions the paradigms that have obscured her work—and that of other (women) writers—from view.

An increasingly vibrant literary scholarship has already opened new critical expectations and has unsettled the conditions of normative legibility that guided the relatively cloistered readings of her work in the decades following her last publications. Some fifty years after her death, and thanks to the recovery work that brought her back from the margins of American letters in the

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1 1980s, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman gained recognition in the US and abroad at
 2 the intersection of diverse and sometimes overlapping literary critical rubrics,
 3 including New England “local color,” rebellious regionalism and female natu-
 4 ralism. More recently, however, Freeman studies have taken a different set of
 5 turns including Gothic, ecocritical, queer, and transnational approaches. New
 6 research on Freeman, invigorated by the foundation of the Mary E. Wilkins
 7 Freeman Society at the 2017 meeting of the ALA in Boston, has disclosed unex-
 8 pected aspects of her work. This essay collection, co-edited by the three found-
 9 ers of the society and featuring a concluding piece by one of the most important
 10 scholars to lead the first wave of Freeman’s recovery, Sandra Zagarell, aims at
 11 pushing further in this direction. It does not intend so much to *recover* Freeman
 12 as to *uncover* alternative modes of reading her work.

13 While the volume focuses explicitly on Freeman, it nonetheless self-
 14 consciously seeks to avoid the pitfalls that have on occasion affected projects of
 15 authorial recovery, especially the dangers of imposing self-coherence and artis-
 16 tic consistency. Hence, reopening the case of Freeman does not mean revert-
 17 ing to the trope of the writer as an exceptional figure or the myth of unified
 18 authorial intention, let alone a biographical approach that often dismisses the
 19 author’s late production—in the case of Freeman, the texts that she wrote once
 20 married and “delocalized” to New Jersey. To the contrary, instead of imposing
 21 a single interpretive grid on Freeman’s work, we offer a variety of authorial and
 22 critical practices, which we hope will allow future scholars to find in Freeman’s
 23 texts the means to challenge previous readings, including the very categories we
 24 have chosen for analysis here. The road to at once diversifying and recovering a
 25 new set of critical readings of Freeman’s oeuvre may then best begin by explor-
 26 ing the lesser-known history of Freeman’s reception from the last decades of
 27 the nineteenth century—when she first gained fame—to today’s post-recovery
 28 critical modes of approaching her oeuvre.

30 A NEW ENGLAND WRITER, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

31 Mary Ella Wilkins² was born in 1852 in Randolph, Massachusetts, to Warren
 32 Wilkins, a carpenter and housebuilder, and his wife Eleanor (Mary changed
 33 her middle name to Eleanor to commemorate her mother, who died in 1880).
 34 Randolph’s economic base of agriculture and shoe manufacturing was eroding
 35 by the time Mary was a teenager. In 1867 the family moved to the resort town
 36 of Brattleboro, Vermont, where her father set up a dry goods business, one
 37 that eventually failed. Mary was well educated, but the family was increasingly
 38 impecunious, and she taught school and gave music lessons in her youth. By
 39 the late 1870s she sent poetry and children’s stories to magazines and news-
 40 papers around the country, and in 1883, she published her first story for adults,
 41 “Two Old Lovers.” Soon after the publication of that story, Mary’s father died,
 42 leaving her without immediate family. She, then, moved back to Randolph,

where she lived for nearly twenty years with a childhood friend, Mary Wales and Wales's parents. In 1902, after a prolonged engagement, she married Dr Charles Manning Freeman and moved to his home town of Metuchen, New Jersey. The marriage seemed happy for a time, but by 1909 Charles had entered sanitariums due to excessive drinking, and the couple broke after 1919 in a formal separation. Her writing, most especially in her first two short story collections for adults, *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1887) and *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891), as well as in her novel *Pembroke* (1894), propelled her into a world of literary celebrity; she was friendly with several prominent Northeastern editors including Mary Louise Booth, Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, and Henry Alden, as well as authors like Sarah Orne Jewett, William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, and Rudyard Kipling. Although she earned the most royalties from her short stories, she also wrote poetry, thirteen novels, a play, work in collaboration with other writers, eight children's books, and a handful of articles.³

While New England made Mary E. Wilkins Freeman famous, New England also was the reason of her dismissal. Freeman, and other (female) writers of her generation, were hastily labeled "local color writers" and, as such, were excluded from the process of canon formation in the 1920s. Yet a local flavor, or a sense of rootedness, had not always rhymed with obsolescence, or queer-ness. One needs only to go back to the last decades of the nineteenth century to grasp how place was *the* major paradigm in the literary reconstruction of the nation. In the 1880s, when Mary E. Wilkins entered the market of regionalist literary production, New England was no longer the "seed-bed of this great American republic, and of all that is likely to come of it," as Harriet Beecher Stowe had once claimed, and illustrated (Stowe, n.p.). New England had become a region almost like any other, a "place" with its singularity and its situatedness. William Dean Howells, a champion of "local color" in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Magazine*, did support the New Englander Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, but he also praised Mary Noailles Murfree of Tennessee, Hart Crane of California, and Hamlin Garland of Wisconsin, with the rationale that truth, the truth of the nation most importantly, is plural, local, and always circumscribed—not indexed, that is, on the principle of generality, but contingent on the place where it was first articulated. For the dean of American letters, US literature, then, was to be as decentralized as the nation itself had become.⁴ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, as one of the particular voices of the nation, was part of this regional destiny of American literature.⁵ Local as her work was, or rather because of its rootedness somewhere, it was representative of a commons that was built on differences, rather than similarities. This equivalence of local differences that Howells's influential "Editor's Studies" championed again and again was what made the nation (and national literature) again possible after the Civil War.

1 The cult of the local, however, did not last. When an overseas US imperialism
 2 developed at the turn of the century under the aegis of Theodore Roosevelt,
 3 the Howellsian local pluralism that had made the heyday of regionalism in
 4 American letters no longer reigned supreme. The peculiar became instead the
 5 label of an anti-Americanism. In that scheme, local color New England, being
 6 the furthest away perhaps from a mythical West where manhood could con-
 7 quer and reign, featured as the true antithesis of the national mythography, and
 8 Freeman, among others, became the representative of morbid femininity and
 9 treacherous parochialism. Indeed, Roosevelt's definition of "true patriotism"
 10 left very little doubt as to who the enemies of the nation were:

11
 12 In the first place we wish to be broadly American and national, as
 13 opposed to being local or sectional. We do not wish, in politics, in litera-
 14 ture, or in art, to develop that unwholesome parochial spirit, that over-
 15 exaltation of the little community at the expense of the great nation,
 16 which produces what has been described as the patriotism of the village,
 17 the patriotism of the belfry. (166)

18
 19 The likes of the Shattuck sisters in "A Mistaken Charity" (1883), one half-deaf,
 20 the other half-blind, who braved old age and the poor house's laws, to get back
 21 "home," or the stubborn Marm Lawson in "Brakes and White Vi'lets" (1884),
 22 who kills her sickly granddaughter by keeping her in her moldy old house lest
 23 she should lose her to the city, became dissonant notes in an American clamor-
 24 ous symphony. Strenuous as they were, the task of being the representative, if
 25 peculiar, voices of the nation was no longer theirs—even if New England, as the
 26 former center of a national literary imaginary, kept something of its grandeur
 27 in the midst of its demise.

28 No wonder, then, that in his *History of American Literature since 1870*
 29 (1915), Fred Lewis Pattee, in spite of his New England origins, or rather
 30 because of them, had "the New England period" in American letters *precede*
 31 "the National period," as if New England literature could only testify to "[t]he
 32 passing of an old regime" (233). Freeman, accordingly, was classified among
 33 the "recorders of the New England decline" (Chapter XI), a declension narra-
 34 tive that Pattee, however, did not initiate. As Fetterley and Pryse (2003) remind
 35 us, from the turn of the century onwards, the surveys of US literature sys-
 36 tematically categorized New England literature as passé and, as such, unfit to
 37 represent US literature. The works of Freeman, but also of Sarah Orne Jewett,
 38 Rose Terry Cooke, or Alice Brown, were spurned as delicate, or genteel at best,
 39 unless they were anathematized as deleterious reading.

40 Interestingly, however, at the turn of the century, Freeman did not suffer
 41 from the charge of "un-Americanness" as much as, say, Jewett, who was last-
 42 ingly plagued by her genteel origins. Like her predecessor Rose Terry Cooke,

Freeman was redeemed of her New Englandness, as it were, by her social class—the modest background she grew up in. And because she wrote on what she knew—poor country people’s lives, “the narrow environment of New England villages,” that was hers (Pattee 236)—and did so, allegedly, by tapping in the “austere and limited” (236) schooling that she had received as a child, she was spared of the sin of bookishness or artistry. Pattee characteristically insisted that she was born a realist. “She seems to have followed no one,” he wrote, “realism was a thing native to her” (236). And as a realist, she could not find the door of the pantheon of American letters entirely closed to her. In April 1926, Freeman became the first recipient of the William Dean Howells Medal for Distinction in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters—a distinction that should have sealed her fate and her fame. Not so, however.

Freeman’s realism was either not enough, or too much to be true. Not grim enough for Edith Wharton, who famously reproached her for considering New England “through [. . .] rose-coloured spectacles,” and overlooking the “outcropping granite” in favor of the “sweet-fern” and “mountain-laurel”; Freeman’s stories, for Pattee, were to the contrary too stern and somber—the outcome of a Puritanism gone awry, the sickly flowering of a degenerating country.⁶ “When she approached literature,” he diagnosed, articulating an origin narrative that would stick to Freeman for decades,

it was as a daughter of the Puritans, as one who had been nurtured in repression. Love in its tropical intensity, the fierce play of the passions, color, profusion, outspoken toleration, freedom—romance in its broadest connotation—of these she knew nothing. She had lived her whole life in the warping atmosphere of inherited Puritanism, of a Puritanism that had lost its earlier vitality and had become a convention and a superstition, in a social group inbred for generations and narrowly restricted to neighborhood limits. (236)

This belated, if critical, Puritanism, was to be Freeman’s birthmark, both a blemish and a blessing, as well as her costly entrance fee to American letters. Three decades after Pattee, Perry D. Westbrook’s influential sum, *Acres of Flint: Writers of Rural New England* (1951), made the exact same diagnosis. Intent on salvaging from oblivion those writers of rural New England that had been buried as unworthy of praise, Westbrook did so paradoxically by identifying their works as the perverted avatars of an ambivalent past. He observed in “a group of New England rural writers, most of them village-bred women,” “a conscience that had been exaggerated to the point of becoming hysteria.” Singling out Freeman among them as having “a morbidly sensitive conscience” (88), Westbrook read her texts as “the workings of a lopsided will,” “crooked” (91) for lack of adequate objects. For Westbrook, then, one thing was certain:

1 the New England of cantankerous old maids and stubborn farmers could only
 2 be conjugated in the past; this literature was a morbid relic of a history that no
 3 longer holds true, and, as such, it could not be America's authoritative writing.

