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UNTIMELY FREEMAN

CÉCILE ROUDEAU

The contemporary is the untimely.

Roland Barthes, *Lectures at the Collège de France 1979–80*,
quoted in Agamben.

Dates matter. Born in 1852 in Randolph, Massachusetts, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was a woman and a writer of her time and age. A housebuilder's daughter, she grew up in a divided country, lived and worked through Reconstruction America, and died a celebrated writer, while the United States, and the world, were confronted with the disastrous results of capitalism gone wild. As this collection of essays has shown, Freeman also responded to the spirit of her time; her stories and novels register the social upheavals brought about by rapid industrialization, the changes in women's lives and gender relations, the rise of xenophobia in a new imperialist age, the trauma of war, again, in the early twentieth century, and the philosophical questioning of the stability of the self under the assault of modernism. Freeman, that is, needs to be read "in time."¹

But Freeman's texts are also responding to the pressures of our present. Uncannily so. What would it mean, this chapter asks, to read Freeman out of time? To free her, and us, from the bonds of nineteenth-century epistemologies, and let her texts "speak back" to us and resonate with our own concerns, however anachronistically? Jennifer Fleissner, in her essay "Historicism Blues," has pointed to the failings of one version of "historicism" that affirms above all "the *pastness* of the past—its inability to speak back to the present-day position that organizes it" (702). Such a card has been played again and again;

1 from Fred Lewis Pattee to Perry D. Westbrook, early critics have largely con-
2 tributed to attaching Freeman to a place, New England, itself the epitome of
3 a past that was no more. On the other hand, a forced contemporaneousness
4 has also taken its toll on nineteenth-century literature. Presentism, as Fleissner
5 and others have observed, has its own pitfalls, one of them being to turn the
6 past into a mere foil to our enlightened present, as if the past existed only “in
7 order to irradiate the virtues of the present” (Fleissner 702). This version of
8 teleological thinking is “a methodologically untenable presumption” (Coviello
9 13) that would exhaust what happens in Freeman’s texts—diegetically, poeti-
10 cally, philosophically—in the discourses that are ours today. This is *not* what
11 “Untimely Freeman” proposes.

12 By focusing on the untimeliness of Freeman, this chapter stakes out a third
13 position: somewhere between, on the one hand, the injunction to historicize,
14 and *only* historicize, and, on the other, the lures of a colonizing presentism
15 that appropriates a text for the benefits of our time only. Reading Freeman as
16 untimely pressures the linearity of our modes of reading the nineteenth century.
17 It entreats us to focus on the staggered and the inchoate; not so much on how
18 the text might be a harbinger, a proto-text, of our present, as on the “unfore-
19 closed possibilities” that would (or would not) come to be and may have dis-
20 appeared from view.² Reading Freeman as untimely means reading her works
21 from our present—what else can we do?—without ever taking our present as
22 the only heuristic pivot. It invites us to meet her *as if* she were our contempo-
23 rary, and by contemporariness we understand, with Agamben, “*that relation-*
24 *ship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*”
25 (41). The key here lies in the “as if condition,”³ the back-and-forth movement
26 between, and within, our present and hers, which is also the condition of empa-
27 thy. Reading Freeman as untimely, then, that is—reading her “now” as always
28 out of joint—allows her present and ours to meet in an unsettled and unset-
29 tling contemporariness, a shared *productive* dischroony and a form of empathy
30 *through time*.

31 Starting from this unstable juncture of temporalities, this chapter considers
32 two of Freeman’s late turn-of-the-century collections of animal and plant stories,
33 *Understudies* (1901) and *Six Trees* (1903), and reads them neither as the end
34 point of her critical regionalism, nor as precursors of what we—inhabitants of
35 a post-Enlightenment natureculture—have learned, but rather as fictional for-
36 ays into alternative “distribution(s) of the sensible” (Rancière) that have not yet
37 come to pass. Both collections, I argue, unsettle the forceful historical continuity
38 and epistemological arc that, we were taught, culminate in our binary ontolo-
39 gies (animals vs humans). Instead, they propose to twenty-first-century read-
40 ers uncanny continuities generative of vibrant demarcations and queer fictional
41 oddkins that pressure our understanding of her—and our—heuristic tools and
42 a priors.