4 Myths die hard; and Freeman, labeled and advertised as "a recluse from
 5 New England," as soon as 1893, continued to feature as one vestigium of
 6 another era in the heart of Progressive America (Doyle 287). At the turn of
 7 the century, critics could wonder, without the slightest irony, at her using a
 8 typewriter (Moss). Was she supposed to wield a quill? And rare were those
 9 who tried to extricate Freeman from the enclosure of the past. When, in 1898,
 10 Joseph Edgar Chamberlin of the *Critic* tried to return her to the present, his
 11 words must have sounded like a provocation: Randolph is a suburb of Bos-
 12 ton, he insisted, and Freeman knows and appreciates the cosmopolitan city as
 13 much as you readers. Her window overlooks electrical tracks, and her house
 14 is heated by radiators! But Chamberlin wrote against the grain; for most crit-
 15 ics, and the readers after them, Freeman was an authentic New Englander, her
 16 prose was rooted in the granite soils of her native New England, and her gaze
 17 warped by centuries of Puritanism. New England, yet again. It may not come
 18 as a surprise, then, that New England served as the pivot of the second-wave
 19 recovery of Freeman, but this time it was as the foil against which her work
 20 was read.

21 In 2003, Fetterley and Pryse's *Writing Out of Place* deterritorialized Freeman's
 22 work the better to enroll her texts as regionalist critique.⁷ By de-emphasizing the
 23 New England dimension of her oeuvre, they meant to counter her (and other writ-
 24 ers') stigmatization as mere providers of quaint picturesqueness and anecdotal, if
 25 not dangerous, pre-modern peculiarity. Regionalist Freeman, they explained, has
 26 not much in common with her local color avatar, who should be regarded as an
 27 ideological fabrication serving the interests of a masculinist national hegemony.
 28 Because rootedness essentializes place and transforms it into one of the commodi-
 29 ties produced by the nation state, it also reifies the oeuvre which, as a relic of the
 30 past, becomes yet another artefact of national production. Denaturalizing region-
 31 alism, understanding regionalism as a "discourse," instead of a "geographical
 32 manifestation," as a point of resistance in the power network that cannot be eas-
 33 ily or exactly located, has a clear political pay-off: regionalism is thereby turned
 34 into a social or political strategy of defiance—a situated knowledge, not an essen-
 35 tial emanation of a particular, and often marginal, place (Fetterley and Pryse 7).
 36 Accordingly, reading Freeman as partaking in regionalist critique is important: it
 37 means aligning her stories with "elements of disruption, resistance, and revolu-
 38 tion" (125); it uncovers a "politics of resistance to the imperialism of gender, age,
 39 and class" (249); reading Freeman "out of place" allows one to read her "from
 40 inside the perspective of the queer" (332). But equally important is to understand
 41 that such radical dismissal of New England as a hermeneutic category in Free-
 42 man's work was preceded by other attempts to push beyond a reading of her work

as systematically harnessed to place. Such history that unfolded from the 1970s to the 1990s is the history of Freeman's recovery.

TWISTS AND TURNS IN FREEMAN SCHOLARSHIP

Most readers who come to Freeman have been influenced by the feminist critics who prompted renewed attention to her oeuvre from the 1970s to the 1990s, a work of recovery that itself bifurcated into two main branches. On the one hand, there were those who chose to depict the predominately female world of late nineteenth-century New England that she belonged to as a nurturing, mother-centered realm (Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature*), and on the other, as early as the 1974 Feminist Press edition of Freeman's short stories by Michelle Clark, and up to the 1983 Norton edition by Marjorie Pryse, there were critics who focused their commentary and story selection on tales of defiance featuring characters (mostly female) who rebelled against the gender and class conventions of their time. Writes Pryse, "For the first time in American peacetime history, the women of an entire region were left in a world transformed into a quasimatriarchal one both by the casualties of the Civil War and by the departure of a substantial proportion of the region's remaining young healthy male population." And she adds, more specifically about Freeman: "Throughout her career, whenever she addressed the themes of rebellion and revolt, in the village fiction that focuses primarily on women, she wrote her most successful work" (viii, xii). The boundaries between the two readings were not as clear-cut as it may seem. But suffice it to say that, coming out of the works of philosophers, psychologists, or historians as diverse as Hélène Cixous, Lillian Faderman, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, some feminist critics insisted on women's ethic of care, and their willingness to cultivate and maintain mutual bonds, particularly with other women, while others emphasized instead women's resistance and direct confrontation to patriarchy. Because there was in both cases a potential for essentialist application, much of this scholarship has been contested over the years, sometimes by the very critics that had initiated it. Yet its central premise, more carefully historicized and somehow nuanced, has remained a pivot of later criticism—that women of a certain class and ethnicity have drawn sustenance from each other rather than from the men around them.

Between the two, Freeman's fiction has largely fallen on the side of rebellion and resistance, as chafing against the directive of the female ethic of care. Michelle Clark (1974) wrote that Freeman characters' dependence on each other economically and socially leads them to "fight, envy, disagree, compete, bicker, and manipulate" even though they are often usually intensely loyal in the end (195). Josephine Donovan details a shift in the 1870s and 1880s toward female education and work outside the home, causing a rift between mothers and daughters in fiction by Jewett and Freeman. Whereas

1 Jewett chooses the mother's matriarchal realm, Donovan proposes, Freeman
2 chooses the daughter's longing to escape ("Silence or Capitulation"). Similarly,
3 Pryse associates Jewett with a "reunion with mother" and Freeman with a
4 "revolt of the mother" (ix). Most notably, Mary R. Reichardt's work recover-
5 ing Freeman's short fiction across her long career argues that Freeman's fiction
6 only partially corroborates the findings of feminist researchers into women's
7 lives: "Rather, the emotional and mutually dependent bonds women form with
8 other women in Freeman's New England more often than not take on a dis-
9 turbingly threatening or ominous tone" (104). Indeed, for every early Free-
10 man story that celebrates a women's special brand of strength—"The Revolt
11 of 'Mother'" (1890), "Louisa" (1890), "A Church Mouse" (1889), and "A
12 Poetess" (1890)—there are later stories in which caring and nurturing resemble
13 smothering or disciplining—"Old Woman Magoun" (1905), "The Reign of the
14 Doll" (1904), "The Lost Ghost" (1903), or "The Selfishness of Amelia Lam-
15 kin" (1908). More than other female writers of her generation, then, Freeman
16 has gained prominence as "dark Freeman," away from the matriarchal utopias
17 of Jewett's stories or the "rose-and lavender" palette that Wharton had tried
18 to attach to her name (*A Backward Glance* 294). Freeman thus complicates an
19 abstract sense of quasimatriarchal realms and the female ethic of care by show-
20 ing that women's power involves the same contradictions, difficult choices, and
21 abuse of boundaries that any kind of power inherently entails. Rather than
22 romanticizing an idealized view of women's nurturing lives, Freeman adopts
23 a decidedly more modern stance that anticipates the expansion of power that
24 women have gradually, albeit not unconditionally, enjoyed. With sobriety and
25 compassion, she looks into particular instances where women's power takes
26 the edge of abuse. From our vantage point of the twenty-first century, we are
27 more prepared to discuss these aspects of her work.

28 Freeman scholars are indebted to Leah Blatt Glasser's critical biography
29 of Freeman *In a Closet Hidden* (1996), which was among the first works to
30 unlock Freeman's complex identity as a woman and an author. Glasser meticu-
31 lously analyzed Freeman's "psychology of self-division" (xviii) that would find
32 expression in thematic and narrative motifs, such as character doubles and mir-
33 ror scenes, which convey Freeman's own ambiguity about rebellion. Glasser's
34 research into Freeman's letters and manuscripts was paved by Brent Kendrick's
35 collection of Freeman's letters *The Infant Sphinx* (1985), another seminal book
36 that was based on archival research. Considering Freeman's long life, the scarcity
37 of her archives bears further question. The Mary Wilkins Freeman Collection
38 #7407 at the Clifton Waller Barrett Library, Special Collections Department,
39 University of Virginia, houses her books, a few of her story manuscripts, and
40 several letters which have already been published in *Infant Sphinx*. New let-
41 ters will appear in Brent Kendrick's forthcoming edited collection of her letters.
42 Additionally, Glasser cites a collection of three letters at the Alfred Williams

Anthony Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, and reminiscences of Freeman's time at Holyoke in the Mary E. Wilkins Freeman folder at Mount Holyoke College Archives. As we are uncovering new directions in Freeman studies, her correspondence may contain formerly ignored evidence that would buttress the hypotheses put forward in this collection. Going back to the archives may indeed flesh out what we perceive makes Freeman interesting today: the vibrant productivity of her later years; the move towards the non-human and non-normative forms of kinship with trees or non-human animals; the ongoing tensions of her oeuvre between writing to formula and experimentation with genres, between a complicity with certain forms of capitalism and a courageous resistance to the exploitation of labor, between her queer leanings and the necessity of female solidarity *malgré tout*.

Readers and scholars will likely continue to be drawn to Freeman for her depictions of female rebellion and defiance, yet recent work carries this line of inquiry into new directions: the fetish, the Gothic, and what Donna M. Campbell in this volume calls "the criminal."⁸ Taking up Westbrook's argument, yet reinscribing Freeman in her time and age, that of turn-of-the-century consumerism, Monika Elbert argues forcefully that her characters' sense of frustration with their narrow lives "leads to an excess of senseless and compulsive behavior reflected in frenzied and repeated activities, such as spending money, sewing incessantly, or collecting useless knick-knacks" (192). Such characters are fetishists rather than benign objects of cosmopolitan readers' sympathy. Jennifer Fleissner similarly argues that Louisa Ellis and other famous Freeman characters suffer from what is now called obsessive compulsive disorder (111–22), while Linda M. Grasso, reading Freeman's "Old Woman Magoun" alongside Sui Sin Far's "The Wisdom of the New," understands these desperate matricides as "symbolically encapsulat [ing] the writers' frustration, rage, and despair about their status as artists in a 'young' America that refuses to allow them to nurture their talent" (19). Rather than frightening and unproductive violence, these stories, Grasso concludes, produce "righteous anger" that "demands social justice" and "has the potential to create community" (19).

The political and social work of Freeman's communities of angry women and downtrodden men is probably most visible in her Gothic short fiction. Beth Wynne Fisker argues that ghosts in Freeman's stories record anxiety and ambivalence about childrearing. Roxanne Harde treats Freeman's child ghost in "The Little Maid at the Door" (1891) as one of several Victorian British or American child ghosts that indict society's practice of allowing children to suffer, particularly if they are involuntarily associated with erring and disgraced parents. Gothic short fiction has become a popular topic among Freeman critics in recent years, with new analyses by Dara Downey, Nicole Diederich, Daniel Mrozowski, Melissa Pennell, and Jennifer Bann among others, which mostly corroborate Fisker's sense that there is something disturbing about Freeman's

1 reading of mothers and children. In that sense, Freeman's Gothic was not only
 2 a belated reworking of the genre, but it also partook of a larger denunciation of
 3 the world in which she lived. A new edition of *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and*
 4 *Other Stories of the Supernatural* edited by Myrto Drizou, points to the impor-
 5 tance of this later collection in which "Freeman's Gothic challenges not only
 6 traditional gender stereotypes but also conventional representations of home"
 7 (xiv) and mother-daughter relationships in a changing world. Indeed, what
 8 remains thought-provoking about Freeman's work is how much she rebelled
 9 against the social wrongs of the turn-of-the-century US while simultaneously
 10 embracing some of the premises of a cosmopolitan, urban, and consumerist
 11 society (Elbert); how she was both fascinated by modernity and wary of a
 12 "progress" that brought its lots of social and economic problems to the US
 13 countryside.

14 As Sandra Zagarell reminds us in her introduction to the Penguin Classics
 15 edition of Freeman's stories, Freeman's first published short story, "Two Old
 16 Lovers" (1883), as well as "A Wayfaring Couple" (1885) are set in factory
 17 towns, as is *The Portion of Labor* (1901). Mostly because of the predominating
 18 sense that regionalism was a form of the pastoral, or because it was associated
 19 with the tradition of female benevolence literature, labor-capital relations have
 20 never been a major strand in Freeman criticism. But here again we may well
 21 have been blinded by persisting critical a-prioris concerning female "regional-
 22 ists." Debra Bernardi, for one, has read Freeman out of the tradition of female
 23 benevolence, and shown how Freeman's characters in her short stories rebel
 24 against scientific charity as bungled by ministers and middle-class female neigh-
 25 bors. Focusing on *The Portion of Labor* (1901), a novel about a shoe factory
 26 strike, Mary Marchand and Dorothy Berkson, on the other hand, have read
 27 it as a failed attempt to update a nineteenth-century tradition of benevolence
 28 literature, in which middle-class white women—drawing on their uniquely
 29 feminine powers of sympathy—descend upon a multi-ethnic working class.
 30 However, focusing on the childlike, unreasoning qualities of Freeman's heroine,
 31 Ellen Brewster, they disregard Ellen's acumen at public speaking, or Freeman's
 32 talent at reproducing the sordid self-respect of the working-class families that
 33 surround her main character. The novel does not sit neatly in a feminist tradi-
 34 tion of middle-class heroines who enter the public sphere through their reform
 35 work, because it focalizes factory conditions through the workers. Two essays
 36 in this volume revisit *The Portion of Labor*, a novel not reprinted since 1967,
 37 so as to draw attention to one neglected facet of Freeman's work, her social
 38 awareness and stubborn reformism.

39 Freeman's social reformism should not however be too quickly dissociated
 40 from her vision of racial relations. Freeman critics have begun to investigate
 41 the presence of racial anxiety in her work. In the introduction to the 1991
 42 *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*, Shirley Marchalonis makes it clear

that Freeman partook of the race theories of her day, using the language of bloodlines in her fiction and nonfiction, highlighting the Puritan ancestry of her characters, and contrasting that lineage to the more exotic, passionate, or violent French, Native American, and African American characters. Stephanie Palmer's work (2020) further addresses how Freeman's fictions were championed by contemporary critics as fine products of an Anglo-Saxon bloodline, but the wayward, nonconforming nature of Freeman's eccentrics, Palmer argues, ultimately troubled critics intent on upholding an image of the United States as a modern nation.

Many of the essays in this volume investigate the racial significations of Freeman's fiction and resist a "Freeman so white" reading of her oeuvre. Fogels's chapter, for instance, complicates what may first appear as the monolithic whiteness of Freeman's texts. Whiteness, as Hannah Lauren Murray has recently shown in her study of early US fiction, was less an essence than a status bestowed on those who exhibited certain traits, including respectability, industry, and sociality (4). The Shattuck sisters of "A Mistaken Charity," Fogels's chapter shows, fail to exhibit these typical traits by sliding into poverty and not caring that their roof is full of chinks or their chins full of hairs. Their refusal to accept charity raises questions about the instability of whiteness for poor women, the way that whiteness can be bestowed or lost in a liminal process involving "precarity and demotion" (Murray 6). Whereas many writers viewed the loss of white privilege as anxiety provoking, for Freeman, it could be humorous or even joyful. Monolithic whiteness is also unsettled by Freeman's complex handling of ethnicity. In *The Portion of Labor*, as shown in Rogers-Cooper's chapter, the intersection of gender, class, and ethnic identity questions working-class forms of resistance as found in naturalist novels of the time. While Ellen, Freeman's main character, is exceptionally beautiful, intelligent, and charismatic, she is also ableist and racialized as belonging to an Irish American culture—which turns the text into an exemplar of what Zagarell might call Freeman's, and the era's, ideological "cross-currents" (Zagarell, "Cross-Currents"). We tend to forget that power, and the power of women especially, can be racialized in Freeman. Campbell offers a rare reading of Freeman's disturbing novel *Madelon* (1896) which features a mixed-race heroine. The eponymous character, with French and Native bloodlines that are implicated in her stubborn self-reliance, is one of Freeman's strongest women, and her capacity for violence is rarely dealt with in feminist readings.

Acknowledging the series of interlinked turns that criticism on Freeman has undergone since the 1970s, and more specifically in the three decades since *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman* appeared (Marchalonis 1991), this volume, then, intends to push beyond critical regionalism (Zagarell, "Introduction" xviii), or rather, push critical regionalism into new directions. Cutting across the emphasis on both a Foucauldian discourse of heterotopia and a Deleuzian

1 deterritorializing impulse that tended to erase the material and historical pres-
 2 ence of New England (Fetterley and Pryse 2003), we believe that it is possi-
 3 ble to evade the pitfalls of essentialism without throwing away place with the
 4 bathwater of antiquarianism or the logic of regional commodification. In the
 5 2000s and 2010s, critics did recover New England yet not the New England of
 6 Pattee, Westbrook, or, for that matter, Richard Brodhead.⁹ Cécile Roudeau's *La*
 7 *Nouvelle-Angleterre: Politique d'une écriture* (2012) argues that erasing New
 8 England amounts to disallowing the tension between center and periphery that
 9 haunts Freeman's regionalism. If New England shapes Freeman's critical region-
 10 alism, she argues, it is because Freeman's New England, as both (ex-)center and
 11 periphery, is always critical of itself. For J. Samaine Lockwood, this self-criticism
 12 is related to a queer historicism practiced by Freeman and other women archi-
 13 tivists, who returned to history with a difference, by placing the unmarried New
 14 England daughter at the heart of their endeavor.

15 On the other hand, if differently, ecocriticism also reiterates that Freeman
 16 really *is* writing about New England, with its flowers, trees, animals, moun-
 17 tains, rivers, bridges, gardens, and crops, as well as, but not predominantly, the
 18 humans that dwell within it. Terrell F. Dixon shows how Freeman's *Understud-*
 19 *ies* (1901) and *Six Trees* (1903), later collections that have not yet received the
 20 attention they deserve, "present an expansive, evolving ecofeminist vision—
 21 one that avoids essentialism and that creates green women and green men who
 22 love and defend nature while engaged in ordinary life" (173). While it is useful
 23 to draw links between Freeman and the earlier New England transcendental-
 24 ists—and Dixon, Alaimo, and Stone have done so—these critics also identify
 25 differences, in that Freeman critiques traditional gender relations (Alaimo 60)
 26 to the point of proposing her own kind of queer regionalism or queer ecology.
 27 Freeman's intimate relationships between women and women,¹⁰ humans and
 28 trees, or women and objects, are not just sisterly, empathetic, or fetishistic.
 29 "(B)ecause of the non-normative formulation of kinship and domesticity that
 30 emerged out of them but also because of the ways in which they embody experi-
 31 ences of alienation from forms of biological, social, and economic reproduction
 32 involved in heterosexual domesticity" (Ansley 434–5), these alliances offer
 33 a queer form of resistance to hegemonic discourses and categories, something
 34 that has been increasingly brought to the fore as critics read more of Freeman's
 35 oeuvre, moving beyond her two canonical collections.

36 With the emergence of digitized newspaper databases, more and more Free-
 37 man stories are being discovered that were not reprinted in her story collections
 38 or listed in Freeman bibliographies. One of these newly discovered stories is the
 39 fascinating "An Idyl of a Berry Pasture," which was published in *Once a Week*
 40 (Aydelott and Wilkins). It is becoming evident, then, that Freeman has not said
 41 her last word. These discoveries significantly undermine lingering suspicions
 42 that she was just a cog in the wheel of the Harper's publishing house, and that

her regionalism was but a fashionable way for readers of the national literary monthlies to consume rural otherness. Freeman was a writer of her time, and her tales were tales of New England; she did write some of her stories to formula—the result, perhaps, of the precariousness of her family finances—and resolved plots with marriages or lovers’ reunions. But if she catered to the late nineteenth-century metropolitan tastes for tales of life in the backward but virtuous countryside, she also wrote—against them—texts that still unsettle our appreciation of her today. Against the Freeman that we know, this volume wants to go one dig into the Freeman that we don’t quite know yet. Doing so requires that we do not stop at her two early collections, but that we read her *against* the periodization that has relegated late (married) Freeman to oblivion and beyond the local and national scale that has traditionally been hers. In brief, and most importantly, it demands that we leave aside our assumptions about how a middle-class white female writer of turn-of-the-century New England *should* write and accept, instead, a rare, if unexpected, complexity that requests patient unravelling once again.

COLLECTION OVERVIEW

The chapters in the volume are organized into four sections that conclude with an afterword by Sandra Zagarell. The sections collectively explore how Freeman pushes against dominant critical perspectives and question our own assumptions about major epistemological rubrics, including genre and periodization, as well as normative structures such as local and national belonging, class, age, and gender affiliation. Reading Freeman with and against the grain, the following chapters engage with her diverse literary production—not her canonical stories only, but also her lesser-known novels—so as to let her texts speak back to us in new and unpredictable voices.