UNCANNY CONTINUITIES

In 1901, Harper & Brothers published *Understudies*, a collection of stories that may be best introduced by looking at the cover of the first edition—adorned with six cameo portraits linked by garlands. In the center, a name stands in golden letters, Mary E. Wilkins. The profiles, however, are not those of angry spinsters, narrow-minded ministers, or miserly farmers that had been so common in her stories up to that time. Rather, readers are witness to a different set of protagonists—a horse, a dog, a parrot, a monkey, a squirrel, and a cat—understudies, all of them, if we believe the title chosen for this collection.⁴ Mimicking “the arrangement of actors’ head shots on a playbill,” as noted by Susan Griffin in one of the few scholarly readings of this collection (511), the cover may have come as a surprise to the many fans of Wilkins’s tales and romances.

True enough, *Understudies* does not quite fit into Freeman’s oeuvre—at least, at first sight. Apart from a recent critical interest in this collection as her “first volume of ecofiction,” (Dixon 166); it has remained, perhaps in accordance with its title, backstage. These studies are, however, only deceptively marginal, and not at all picturesquely outmoded. I read them instead as Freeman’s testing ground for a radical shift from essentialization to performance, from the belief in a self-bounded identity to a “relational epistemology” in which knowledge of “self” and “others” starts with and as relation.⁵ Not only do the stories partly strip humans of their hegemony as social—and narrative—agents; they also sidestep our ingrained anthropological dualisms, nature-/culture, human-/nonhuman, without necessarily eroding the boundaries between them. If they “speak back” to us, then, they do so from a present that is not ours yet uncannily continuous with it; as such they open up our present to a new contemporaneousness that however precludes any coincidence—of ourselves with ourselves, of themselves with themselves. And they do so by hijacking us into the world of fiction. Thus begins “The Cat”:

The snow was falling, and the Cat’s fur was stiffly pointed with it, but he was imperturbable . . . It was night—but that made no difference—all times were as one to the Cat when he was in wait for prey. Then, too, he was under no constraint of human will, for he was living alone that winter . . . He was quite free except for his own desires, which tyrannized over him when unsatisfied as now. (“The Cat” 3)

Entering the world of fiction, not unlike entering the world of the theater, implies that we willingly suspend our disbelief, in this case, that we divest ourselves of what French anthropologist Philippe Descola calls our “naturalism” and shift to “animism.” In *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2005), Descola defines naturalism as the belief in a radical discontinuity of interiorities between the

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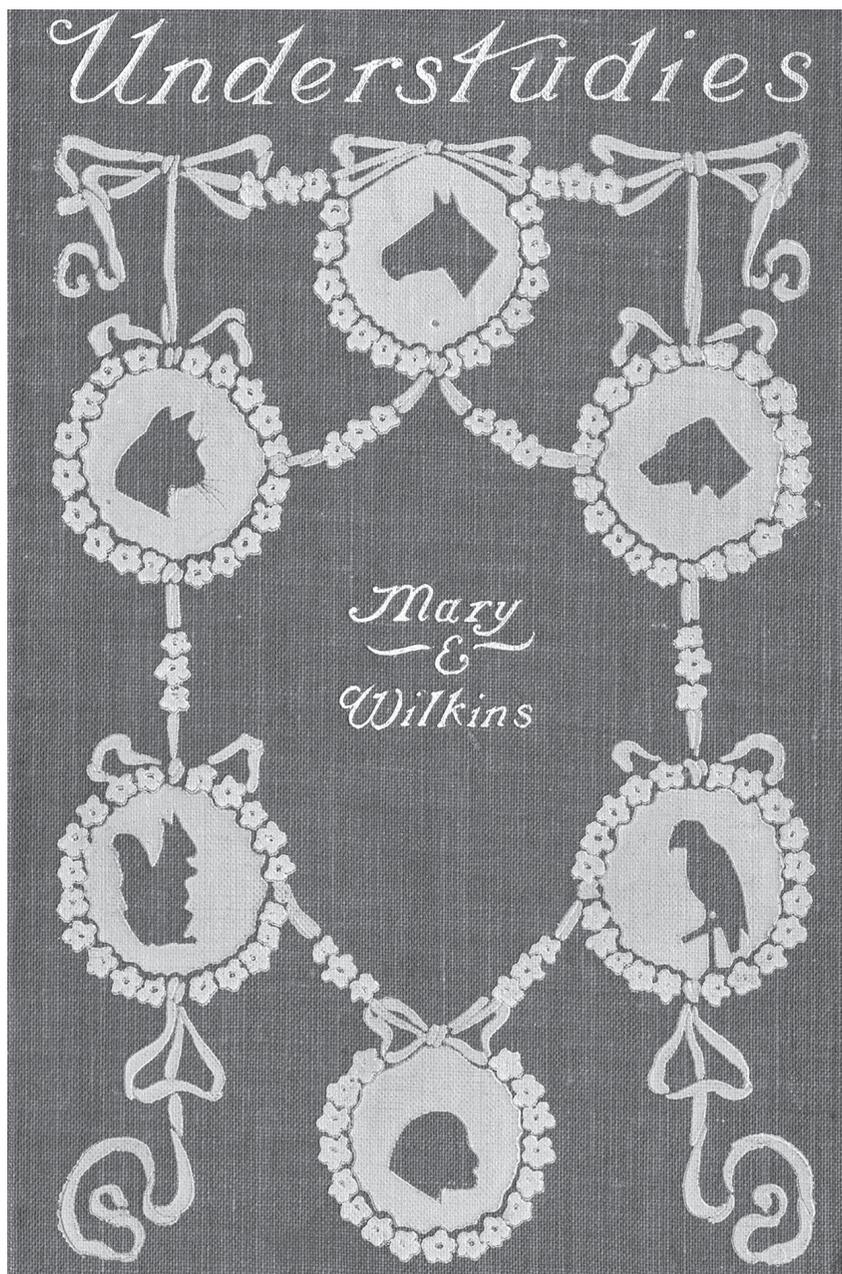


Figure 14.1 Front cover of *Understudies*, 1901. Image courtesy of Thompson Library Charvat American Fiction Stacks, Thompson Library Special Collections, The Ohio State University Libraries.

human and the nonhuman, combined with an acknowledgment of a continuity between our physicalities. Conversely, animism is the belief in a continuity of interiorities (here the “desires” nagging the Cat, his sense of freedom) and a discontinuity of physicalities (here, the bristling “fur”). In order to develop an animal narrative, Freeman’s *Understudies* tap into the possibilities of animism; she bets on the continuity of interiorities between animals and humans to accommodate the mental and experiential scheme of non-Western modes of identification that are not so much *past* ontologies as *alternative* ways of distributing the sensible in the present.

In Freeman’s “The Cat,” the Cat is the hunter, providing fresh food to the ailing stranger “with yellow hands like yellow claws” (10). Once the Cat has brought the prey to the old man, the narration creates a non-intuitive yet potent structure of feeling between them both:

both the man and the Cat looked wolfish . . . When the rabbit was half cooked, *neither the man nor the Cat* could wait any longer. The man took it from the fire, divided it exactly in halves, gave the Cat one, and took the other himself. Then *they* ate. (11–12, my emphasis)

Freeman does not merely anthropomorphize the Cat. She only deceptively takes up the trappings of the old-time fables or Elizabethan allegories à la Ben Jonson. As readers, we do *not* encounter ourselves as specimens of the human condition in an animal guise; what we encounter is the possibility of an encounter with “others” that are fictionally revealed to live and think and feel in continuity with ourselves. The adverb “both,” or, further down, the pair “neither . . . nor,” put the man and the cat on the same footing; they are impatient together—“wolfish,” adds the narration, as if mischievously pointing to a third term that is less a term than a blurry and blurring qualification. Turned into equals, “they” then eat—one subject, however plural.