The first section, “Kinship Outside of Normative Structures,” uncovers alternative modes of communality in Freeman’s fiction. In the chapter “Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s Neighborly Encounters and the Project of Neighborliness,” Jana Tigchelaar introduces the concept of “neighborliness” to describe Freeman’s complex representation of kinship bonds beyond normative constructs. Looking at a wide range of Freeman’s short stories—from staples, such as “Christmas Jenny” and “A Village Singer,” to less widely discussed stories in the volume *Understudies*—Tigchelaar argues that Freeman’s neighborly encounters occur at liminal spaces that imagine new forms of belonging within (and across) regional hierarchies of class, age, gender, and ability. In the next chapter, “‘Her Own Creed of Bloom’: The Transcendental Ecofeminism of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,” Susan M. Stone reads some of the stories discussed by Tigchelaar—including “Christmas Jenny” and “The Great Pine”—yet from a different perspective. Stone argues that Freeman’s fiction acts as a bridge between first-wave transcendentalism and ecofeminism insofar as it centers on

1 ecological stewardship to rethink boundaries between nature and the human,
2 “providing readers with option-filled alternatives to socially prescriptive and
3 restrictive domesticity and gender conventions.” As a sustained expression of
4 ecofeminist views, Freeman’s work inflects key transcendental concepts to envi-
5 sion new forms of companionship, responsibility, and belonging. Freeman’s
6 search for new modes of belonging is also the focus of the following chapter,
7 “‘Preposterous Fancies’ or a ‘Plain, Common World’? Queer World-Making in
8 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s ‘The Prism’ (1901),” in which H. J. E. Champion
9 explores Freeman’s representation of queer children. Through a close reading
10 of “The Prism,” a rarely anthologized story, Champion analyzes the protag-
11 onist’s eccentric sense of autonomy that borders on autosexuality, resisting
12 normative projections of linearity in terms of age, domesticity, and marriage.
13 Although the plot concludes with marriage, Champion contends, it suggests the
14 possibility of imagined queer futures.

15 The second section, “Violent, Criminal, and Infanticidal Womanhood,”
16 continues the examination of deviant female characters throughout Free-
17 man’s fiction. In “The Reign of the Dolls: Violence and the Nonhuman in
18 Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,” Donna M. Campbell addresses criminal acts
19 of violence, in which women are not just victims but also perpetrators and
20 aggressors. Freeman’s representations of child kidnapping, fatal neglect, and
21 murder rely on nonhuman surrogates such as dolls and animals. Through
22 their power to signify suffering, desire, and trauma, Campbell argues, these
23 surrogates not only embody but also catalyze the disruption of power struc-
24 tures, including the market economy, racial discrimination, gender inequality,
25 and colonial history. The next two chapters explore Freeman’s eccentric and
26 violent heroines from a transatlantic scope, placing Freeman in new cross-
27 cultural contexts. In her chapter, “Transatlantic Lloronas: Infanticide and
28 Gender in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Alexandros Papadiamantis,” Myrto
29 Drizou argues that the depiction of child murder, which she interprets as
30 infanticide, in “Old Woman Magoun” evokes a transatlantic mythology of
31 deviant maternal figures epitomized by La Llorona, the Wailing or Weep-
32 ing Woman in Meso-American mythology that is also central to Alexan-
33 dros Papadiamantis’s 1903 Greek novella, *The Murderess*. In the following
34 chapter, Aušra Paulauskienė argues that Freeman’s deviant women—both in
35 well-read stories, such as “A New England Nun” and “Louisa,” and lesser stud-
36 ied novels—evoke Catholic tropes to criticize old-dogma Puritanism. These
37 tropes, including religious ritual, cloister motifs, and the representation of
38 motherhood, as the stronghold of outdated religion, bring Freeman closer to
39 Irish American fiction, a new context for reading her work. As Paulauskienė
40 concludes, such connections to Irish American texts draw out the powerful
41 entanglement of social, religious, and political systems of belief in the increas-
42 ingly multi-ethnic nation.

The third section, entitled “Women’s Work: Capital, Business, Labor,” situates Freeman within a range of turn-of-the-century economic discourses, such as the literary market, social class, and labor reform. The first two chapters place Freeman’s neglected novel *The Portion of Labor* in the vexed terrain between a sentimental tradition of protest novels à la Stowe and the early twentieth-century realist and naturalist reform fiction with which Freeman has rarely been associated. Justin Rogers-Cooper argues that it is the novel’s “feminist labor solidarities” that engender the conditions for working-class forms of resistance such as strikes. In Freeman’s text, the performance of queer intimacy and desire are recast as a political tool for social reform. Laura Dawkins, on the other hand, analyzes the thorny issue of child labor, as represented in the novel. Freeman, Dawkins argues, turns the “cult of childhood” into the “theft of childhood” in the context of a family wage economy that forces tough decisions on both parents and children. Freeman’s conflicted adherence to reform should not, however, be dissociated from her own multifaceted relation to labor and capital as a writer. Brent L. Kendrick sheds light on one of the lesser-known aspects of Freeman’s literary career, namely, her financial competence and business acumen. Taking Freeman as a prime example of a highly successful “literary businesswoman,” Kendrick examines her business decisions, publishing strategies, and various dealings with cash, property, and investment. Given her successful navigation of the literary market, Kendrick suggests, Freeman deserves to be noted not only for her prolific output but also for her economic skill. This section concludes with Audrey Fogels’s chapter “Deconstructing Upper Middle-Class Rites and Rituals: Reading Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s Stories Alongside Mary Louise Booth’s *Harper’s Bazar*.” Fogels argues that Freeman’s archaic New England settings and quaint lower-middle-class characters function as ironic mirrors to the world of *Harper’s Bazar* and the privileges of upper-middle-class membership. Fogels’s analysis of well-known stories, such as “A Mistaken Charity” and “Sister Liddy,” and rarely discussed ones, such as “A Modern Dragon,” draws on textual and visual evidence to suggest that Freeman’s portrayal of consumer culture, financial hardship, and women’s competition underwrites the *Bazar*’s covert yet complex commitment to feminist concerns.

The final section, “Periodization Reconsidered,” addresses how Freeman’s work extends beyond conventional period markers and established literary histories. Daniel Mrozowski examines Freeman’s late collection of stories that has received scant scholarly attention. Mrozowski points out that Freeman’s portrayal of war mobilization in the home front challenges traditional modes of representing the war, as it combines mundane choices and reversals of fate with larger questions of pacifism and internationalism. What is more, Freeman’s response to the Great War questions our own response to “realist” writers at the close of their career, especially when they continue to write well into the period we tend to define as “modernism.” Monika Elbert’s

1 essay, “A Cacophony of Voices: Freeman’s Modernism,” further elaborates on
2 Freeman’s engagement with modernist anxieties and concerns in the context
3 of an increasingly industrialized New England. Elbert suggests that Freeman
4 represents her home not as a pastoral rural space but as a site of alienation,
5 consumerism, and capitalism, connected to global problems such as World
6 Wars. Freeman’s early twentieth-century stories, in particular, feature false
7 relationships, disenchantment with objects of prestige, and struggles of self-
8 actualization in a disintegrating world, all of which bring Freeman closer
9 to themes of modernist fragmentation and disenchantment than regionalist
10 wistfulness and nostalgia. The following chapter, “Underground Influence:
11 Sylvia Townsend Warner’s Pastiche of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,” argues that
12 Freeman’s work lived on into the 1920s through the 60s, even after Freeman
13 lost her main audience. Stephanie Palmer explores Freeman’s transatlantic
14 influence on the twentieth-century British writer Sylvia Townsend Warner.
15 Palmer identifies a “progressive female-to-female influence” that is structured
16 differently than the Bloomian model of influence, featuring a broader array of
17 emotions including but *not only* about anxiety. The final chapter of the volume,
18 entitled “Untimely Freeman,” sheds new light on Freeman’s “understudies”
19 from the deliberately anachronistic perspective of a twenty-first-century reader.
20 Part of the “late Freeman” corpus, *Understudies* has been recently recovered
21 as her “first volume of ecofiction,” yet has remained, perhaps in accordance
22 with its title, somewhat obscure. Reading *Understudies* from the perspective of
23 recent scientific hypotheses and philosophical developments about the animal
24 and the vegetal world as a world of relations in which the human no longer
25 abides as center, does not imply de-historicizing her, Roudeau argues; it rather
26 requires historicizing both her writing and our reception in order to engage
27 with the non-coincidence between the two as an opportunity to be seized, not
28 a discontinuity to be lamented.

29 Sandra Zagarell, in her “Afterword,” brings these voices together and
30 offers an incisive assessment of Freeman’s resonance with the twenty-first-cent-
31 ury reader and critic. As each contributor to this volume shows, Freeman’s
32 texts continue to yield fresh insight, especially in the context of new critical
33 approaches to gender, race, age, and class. This insight is never unidirectional,
34 however. Freeman’s work speaks back to contemporary critics insofar as it illu-
35 minates the fault lines of current social and political debates and, in doing so,
36 opens the space for further conversations that help us navigate the complexi-
37 ties of our own time and age. In a world where modes of connection have been
38 largely restructured by the global pandemic, in which the climate crisis, the
39 fear of massive deforestation and species extinction demand both a planetary
40 response and practical changes within our most quotidian practices, Freeman’s
41 fiction seems all too familiar, as her plots place the minute, the domestic, and
42 the monotonously mundane at the core of narratives that echo forward to our

carefully sheltered lives. This deep-rooted desire for connection is both soothing and unsettling. Some may choose to spend their lives “in a closet hidden,” after all, a phrase that perhaps echoes differently in pandemic times, when unable or unwilling to confront the world, we remain wary of contact, and contagion, ready to invent or reactivate new forms of (remote) sociability. The spectral, the ghostly, are forms of correspondence that we have reconfigured to experience and learned to newly appreciate.

But Freeman’s way of releasing the unsettling power of connectiveness is also instructive insofar as it embraces and reaches beyond the orbit of individual existence, combining examples of subtle, everyday revolt and larger-scale examinations of organized movements, as in *The Portion of Labor*. The global crises we have experienced in the 2020s, pandemic- or climate-related, and evidenced in the migrant crises and a global political and social unrest, have revealed that class, race, and gender inequalities persist amidst radical change; indeed, they necessitate new modes of struggle beyond conventional paradigms of connection and outside conventional alliances. Freeman’s shifts between forbearance and defiance continue to comfort and inspire new readers, who may be more ready than they were in the 1990s, during the heyday of Freeman’s recovery, to commit themselves, individually or collectively, at the level of their local community or more broadly, to activist action and a new language of hope.

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- 34 —. "Introduction." *A New England Nun and Other Stories*, by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman,
35 Penguin, 2000, pp. ix–xxvii.

NOTES

- 38 1. Freeman published her story "A New England Nun" in *A New England Nun and
39 Other Stories* (Harper & Brothers, 1891), and it remains one of her most famous
40 stories.
- 41 2. Throughout this collection, we generally use Freeman's married name—the one
42 that editors and anthologists have preferred.