The love story between the man and the Cat, which is played while the Master is away and the Cat serves as his understudy, does not turn the Cat into a human, though. Not quite. Freeman does not fall back on the autobiographical formula, that of Anna Sewall’s *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* (1877) and others. By assimilating animal psychology to that of humans, these animal autobiographies persisted in colonizing the other, making the other fit in the highly self-centered scheme of the autobiographical genre. The challenge of Freeman’s *Understudies* is instead to find a form that allows for *another* story to be told *together with* the human plot. This other non (hetero-) normative story takes place outside the village and in the Master’s absence, between the acts, as it were, before the curtain is raised again on the world as we know it.

Upon the return of the Master to his home and property, the plot is indeed resumed. The Master and the Cat must be reacquainted like an old couple who

1 has seen better days, and it is pathetic; “[t]he Cat had his bird to himself, for his
 2 master had his own supper already cooking on the stove” (15). Queer suffixes
 3 have yielded to the law of separation—the raw and the cooked, the animal and
 4 the human, and the last sentence of the story tells as much: “he and the Cat
 5 looked at each other across that impassable barrier of silence which has been
 6 set between man and beast from the creation of the world” (16). This clausula
 7 sounds like a provocation. The sudden resurgence of the biblical injunction of
 8 absolute separation between the human and the nonhuman does not quite fit
 9 into the diegetic arc of a tale that has gone very far, maybe too far, in the reshuf-
 10 fling of categories. As often, in Freeman, the ending of the tale disappointingly
 11 caters to the expectations of the most conservative readers. “The Cat” is no
 12 exception. Yet, something is amiss:

13
 14 But the tobacco was gone; not a dust left . . . Suddenly many features
 15 struck [the Master] as being changed. Another stove lid was broken; an
 16 old piece of carpet was tacked up over a window to keep out the cold;
 17 his fire-wood was gone. He looked, and there was no oil left in his can.
 18 (15–16)

19
 20 Between the acts, something has happened, the trace of which bears no easy
 21 explanation. What is missing is the trace of another story, another temporality,
 22 and another performance of the present—that of the Cat and his lover—which
 23 Freeman’s understudies can accommodate, without entirely being able to inte-
 24 grate it in the weaving of the tale. Freeman’s animism pluralizes the present.
 25 Ontologies with a deeper history continue to carry their own efficacy into the
 26 tale’s unsettled “now”—Freeman’s and ours.⁶

27 Another of Freeman’s understudies, the sixth and last of her animal tales,
 28 also proposes a shift in ontological regimes, an unsettling of binary epistemolo-
 29 gies—animal vs. human. In “The Doctor’s Horse,” the reader of regionalist
 30 sketches, from Sarah Orne Jewett to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, will easily recog-
 31 nize the figure of the country doctor on his daily rounds. Freeman’s story, how-
 32 ever, would not be much of a story if one focused on the figure of the doctor
 33 only. The doctor’s life—we learn it from the horse’s mouth—is no storied life.
 34 Nor is the horse’s for that matter:

35
 36 The horse seemed to live his life in a perfect monotony of identical chap-
 37 ters . . . The same stall, the same measure of oats, the same allotment of
 38 hay . . . All the variation which came to his experience was the uncer-
 39 tainty as to the night calls. (“The Horse” 88)

40
 41 In order for a story to emerge that is *not* the insipid story of the doctor nor that
 42 of the domesticated animal, something must happen. What happens, in Freeman’s

tale, is a shift in ontological regimes, dramatized as the sudden capacity of the animal, first described as one who “had no disturbing memories, and no anticipations” (88), to know and remember who he is. Put differently, the horse evolves into an individualized consciousness aware of itself as continuous through time—into a historical self, that is.