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3. The most recent biography is Leah Blatt Glasser, *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Works of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Many of her stories are in print; Jeff Kaylin's website reprints the serialised version of much of her writing, <<http://wilkinsfreeman.info/>> (last accessed 1 June 2022) and can serve as a resource for readers of this volume. 1
 4. "It is true that no one writer, no one book, represents it, for that is not possible; our social and political decentralization forbids this, and may for ever forbid it" (Howells 641). 2
 5. "[We] should call the present American work, North and South, thorough, rather than narrow. In one sense it is as broad as life, for each man is a microcosm, and the writer who is able to acquaint us intimately with half a dozen people, or the conditions of a neighborhood or a class, has done something which cannot in any bad sense be called narrow," Howells writes, before enrolling Freeman's first collection of New England stories in this national scope (640). 3
 6. "[I wanted] to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life . . . utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett" (Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 293). "I had had an uneasy sense that the New England of fiction bore little—except a vague botanical and dialectical—resemblance to the harsh and beautiful land as I had seen it. Even the abundant enumeration of sweet-fern, asters and mountain-laurel, and the conscientious reproduction of the vernacular, left me with the feeling that the outcropping granite had . . . been overlooked" (Wharton, "Introduction," *Ethan Frome* xvii). 4
 7. The feminist perspective on regionalism is multifaceted, as the bibliography of this essay attests, but Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have been the most prolific and influential at lifting the notion of reading regionalism for feminist critique into the realm of theory. See *Writing Out of Place*. 5
 8. Our thinking on this particular turn in Freeman scholarship is indebted to Campbell, "Shapeshifter." 6
 9. The most influential reading of regionalism as a form of consumption for urban audiences is Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters*. Scholars have long sought to build bridges between the feminist and the historicist ways of reading regionalism, including June Howard, Tom Lutz, and Christine Holbo. 7
 10. Given the warmth of Freeman's letters about Mary Wales, contrasted with the wryness with which she dismissed Charles in some late correspondence, scholars including Koppelman (124–7) and Reichardt (105) have wondered whether her relationships with Wales and other women were on the lesbian continuum. Nearly all scholars tend to agree that what she wrote after her wedding in 1902 was of lesser interest. 8



PART I

KINSHIP OUTSIDE OF
NORMATIVE STRUCTURES

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MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN'S NEIGHBORLY ENCOUNTERS AND THE PROJECT OF NEIGHBORLINESS

JANA TIGCHELAAR

Against a familiar backdrop of economic recession, industrial innovation, and a shifting social landscape, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman wrote the short fiction she is best known for—scenes of New England village life that depict with clarity, insight, and humor the daily dramas of courtship and marriage, family life, religious faith, and domestic spaces. Freeman also wrote poetry and novels, as well as short fiction in innumerable other veins, including dozens of stories for children, supernatural tales, and series of fiction focused on animals, flowers, and trees. And yet Freeman's fame rested on her depictions of villages and their seemingly anachronistic inhabitants. This fame was a double-edged sword—Freeman's skill in depicting regional locales and residents cemented her status as a regionalist writer during a time when even regionalism's most vocal supporters voiced their defense of the movement in limiting terms. In an 1891 "The Editor's Study," for example, William Dean Howells describes Freeman's stories as "miniatures" that record "narrowly" lived lives (20). Freeman and other local colorist or regionalist authors were frequently seen by their contemporaries as merely chronicling a fast-disappearing rural reality. Even when acknowledging the artistry of regionalist authors, critics emphasized their work as secondary or marginal; for example, in an 1895 article examining Boston's literary history since the Civil War, Howells writes that while he does not "forget the exquisitely realistic art of Miss Jewett or Miss Freeman," their stories "[have] hardly the novelist's scope" (868).

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1 However, as the work of recovery over the past few decades has turned
2 critical attention to literary regionalism, this narrow conception of the genre's
3 scope has been scrutinized. The first work of feminist critics, including Judith
4 Fetterley, Marjorie Pryse, and Sandra Zagarell, was to read the female-centered
5 imaginaries of much regionalist fiction in the context of the patriarchal systems
6 and structures of the late nineteenth century. Their oppositional reading has
7 often situated appraisals of Freeman alongside other recovered regional writ-
8 ers, arguing that Freeman's regional stories oppose national narratives, her
9 female characters resist patriarchal control, and her domestic spaces counter
10 the public sphere. Further work in reading regionalism's complex relationship
11 with the larger social, cultural, political, and commercial forces shaping not
12 just local but national and global power relations during the late nineteenth
13 and early twentieth centuries has emerged from critics including Stephanie
14 Foote, June Howard, Hsuan L. Hsu, Tom Lutz, Mark Storey, and Edward
15 Watts.¹ Hsu contextualizes even the most nostalgic portrayals of seemingly
16 pre-industrial regionals as subject to the global or national forces their regions
17 imagine to escape, and that their regional productions "[occur] in relation to
18 large-scale phenomena such as migrant flows, transportation networks, and
19 international commerce" (Hsu 164). Like Hsu, other critics see regionalist
20 writers as deeply entangled (whether deliberately or inadvertently) in issues of
21 national and global significance. Howard, for example, notes the recent trend
22 in "relational" studies of concepts including regionalism, pointing toward
23 the way social sciences and policy studies position region in terms of the
24 "interdependence of neighboring states" and often focus "on how economic,
25 political, and cultural connections mesh" (*Center* 3). Storey states that the
26 literature characterized as regional reveals "the hidden and encoded traces of
27 social and cultural change on a level that is shared and transregional," a depic-
28 tion that is always in dialogue with "the geographically indiscrete experience
29 of modernity" (205).

30 Following Howard's advice as she encourages reading regionalism "in rela-
31 tion to a form or practice that illuminates" both individual texts and cultural
32 and historical context ("Circuits" 123), this essay suggests another form for
33 reading Freeman's regionalist stories that clearly indicates the genre's imbrica-
34 tion in the intricate web of power relations that structured the late nineteenth
35 and early twentieth centuries: what I am calling Freeman's project of neigh-
36 borliness. By neighborliness, I mean the recurrent formations of kinship bonds
37 outside of normative structures that appear with regularity in her short fic-
38 tion.² These bonds do not merely oppose these structures, but actively work to
39 enact structural transformation, reimagining the closed space of the domestic
40 family, the restricted Calvinist environment of the village church, or the hier-
41 archical social structure of the regional community. Central to the project of
42 neighborliness is the neighborly encounter, a liminal, transformative meeting

that instigates the reimagining of a community's power and structure along neighborly lines. Freeman's neighborly encounters promote neighborliness by proposing a modified network of meaning and belonging in her regional communities. 1
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Reading Freeman's regional fiction in light of neighborly encounters illuminates another purpose behind the project of neighborliness: it also serves as the means by which Freeman attempts to make legible to her largely urban readership the proper mode for consuming these stories and the regional inhabitants they represent. In this, the neighborly encounter serves as an alternative mode of reading regionalist texts, in contrast to the hierarchical mode suggested by the figure of the urban observer/narrator apparent in much regional literature. The success of the neighborly encounter in transforming culture and community rests on collaborative efforts that cross boundaries of class, age, gender, and ability. The community transformation that results from these neighborly encounters serves by extension as a model for the reconciliation of the regional "other" in configurations of national identity. Freeman's empathetic portrayal of socially sidelined individuals whose marginalization is compounded by the perception of their communities as peripheral reveals the potential for social transformation via neighborly encounters. Neighborliness as dramatized by Freeman in these stories also suggests a privileging of communitarian values over individualism—a reevaluation that resonates today. By staging neighborly encounters in liminal spaces and states, Freeman's regional texts work to transform relationships both within the text and within the nation, reframing the modes by which her readers would recognize themselves and others. 5
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“CHRISTMAS JENNY” AND THE NEIGHBORLY ENCOUNTER 25

In order to define what I mean by neighborliness and what I am describing as the neighborly encounter, I turn to Freeman's story “Christmas Jenny,” originally published in *Harper's Bazar* in December 1888 and collected in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* in 1891. “Christmas Jenny” tells the story of an elderly couple, Jonas and Betsey Carey, and their neighbor, Jenny Wrayne, who is known as “Christmas Jenny” for the handmade wreaths and seasonal greenery she sells in the village around Christmastime. Jonas is prone to “tantrums” when things don't go his way, and Jenny rescues Betsey during two of these tantrums (offering the advice that parents of toddlers have known for decades: ignore him and he'll get over it on his own). These acts of neighborly kindness bookend the story, and in-between plays out the other central drama: the village's judgment of Jenny, whom they perceive to be unusual, perhaps a witch, and in need of the intervention of the community. When the minister and church deacon pay Jenny an unannounced visit to confirm for themselves the charges that she is abusing the sick and injured animals she has rescued and the young disabled child she has adopted, Betsey intervenes to speak on behalf 26
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1 of the absent Jenny. The men are convinced by Betsey and moved to generosity,
2 sending Jenny a Christmas turkey, gifts for Willy, her ward, and a new calico
3 dress. The story ends with a feast Jenny shares with the Careys and the light
4 from Jenny's Christmas candle shining down on the village, an emblem for the
5 general blessing of neighborly kindness.

6 "Christmas Jenny" illustrates a number of key characteristics of the neigh-
7 borly encounter, specifically in the meeting between Betsey Carey and the
8 visiting minister and deacon. Neighborly encounters often occur in liminal or
9 interstitial spaces, settings which facilitate the transformative nature of the
10 encounters. Liminality, a term I am reading in light of Victor Turner's notion
11 of the liminal state as the middle stage of the ritual process by which social
12 order may be transformed, appears as a setting or as a condition in many of
13 Freeman's stories.³ In "Christmas Jenny," Betsey encounters the minister and
14 deacon in the liminal space of Jenny's home, which is described as being neither
15 fully domestic nor out of doors, but mingling the two. The liminality of neigh-
16 borly encounters enables the inversion or questioning of hierarchical power
17 arrangements, as is the case in the meeting between Betsey, who is an elderly
18 female parishioner, and the minister and Deacon Little, who hold positions of
19 power in their New England village. Challenging social structures, the liminal
20 figure in the neighborly encounter often experiences a transcendent, empow-
21 ered state which temporarily inverts power structures and has the potential
22 to enact long-term community change. In "Christmas Jenny," Betsey's liminal
23 empowerment persuades the two men of the importance of neighborly values,
24 which in turn blesses the entire community.