To take neuroscientist and philosopher Antonio Damasio’s terms, fiction, the possibility of fiction, is indexed on this transition from “core” to “extended consciousness”—i.e. from a consciousness that provides the organism with a sense of self here and now to a consciousness that encompasses “the organism’s past and its anticipated future” (3). And not only is the story made possible *because* of this transition, fiction also *performs* this transition with its own tools.

One day, as the doctor’s niece sits in the doctor’s buggy, the horse, sensing a “current of terror behind him,” suddenly feels as if an electric current were “firing his blood” (92). Granted, the narration’s vocabulary is here reminiscent of evolutionary discourse—the horse reacts in accordance with his race and becomes what he should never have stopped being: a fiery undomesticated colt. Another lexicon, however, emerges—that of knowledge and consciousness: “At last he knew, by her terrified recognition of it, his own sovereignty of liberty . . . He was again himself—what he had been when he first awoke to a consciousness of existence . . . He was no longer the doctor’s horse, but his own” (93–4). No longer an animal with neither memories nor anticipation, the horse acknowledges the continuity of his self and the consciousness of his existence as a historical being. Has the tale gone too far? It may well be.

“The Doctor’s Horse” soon reverts to a more acceptable conclusion. By courtesy of fiction, the doctor, grown old, buys the same old horse. “He did not know him first,” says the narration, but when the horse stops where they always used to stop, the doctor remembers; “The doctor stared at him. Then he got out and went to the animal’s head, and man and horse recognized each other” (96). He who had forgotten, whose consciousness had been discontinuous enough not to know his old companion can suddenly reconnect with his youth and former self. Unlike the horse, who knew him from the start, the doctor needs the face-to-face encounter to regain an extended consciousness of himself. The tale ends with this moment of recognition that also heralds a backward move to the initial dynamics between man and beast, master and servant:

He was once more the master, in the presence of that which he had mastered. But the horse was expressed in body and spirit only by the lines of utter yielding and patience and submission. He was again the doctor’s horse. (96)

Not unlike the conclusion of “The Cat,” the tale comes full circle—almost, that is. For something has happened in between; a story has developed, a story

1 of a life—a horse’s life—made possible, within the conventions of the genre of
2 the story, by the acknowledgment of the horse’s extended consciousness. The
3 title of the story gives us a clue. “The Doctor’s Horse” is neither the story of
4 the Doctor nor exactly the story of the Horse, but the story of a relation that
5 verges on interdependence, or “intra-action.” In “The Doctor’s Horse,” neither
6 the doctor nor the horse’s identities are stabilized at the beginning of the tale;
7 they emerge in and as relations, until in the end, disappointingly perhaps, both
8 acknowledge their relative and relational selves—as master, as servant.

9 There are, of course, other ways of reading Freeman’s understudies. “The
10 Doctor’s Horse,” for one, reads like a failed emancipation story; the analogies
11 with slavery—the mention of “unbreakable chains of servitude” (87) of “the
12 assertion of freedom”(92)—are hidden in plain sight. The emergence of the
13 relational selves of master and servant also signifies within the immediate con-
14 text of its publication, the imperialistic turn of US national policy inaugurated
15 by the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War.⁷