25 The neighborly encounter, then, is a transformative meeting, often in a
26 liminal space or setting, between "neighbors," people who are united by geo-
27 graphic proximity but often separated within their communities by reasons of
28 social station, age, ability, behavior, or gender. The encounter serves the pur-
29 pose of promoting neighborly values such as radical generosity and hospitality
30 and moves the participants to prioritize their neighborly relationships. While
31 neighborliness is in a sense a tenet of Christianity and village life (recount the
32 New Testament story of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus answers the question
33 "who is my neighbor," intended by the "expert in the law" who asked the ques-
34 tion to narrow his range of obligation to others, with a parable about radical
35 hospitality), Freeman's neighborliness reveals the ways in which patriarchal
36 theology and civic structures have restricted the range of care and responsibility
37 toward others. Frequently the neighborly encounter illuminates the failures of
38 traditional Christian benevolence and civic charity to truly address the needs of
39 all neighbors. Freeman's neighborliness therefore works to address internally
40 a social wrong in the community, and as such functions as a community cor-
41 rective that brings with it the additional benefit of the general promotion of
42 community-kinship bonds that extend beyond normative structures like the

domestic family unit and the village church. In promoting the project of neighborliness, these stories reveal the ways in which Freeman is speaking to larger questions of identity and belonging beyond her regional communities.

In focusing on belonging and on individual and collective identity, Foote argues that “neighborliness gives us a way to imagine the social work of regional fiction outside the conventional models of family or nation” (“Neighborliness”).⁴ In this, neighborliness bears similarities to a few other approaches to reading regionalist literature. Jennifer Ansley’s “Geographies of Intimacy in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s Short Fiction” proposes reading “female-centered communal imaginaries,” which she describes as queer due to their “non-normative formulations of kinship and domesticity,” as one of Freeman’s narrative strategies for navigating the economic impact of industrialization and the concurrent changes to normative domesticity in New England communities (434). Ansley’s queer imaginaries can be read alongside Zagarell’s narratives of community as describing the social work of regionalist texts in relationship to formations of community. Zagarell’s concluding essay to *Narratives of Community: Women’s Short Story Sequences* complicates her initial discussion of community-based narratives by examining Freeman’s *The Jamesons*, a text she sees as in direct communication with (and critique of) the foundational regional text, Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.⁵ While Zagarell states that her 1988 definition of the genre of narratives of community “idealized it as a fully positive form of social organization,” her 2007 essay recognizes that representations of community can be “limiting” and “destructive,” and that all readings of narratives of community should be contingent upon the social and historical contexts of their production and reception (434). Zagarell’s particular project here, reading *The Jamesons* in the context of Jewett’s *Country* (and particularly *Country*’s urban narrator, who sees Dunnet Landing through a nostalgic lens) as well as in light of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*’s narrow notion of commercialized domesticity, offers one such contingent reading.

Similarly, in *Regional Fictions*, Foote takes up the idea of community formation, identity, and citizenship in Jewett’s *Country*, and like Zagarell notes that *Country* promotes a sense of regional unity on the foundation of “suppressed relationships between natives and strangers,” relationships which “are themselves modulated interventions in a more general concern over origins and nativity” (18). Much of Jewett’s *Country* is concerned with the urban narrator’s anxiety over her own belonging to the idealized community of Dunnet Landing, and this anxiety, Foote argues, is embedded in the eventual revelation that regional identity is not homogenous but is in fact paradoxically reliant upon the shifting notions of “foreign” and “strange” which are used to define who is a native insider. Although Foote’s focus is Jewett’s *Country*, which she uses “to show that the foreign constitutes what seems most comfortably homelike in the region,” she also notes that “the problems of citizenship in the supposedly

1 homogeneous region” extends to other New England women’s regionalism as
 2 well, including Freeman, whose short stories “[reveal] her belief in the necessity
 3 of community and also the variation in many characters’ local or individual
 4 relations with a normative community” (37). Withdrawal from community,
 5 as seen with Louisa Ellis of “A New England Nun,” is one such variation,
 6 Foote notes.

7 In their discussions of community formations in regional texts, Foote and
 8 Zagarell both identify the meeting between the urban observer narrator and
 9 the regional resident as essential to the mediation of community identity and
 10 membership in regional fiction. Zagarell reveals that *The Jamesons’* narrative
 11 of community differs from *Country’s* in that what threatens the village of Lin-
 12 nville’s integrity is not modernization, but nostalgic, urban interlopers—the
 13 Jameson family of New York City, who summer in Linnville, to be specific.⁶
 14 Foote, too, focuses on the unnamed narrator of Jewett’s *Country* whose own
 15 subject position as insider or outsider (and simultaneously as a privileged
 16 authority figure) in Dunnet Landing is in constant flux. In this, Zagarell and
 17 Foote join many other critics of regionalist fiction, including Judith Fetterley
 18 and Marjorie Pryse, in identifying the significant narrative role played by the
 19 urban visitor in regionalist fiction. However, in my discussion of neighborliness
 20 in Freeman’s fiction, I identify another stage on which the negotiations of com-
 21 munity identity and belonging take place. Neighborly encounters resemble the
 22 meetings between metropolitan visitor and rural resident that animate much
 23 regional fiction; however, in Freeman’s neighborly encounters, participants are
 24 members of the same community who are working within their communities
 25 to take up similar questions about community belonging and regional identity.
 26 By dramatizing meetings that encourage seeing liminal regional inhabitants as
 27 “neighbors,” the neighborly encounter serves as an alternative way of reconciling
 28 outsiders within the social fabric of the regional community, one which
 29 attempts to avoid the fetishization of regionalist literature and its regional resi-
 30 dents that the outsider narrator often enables.

31 INTERSTITIAL SPACES, LIMINAL ENCOUNTERS

32 The neighborly encounter is characterized by a “betweenness,” which implies
 33 both literal and figurative notions of thresholds, doorways, and margins and
 34 instigates the blurring of arbitrary boundaries between identity categories. As
 35 Turner discusses in *The Forest of Symbols*, while this liminal stage suggests
 36 alienation, it also carries with it the possibility of transformation (236). Key
 37 to the neighborly encounter is the collective outcome of neighborliness; the
 38 liminal figure does not experience transformation alone, but instead in her rein-
 39 tegration into society brings new knowledge to her place in a typically hierar-
 40 chal structure. The liminal process is, therefore, central to social change, given
 41 its capacity to generate new, communitarian social arrangements.⁷ In many of
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Freeman's stories, the liminality of the neighborly encounter manifests spatially in interstitial zones such as front steps, doorways, or thresholds, spaces whose "betweenness" mediates public and private, inside and outside. These border spaces symbolically stand for the liminal person's status as both temporarily outside of social boundaries and working to promote neighborliness within the freedom from social constraints that outsider status offers. These liminal spaces, already located in-between categories of identification and setting, are particularly apt stages for neighborly encounters. Examples of these interstitial spaces abound in Freeman's regional fiction. In stories like "A Conflict Ended," in which a man spends every Sunday for years sitting on the church steps in protest of a minister's doctrinal interpretation, or in "The Outside of the House," in which an elderly couple take up residence on the porch of a seaside mansion when their wealthy neighbors who own the house are away, Freeman explores the way interstitial spaces like front porches, doorways, and yards can be used to negotiate not just individual but collective identity.

For example, Freeman's "Peony," one of her stories in *Understudies* that draw on flowers and animals for their central metaphors, offers a clear depiction of threshold liminality in the service of neighborliness. As Mary Reichardt has observed, the central metaphors in *Understudies* explore the Emersonian idea that "all elements of the natural world bear correspondence to each other" (*Study* 76). For Arabella Lambert, her corresponding natural element is the peony, described as coarser than the more refined rose—an ironic description, since Freeman offsets Arabella's supposed coarseness with an excessive empathy and abundant generosity toward her neighbors. Arabella's niece, Sarah, condemns her generosity, telling her aunt that "The door of your heart is always open, and [neighbors] walk in and take advantage of it" (199). The story's neighborly encounter occurs after Arabella has given away much of the home's furnishings to a couple who lost their savings in a bank collapse. She blocks the doorway to her house, refusing her niece entry until she accepts the latest in her aunt's series of acts of radical generosity. The central metaphor is underlined during this scene: as Arabella stands in the doorway, unmoving and unspeaking, she fixes her gaze on her peonies, vowing to continue to "yield unstintingly all her largess of life to whomsoever crossed her path with a heart or hand of need for it" (213).

Arabella's immovable doorway meeting with her niece is one of Freeman's more obvious instances of a threshold encounter in service of neighborliness, but the liminal threshold space appears in many other stories, as well. In addition to these literal thresholds, Freeman grapples with the hierarchies of power in regional communities in her depictions of encounters in public gathering places like meeting houses, churches, schools, and village squares. These more traditional public spaces intended for social interaction are ostensibly held in common but are in practice often male-controlled and dominated by normative narratives

1 and ideals. These spaces become liminal stages for neighborly encounters when
2 they are “misused” according to social norms. One type of misuse has to do with
3 a liminal blurring of boundaries in these public spaces—boundaries between
4 domestic and public, between inside and outside, as in the case of Betsey’s neigh-
5 borly encounter in the liminal space of Jenny’s house.

6 This is true of the liminality in a number of well-known stories, like “A
7 Church Mouse,” in which Hetty Fifield sets the stage for the neighborly encoun-
8 ter that marks the story’s climax through her transformation of the village
9 church into a domestic space. Hetty decorates the meeting house with “treasures
10 of worsted-work,” hangs a “gay sunflower quilt” to curtain off a living area
11 for herself, and cooks strong-smelling food for herself in the building (98–100).
12 Similarly, in “The Revolt of ‘Mother,’” the appropriated space is Adoniram
13 Penn’s new barn, which he has built instead of the new home he has been prom-
14 ising his wife, Sarah, for decades. Sarah’s interstitial misuse of the barn, a space
15 meant to mark her husband’s commercial success, brings about a personal and
16 familial transformation. The liminal settings of neighborly encounters demon-
17 strated in these two stories are echoed throughout other of Freeman’s stories
18 that feature interstitial spaces. For example, in “A Village Singer,” Candace
19 Whitcomb, the former leading soprano in the church choir, has been forced out
20 due to her “cracked and uncertain” aging voice and replaced by the younger
21 Alma Way (80). To protest her removal, Candace, whose house is next door
22 to the church, plays her own parlor organ and sings loudly over Alma’s vocal
23 performances. Like Hetty’s experience in “A Church Mouse,” this interstitial
24 encounter emphasizes the blurred boundaries between the domestic space of
25 Candace’s home and the public, patriarchal space of the church.

26 Whether taking place in misused, appropriated public spaces or in intersti-
27 tial zones, neighborly encounters work to disrupt the narrative and structure of
28 authority. At times in these stories, marginalized characters’ mere existence is
29 enough to illuminate arbitrary and oppressive hierarchical structures. This is the
30 case in “A Church Mouse,” where Hetty’s plight comes about because the vil-
31 lage’s twin structural pillars of the church and the domestic family unit neglect
32 the neighborly values of charity, hospitality, and generosity toward those who
33 don’t fit into either of those normative structures. Hetty’s village is filled with
34 families who keep to their own “company,” a network of relatives and in-laws.
35 Within this private, domestic framework and without the benefit of charitable
36 organizations, the village has no place for someone in Hetty’s position. In addi-
37 tion, the resistance of church authorities to Hetty serving as the church sexton,
38 a job typically done by a younger male villager, reveals the gendered, ageist,
39 and ableist hierarchy of the church that defines the social fabric of the village.
40 By challenging the village’s social order, Hetty draws attention to the need for
41 neighborliness and the negative repercussions that patriarchal social structures
42 and gaps in social services have caused in regional settings. Candace’s situation

in “A Village Singer” is similarly gendered; Candace points out to the visiting minister that the leading tenor, who is three years her senior, was not given the same treatment as she was. Candace’s interstitial actions initiate an encounter that challenges the hypocrisy of the congregation and the patriarchal authority of the church. While she has not succeeded in transforming her village, she has stepped outside of the bounds of propriety, demonstrating how marginalized people can harness the implicit power of liminality to resist absorption into dominant ideology.⁸

“STRANGE” DEVIANCE AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

In the interstitial spaces and liminal situations of the neighborly encounter, Freeman’s marginalized characters use their position from outside of the social order to both reimagine their communities and to revise their own subject positions within their communities. Part of this reimagining comes from a deviation from conforming to social norms, a deviation that can be temporary (as in Candace’s protest singing) or enduring (such as Hetty’s move into the church). A number of stories focus on characters whose promotion of the values of neighborliness comes at the price of their role within the social order. Esther Gay of “An Independent Thinker,” who is hard of hearing, is ostracized for not attending church services she cannot hear; however, she occupies the hours she would spend at church meetings knitting to earn income which she gives anonymously to help her impoverished neighbors. In “Life-Everlastin’,” Luella Norcross offers sustenance and care to many of the community’s marginalized, poor, and transient figures, but refuses to attend church due to unbelief. Here as elsewhere, Freeman aligns blind adherence to church doctrine or other social norms with unthinking conformity—Luella’s sister’s frustration that Luella will not attend church meetings does not come out of any concern for her mortal soul, but because she wants her to behave (and dress) “like other folks” (67). In “A Church Mouse,” Hetty’s “reputation of always taking her own way, and never heeding the voice of authority” has given her an “unfortunate name” in her village (99). Consequently, Hetty is imagined by the villagers as a “brier among the beanpoles, or a fierce little animal with claws and teeth bared” (99); described as a weed or an animal, Hetty’s strong will and eccentricity lead to her dehumanization. Similarly, Jenny is considered “somewhat fantastic” as a result of a failed love affair that has rendered her “love-cracked,” according to the villagers (54); her “eccentricity,” which the church authorities believe is a “possibly uncanny deviation from the ordinary ways of life,” leads to the “witch-hunt” that Betsey thwarts (59). Jenny’s outsider status has “tinctured her whole life with an alien element” (54); Freeman’s use of the term alien here suggests both foreign and nonhuman.⁹

Beyond these strange characters who are othered due to their eccentric natures, Freeman also aligns othering with the experience of otherwise normative

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1 characters who are situationally marginalized during neighborly encounters.
2 While Sarah, Candace, and Betsey are not initially considered odd in the way
3 Jenny and Hetty are, each of them comes to be seen as strange by the authority
4 figure with whom she clashes in their encounter. The minister in “The Revolt
5 of ‘Mother’” finds Sarah to be “beyond him,” noting that “[he] could deal
6 with primal cases, but parallel ones worsted him” (133). Following one of
7 her interstitial performances in “A Village Singer,” Candace is accused by her
8 nephew of being “crazy,” and the visiting minister too “could not account for
9 such violence, such extremes, except in a loss of reason” (88, 87). The dea-
10 con and minister who encounter Betsey in “Christmas Jenny” describe her as
11 transformed and frightening: “They were thankful to leave that small, vocifer-
12 ous old woman, who seemed to be pulling herself up by her enthusiasm until
13 she reached the air over their heads, and became so abnormal she was fright-
14 ful” (59). In their deviation from the restrictive, normative behavior in their
15 regional communities, Sarah, Candace, and Betsey, too, become strange.¹⁰

16 But strangeness alone is insufficient to enact social change in the service of
17 neighborliness in Freeman’s stories; it is in the interaction between the margin-
18 alized, liminal figures and those in positions of authority that the transformative
19 potential of the neighborly encounter is realized. The encounters themselves are
20 characterized by the temporary inversion of power Turner describes as central
21 to the liminal phase. In “The Revolt of ‘Mother,’” for example, Sarah speaks
22 in language and is described in terms that highlight her power and authority
23 in her confrontation with the minister. Sarah “returned [the minister’s] saluta-
24 tion with dignity” before defending herself with a spirit previously hidden by a
25 “meek front” (132). Sarah asserts that she has “[her] own mind an’ [her] own
26 feet” and needs only consult with God about her decisions, arguing for her full
27 humanity as a Christian with direct access to God, rather than a wife who is
28 subservient to her husband’s control and divine intervention (133). Similarly, in
29 “Life-Everlastin’” Luella is described as having an almost extrasensory percep-
30 tion during her conversation with the visiting minister: “Luella . . . looked at
31 the minister. Her deep-set blue eyes seemed to see every atom of him; her noble
32 forehead . . . seemed to front him with a kind of visual power of its own” (71).

33 This combination of unexpected physical and verbal power can be seen
34 throughout Freeman’s neighborly encounters. In “A Village Singer,” when
35 Reverend Pollard calls on Candace with the aim of gently reprimanding her,
36 Candace speaks forcibly and effectively, highlighting the hypocrisy of the
37 church and the social fabric of the village. Rather than acceding to the cler-
38 gyman’s admonishments, Candace defiantly defends her disruptive singing,
39 strategically pointing out the congregation’s un-Christian duplicity: when
40 Pollard suggests they “kneel and ask the guidance of the Lord in the matter,”
41 Candace refuses, noting that it wasn’t the Lord who created this situation,
42 but rather status-conscious people “‘gettin’ as high-steppin’ an’ fussy in a

meetin'-house as they are in a tavern, nowadays'" (86, 85). Candace's strategies here resemble Betsey's emotional defense of her neighbor in "Christmas Jenny," as both women point out the Christian hypocrisy at work in their subjugation. Betsey argues, in fact, that Jenny's care for wounded or sick animals and a young disabled child "'mounts to jest about as much as sendin' money to missionaries,'" elevating her strange neighbor's behavior from eccentric to Christ-like (58). Candace, too, uses native logic and the assertion of her own authority to engage in discursive cultural criticism; her dying words, a negative commentary on Alma's singing, reassert herself as the authority on quality singing from outside of the bounds of both the church building and patriarchal authority.

The inversion of social hierarchies during the neighborly encounter does not just empower the marginalized; during these encounters, characters who hold positions of power within the normative structures of the community are described in terms that highlight their loss of mastery as they meet these marginalized figures. In "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" the minister "stood awkwardly," spoke "helplessly," and uttered "perplexed apologetic remarks" during his encounter with Sarah, while Adoniram similarly loses the power of speech (132-3, 134). In "A Church Mouse," Deacon Gale and two other church authorities stand before Hetty "stiff and irresponsive," speaking hesitantly and "feebly" to the stubborn woman (101-2). In "Life-Everlastin'," Reverend Sand is "filled . . . with amazement and terror" as he confronts the agnostic Luella (72). So, too, does Reverend Pollard encounter Candace's defense of her singing protest in "The Village Singer"—never imagining that a quiet New England woman could engage in "such violence, such extremes," which he likens to "the elements of revolution" (87) and does not feel competent to address.

In these encounters that promote neighborly values, Freeman repeatedly recreates alternative strategies of representation that resist normative structures. While these neighborly encounters most obviously promote neighborliness within the regional communities Freeman depicts in her stories, they also serve a larger purpose: as a culturally resonant image of the proper mode by which regionalism's urban audience should approach a region's "strange" inhabitants. As many critics have noted, in dramatizing the encounter between "native" and "stranger," regional literature frequently functioned as a seemingly fixed point of reference against which to define normative national identity. In my examination of neighborliness, the dramatized encounter is intraregional, further unsettling the supposed fixed categories of identification. While these characters are indeed strange, the function of their strangeness isn't to reinforce others' normalcy, but to call into question these fixed categories of identity on multiple scales. While Freeman's ministers, husbands, socially conscious housewives, and other characters who have embraced their positions within the normative structures of their communities do initially define themselves against

1 deviant characters' strangeness, the project of neighborliness refuses to allow
2 these figures to reaffirm their own normalcy by these means.

3 This is because the recognition of common humanity that is key to the proj-
4 ect of neighborliness demonstrates that transformation is communal, not just
5 individual. The power liminal figures gain during neighborly encounters trans-
6 lates into social restructuring on multiple scales. For example, "The Revolt of
7 'Mother'" transforms Sarah's social standing, both within her family and in
8 the eyes of the community: Sarah's rebellion inspires an "inborn confidence" in
9 her children for their mother, who anticipate the encounter between their par-
10 ents in the new house with "pleasant excitement" (133), and the townspeople
11 who learn of Sarah's revolt are similarly captivated, "[pausing] to look at the
12 staid, independent figure on the side track" (132). Similarly, in "Christmas
13 Jenny," the minister and Deacon Little begin their patriarchal survey of Jenny's
14 house "remorselessly," but following their encounter with Betsey, they speak
15 "apologetically," and vow to support Jenny rather than condemn her (56, 59).
16 The collective nature of neighborly transformations is even more apparent in
17 "A Church Mouse," in which it is the support of other women, who com-
18 bine efforts with Hetty and against the male church officials, that enables a
19 communitarian compromise. In addition, following the dramatic encounter
20 between Hetty, the male church authorities, and the women who come to her
21 aid, Hetty takes further steps toward promoting neighborliness: Hetty's act of
22 bell-ringing to "awaken" the town on Christmas Day solidifies her authority
23 as sexton while also supporting a relatively new tradition (keeping Christmas,
24 which, when Hetty was young, was not common in the village), one that unites
25 the townspeople and breaks from strict Congregationalism. Freeman's use of
26 the word "awakened" in this context is intriguing, considering the religious
27 overtones the word carries—Hetty is the instigator of the awakening, and it
28 is an act that unifies the community along neighborly rather than traditional
29 domestic or civic lines. In this, "A Church Mouse" resembles the conclusion of
30 "Christmas Jenny," where Jenny's Christmas candle serves as a symbol for the
31 community's privileging of neighborly values.