16 We should not be surprised, then, that at a time when magazines voiced
17 the concerns of many about encountering others and other selves, Freeman,
18 however obliquely, chose to change the templates and the coordinates of her
19 regionalist tales accordingly. Adopting the perspective of anthropology and
20 psychology in her turn-of-the-century fiction was a way to try to come to terms
21 with the broader issue of the existence, or not, of a continuum of interiorities
22 that would radically challenge the geopolitical order, the imperialistic parti-
23 tion of the sensible. In “The Philippine Question” (1899), psychologist William
24 James proposed: “If ever there was a situation to be handled psychologically, it
25 was this one—We have treated the Filipinos as if they were a painted picture,
26 an amount of mere matter in our way. They are too remote from us ever to
27 be realized as they exist in their inwardness” (159). Freeman’s *Understudies*,
28 I suggest, uses the tools of fiction to do just that: it inquires into the other’s
29 inwardness and, betting on the continuity of interiorities that is at the heart of
30 non-Western ontologies, handles the question “psychologically,” as she herself
31 admits in a letter to her editor,⁸ as her fellow anthropologists and philosophers
32 tried to do at the time, and as today’s cognitivists, neuroscientists, and anthro-
33 pologists also do. Her turn-of-the-century tales prompt us to pay attention, not
34 only to (subjected) others, but to other modes of consciousness at large that
35 fiction as a privileged means of encounter can best articulate.

36 In *Understudies*, Freeman’s uncanny continuities ask that we accept the unreli-
37 ability of our contours, the performativity of our “identities,” and the untimeli-
38 ness of the present itself that allows the deeper time of non-Western ontologies to
39 seep into, and pluralize, the “now.” Entering this world demands that we under-
40 stand ourselves as co-agents in the relation between us and those who are no
41 longer simply, and wrongly, referred to as “them.” Her next collection, *Six Trees*,
42 goes even further. It trades the ontological cut for a continuity with variations.

VIBRANT DEMARCATIONS

About halfway through *Six Trees*, the narrative voice boldly asks:

Who shall determine the limit at which the intimate connection and reciprocal influence of all forms of visible creation upon one another may stop? A man may *cut down a tree* and *plant* one. Who knows what effect the tree may have upon the man, to his *raising* or *undoing*? (“The Great Pine,” 79–80, my emphasis)

Some readers have recognized here one of the last symptoms of Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences, or a late Transcendentalist penchant in Freeman’s writing. And rightly so.⁹ Reading Freeman as untimely, however, invites us to disjoin her questioning from her present, and let her meet ours. To do so it suffices to take her at her word, that is, to let her words do their office. Freeman’s question is more than a formulaic device. Her text does what it does not yet dare say it does—figuratively and diegetically. Figuratively, the double chiasmic structures interweave man and tree, and create a logical bond between the cutting down of a tree and the undoing of man, and conversely the raising of man with the planting of a tree. As such, the narration lexically performs the “intimate connection and reciprocal influence” between man and tree that it pretends to offer as a mere hypothesis—something that also comes to pass diegetically. The plot, indeed, turns the great pine of the tale into the transformative force whereby an irresponsible sailor (who has left his wife and family to see the world) becomes a caring community healer. A narrative agent, the tree changes the man’s heart and ethical stance at the cost of its—or, shall we say, like Freeman, “his”—own life.

Freeman’s question cuts through the pith of her book and opens an interpretive rift right at its center: we are asked to situate ourselves where the limit is, at the very place of connection between human and tree, and read from this unstable, if vibrant, demarcation. In other words, the text itself requires that we should dis-inhabit our narrative comfort zone on *one* side of “the impassable barrier” between species; that we shoot our readers’ roots in the messy terrains resisting classification.

This is *not*, however, how the stories were received at the time of their publication. Cut the trees, the critics suggested, or at least cut them off the narration as so many disposable, even obstructive elements: “With all deference to the admirable technique of the author,” wrote Eleanor Hoyt in *The Lamp* in 1903, “one feels that there is too much tree in her landscape” (253). *The Spectator* concurred: “We cannot help thinking that these six ‘short stories’ would be better, or a least as good, *without* the six trees” (Anon. 23). The trees, or so it seems, are a hindrance, at least an embarrassment.