32 The collective efforts of Hetty and the women of her village, Jenny's com-
33 munal enjoyed candle, Arabella and Luella's excessive generosity toward
34 their neighbors, and the many other encounters between liminal and normative
35 figures in Freeman's stories reveal a thematic pattern of disruption and trans-
36 formation in the service of neighborliness, or the elevation of non-domestic
37 bonds of neighborly kinship within a community. The project of neighborly
38 reconciliation in Freeman's fiction, which illuminates the oppressive nature of
39 normative structures, pivots on acts of generosity and hospitality for outsiders.
40 This radical hospitality is illustrated in stories like "The Great Pine," in which a
41 man named Dick, having returned home from a lengthy sojourn at sea, discov-
42 ers that during his absence his wife married a neighbor man, had a child with

him, and died. The baby and the new husband, who is bedridden by illness, are being cared for by Dick's daughter. In this unusual domestic setting, Dick both gives and receives hospitality as he is welcomed by his replacement and as he chooses to become caretaker to the motley assortment. As in the other stories collected in *Six Trees*, "The Great Pine" builds on a central metaphor—in this case, the pine tree of the story's title represents the paradoxical binary of solitude and fellowship, polarities with which Dick wars. Freeman's narrator muses about the "intimate connection and reciprocal influence" among "all forms of visible creation"—initially illustrated with the care Dick eventually shows to the tree, but ultimately embodied in the radical neighborliness Dick extends to his wife's second husband and family (241). Dick's conversion to neighborliness by the story's end is echoed when the great pine falls: "He was no more to be seen dominating the other trees, standing out in solitary majesty among his kind" (247). Dick's transformation, like that of the forest, illustrates the collective purpose of neighborliness, opposing the "solitary majesty" and individual domination typical of normative, hierarchical structures.

"AMONG NEW ENGLAND NEIGHBORS"

In a letter to her friend and editor Mary Louise Booth on 15 March 1887, Freeman expresses distress with the proposed title for her first story collection for adults and wonders "if Among New England Neighbors would have been any better" (Kendrick 79).¹¹ Freeman's use of the word "neighbors" here is intriguing, but even more telling in the context of the project of neighborliness is her use of the preposition "among," a term which suggests not only being surrounded by something, but being a member of that something. In contrast to local color and regionalist fiction that dramatizes the encounter between native and stranger in order to both reaffirm the superiority of the urban perspective and infuse regional settings and people with a nostalgic authenticity against which and in the context of which to define modern advancement, the stories in Freeman's *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* and the many stories that followed dramatize a different encounter, one that places the reader "among" their regional "neighbors."

The neighborly encounter's empowerment of the marginalized within the community alongside the transformation of their communities into places that value even the strangest among them is a strategy of representation intended to reimagine the encounters between the urban readers who consume the stories and the regional residents represented by the stories. In this way, Freeman's stories don't just depict encounters between the socially unequal residents of regional communities but work through these literary encounters to display to the consumers of regional literature the proper attitude they should adopt toward both the genre of regionalism and regional residents. As such, Freeman simultaneously employs and exploits the reader's expectations for regional literature's settings

1 and characters, producing scenes of community reconciliation in which categor-
2 ies of normalcy and deviation are unsettled. While Zagarell notes that in some
3 cases, a community's coherence "may be grounded in categorizing certain people
4 as outliers, outcasts, deviants" ("Reflections" 434), the neighborly encounter
5 empowers those who are categorized as outsiders within their own communities
6 to communicate a transformed vision of coherence and unity. By encouraging
7 readers to recognize these outsiders as "neighbors," Freeman's fiction proposes
8 an alternative mode by which outsiders can be assimilated—both into the social
9 fabric of the village and into the broader narrative of national identity.

10 This assimilation is not without its limitations or its areas of concern, how-
11 ever. If, following Zagarell, we recognize that narratives of community reflect
12 not a purely positive or even benign mode of belonging to communities, then
13 the emphasis in Freeman's neighborly encounters on the collective benefit of
14 neighborliness should be read with caution. Neighborliness is the means by
15 which one's obligation to others—especially to others who exist outside of the
16 closed systems that structure the community—is defined and reinforced. For
17 Freeman, neighborliness bridges the gaps that outsiders—those marginalized
18 within their communities due to reasons of age, solitude, ability, poverty, non-
19 conformity, and gender—have fallen through. But here it is important to note
20 the significance of the community blessing at the end of "Christmas Jenny" and
21 other stories featuring neighborly encounters. As an outcome of the neighborly
22 encounter, the broader benefit to the collective makes the excesses of neighbor-
23 liness more palatable, particularly when neighborliness is seen as a culturally
24 resonant metaphor for the reception of regional texts and people. In emphasizing
25 the collective benefit resulting from the neighborly encounter, Freeman paradoxi-
26 cally demonstrates that individual empowerment alone is an insufficient
27 cause for the extravagance of neighborliness.

28 While Freeman's project of neighborly reconciliation offers tantalizing
29 possibilities for reimagining the modes of belonging to regional and national
30 imagined communities, the limitations of neighborliness leave many questions
31 unanswered. Is the transformative insight gained and communicated by margi-
32 nalized figures during their liminal encounters lost in their reintegration into
33 their communities, or are their communities truly transformed? Freeman's ten-
34 dency at the end of her stories featuring neighborly encounters to broaden
35 her focus, shifting from scenes centering her "strange" outsiders to a more
36 wide-angle perspective on the entire village, offers an intriguing entry point at
37 which to probe this question. Is Freeman limiting the transformative power of
38 neighborliness by encouraging her readers to focus ultimately on the benefit of
39 collective transformation that reintegrates deviant characters into the fabric of
40 the community?

41 Freeman's neighborly project is also limited in a more apparent way: her
42 vision of neighborliness asks readers to imagine kinship with marginalized

figures who fall outside of normative domestic and civic structures for reasons of age, class, ability, and gender. Absent from this list are those marginalized due to race or ethnicity. Whiteness is presumed in all of these encounters, spotlighting the structural inequalities that are intrinsic to regionalism's vision of community. The inherent whiteness of Freeman's neighbors is perhaps the most obvious limitation of the project of neighborliness, but the role neighborliness plays in service to community reintegration suggests that Freeman's larger message to her urban readers is perhaps not so revolutionary as one might hope. While the metric of neighborliness enables a vision of community formation that exceeds the boundaries of the domestic family and normative religious and civic structures, the regional "other" who is reintegrated into her community is ultimately a relatively safe and familiar outsider, particularly at a time when questions of racial and ethnic difference and nativist notions of national identity were rife. Ultimately, the neighborly encounter is the means by which Freeman's communities move toward a transformed coherence—one that in opposing normative structures and working to redistribute power among the marginalized of the community paradoxically demonstrates that such transformation requires the participation of those in power to truly effect change.

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 31 NOTES

- 32 1. For example, Foote describes the project of regionalism not as “representing a com-
 33 mon national past” but characterizing in its diverse communities the conflicts over
 34 immigration, industrialization, and modernization that were plaguing the nation
 35 (*Regional Fictions* 13). Lutz also defines regionalist literature as exemplified not
 36 by nostalgic consistency, but as “dramatiz[ing] the differences between and within
 37 classes, regions, sexes, and communities,” seeking not resolution but “an oscilla-
 38 tion between the sides” (28). Watts similarly focuses on regionalism’s “moments of
 39 interregional exchange,” which are characterized by “continual tension” between
 40 loyalty to the region or the nation (178).
- 41 2. In this, Freeman’s neighborliness resembles historian Nancy L. Rosenblum’s discus-
 42 sion of the figure of the “good neighbor” as central to the “democracy of everyday
 life” which shapes our expectations in our daily encounters (7).

3. During the liminal phase, participants are necessarily outside of ordinary grouping systems; they are, as Turner says, “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventions, and ceremonial” (*Ritual Process* 95). 1
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4. Foote takes up the topic of neighborliness in a forthcoming essay that comes to some similar conclusions as I do here, although Foote’s overall project has a different aim from mine. For example, she defines neighborliness as a “social interaction generated by the accident of physical proximity” that “provides a more nuanced way than community to look at the dialectics between strangers and natives, and at the unspoken but customary obligations people owe to one another.” However, Foote’s essay differs from mine in some key ways. One of these is that she describes Freeman’s neighborliness as “almost always [having] an expressly legislative function,” chief among which is “help[ing] to draw boundaries between different social actors” (5). While I also read Freeman’s neighborliness as exploring the limitations of traditional conceptions of community within normative structures (Foote specifically discusses the structural forces of the domestic sphere and US imperialism), my examination ties neighborliness to liminal encounters that work to erase boundaries rather than further reinscribe them. I am grateful to Stephanie Foote for generously sharing this essay with me in draft form, and I look forward to engaging with her ideas more when the essay is published in the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Race and American Literature*. 4
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5. In the case of *The Jamesons*, Zagarell argues, Freeman offers a “canny critique” of the regionalist narrative of community, turning “the genre into a satire of *Country* and other regionalist works for their unquestioned metropolitanism and proffers a community that differs” from other regionalist communities (such as Jewett’s Dunnet Landing) which are steeped in tradition (440). 19
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6. Zagarell notes that Freeman’s *The Jamesons* “might be called a narrative of community preservation, for its six sketches focus on Mrs Jameson’s assaults on community life and the community’s deepening skill in withstanding her” (441). 23
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7. Turner calls the more direct and egalitarian exchanges that grow out of the ambiguity in social relations created by liminality “communitas.” While Turner describes these exchanges as “essentially opposed to structure,” he also notes that communitas is simultaneously invested in remaking social structures from within (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 243). 26
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8. This is similar to the conclusion of another of Freeman’s stories of frustrated women artists, “A Poetess” (1890). What seems like a spiteful act at the story’s end (Betsey Dole’s request that the minister who unknowingly destroyed her dreams of writing poetry bury her with the ashes of her burned poems) is in a sense a criticism of the confining structure of the church, which, rather than offering true Christ-like welcome to someone like Betsey, instead replicates social hierarchies. 31
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9. The “strangeness” I discuss here has been read by Ansley as “queer” ways of identifying. Ansley also argues that disability, poverty, and non-reproductivity are seen as deviant because they don’t contribute to (or produce workers for) the capitalist system. In many of Freeman’s stories, Ansley notes, “characters’ orientation to space is ‘queer’ insofar as their perceived relationship to their environment is shaped by their disaffection from the demands of capitalism as it pulls them toward normative spaces of capital, biological, and social reproduction” (452–3). 37
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- 1 10. Foote notes that regionalism “both displaces cultural anxiety about strangers, as
2 well as paradoxically registering the fact that anyone may become an alien, an
3 exotic fetish,” a phenomenon she reads as a result of “the smooth function of
4 commodity culture” (*Regional Fictions* 57); here, the “alienation” of Freeman’s
5 characters is certainly related to commodity culture, which I see as one component
6 of the hierarchies of power Freeman examines in her stories.
7 11. Booth apparently suggests a geographically based name (“Green Mountain
8 Stories”), which was used in advertising the stories, although the publisher’s original
9 title, *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, was ultimately the final title, as Brent
L. Kendrick notes (448).