No wonder the illustrators of the book version also chose to downplay the trees’ importance. The frontispiece is a case in point, which shows the

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1 sailor of “The Great Pine,” aghast in a Gothic chiaroscuro, confronting the
 2 consumptive bedridden man that has replaced him and the trembling chil-
 3 dren huddled in a corner. No tree whatsoever, not a branch, not even a leaf.
 4 But why? Why capitalize on the well-known melodramas of domestic life,
 5 when the trees beg for recognition? Why did the editorial *mise en scène* mini-
 6 mize, or even minoritize, them? In 1995, Shirley Marchalonis, who unearthed
 7 this collection of stories, also cast some doubt on the “intimate connection”
 8 between humans and trees, arguing that these “stories are not ‘about’ the
 9 Natural Other, but about people . . . what they do is widen the world Free-
 10 man writes about without changing the human predicaments she explores.”¹⁰

11 True enough, despite promising titles and incipits using gendered personifica-
 12 tions, the animistic beginning leaves the stage to the all-too-familiar regionalist
 13 tale: in “The Elm Tree,” a destitute old man resists the selectmen who have
 14 decided to “uproot” him in the name of the welfare of the community; in “The
 15 White Birch,” a rich old bachelor decides to marry a young money-grabbing
 16 girl, only to be jilted in the end. The trees may indeed appear as baits to catch
 17 our gullible attention, and the paratext and the story frame as yet another guise
 18 for an old story. I want however to time our reading differently, and consider
 19 Freeman’s stories not from the perspective of her short-lived human characters,
 20 but from that of the deeper temporality of trees.

21 Reading from the tree’s perspective requires that we revisit the old story that
 22 the tree frames, and allow it to be diffracted by its (non-human) paratext. What
 23 emerges when we do so is first a gradual transfer of agency from characters to
 24 trees. After all, it is the eponymous “elm-tree” that saves David Ransom from
 25 the violence of the selectmen. Once sheltered in the foliage, the old man is “inex-
 26 pressibly changed” (33). By dint of a passive voice, agency has shifted from man
 27 to tree; or more accurately, the human (character) is now defined through his
 28 relationship to what is no longer, and maybe never was, an “Other.”

29 What we might have taken to be a late manifestation of anthropomorphism is
 30 revealed to be one part of a two-part drama, where the becoming-human of the
 31 tree is balanced with the becoming-tree of the human. *Six Trees* does more than
 32 allocate possibilities for selfhood across the species boundary, like in “The Doctor’s
 33 Horse”—what David Herman has called a “narratology beyond the human.” The
 34 collection stands as a warning against an obsolete epistemic, and semiotic, regime
 35 based on the fallacious givenness of the differential categories of human and non-
 36 human. Here, trees and humans talk, and think, and feel, with and through the
 37 “other.” The ending of “The Birch-Tree” may serve as an illustration.

38 Old Joseph Lynn, who has eventually decided to let go of his young lover,
 39 comes to sit under, or rather, *with* the tree:

40
 41 the silvery shimmer of the birches and their white gleam of *limb* caught
 42 his eye . . . the solitary birch which had been bereft of her sisters was very

near. He flung himself down beside her, and leaned against *her frail swaying body*, and felt *her silvery skin against his cheek*. (“The Birch-Tree” 64, my emphasis)

What we are witnessing here is not just another version of a regionalist critique that allows the “other” to look back, and gives some agency to those relegated to the margins. We may even suggest that reading these stories through the lens of 1990s feminist readings of Freeman has prevented us from attending to other modalities of critique. Reading against the grain of earlier criticism, even as we don’t consign it to the dustbin of history, is a move that Freeman’s late collections in particular invite us to do.

The end of “The White Birch” inquires into “other ways of being that might emerge from transmaterial”—and I would add cross-species—“affections” (Chen and Luciano 186). Categories “rub on and against each other, generating friction and leakage” (186), companion species dance cheek to cheek. The text concludes: “He loved the girl as he had never loved her before” (64–5). The girl? Which girl? Sarah, the lover that he lost to his younger rival? or the lonely white birch who stands so close to him, also referred to as “her”? The somehow hackneyed phrasing finds itself revitalized and destabilized by the shifting

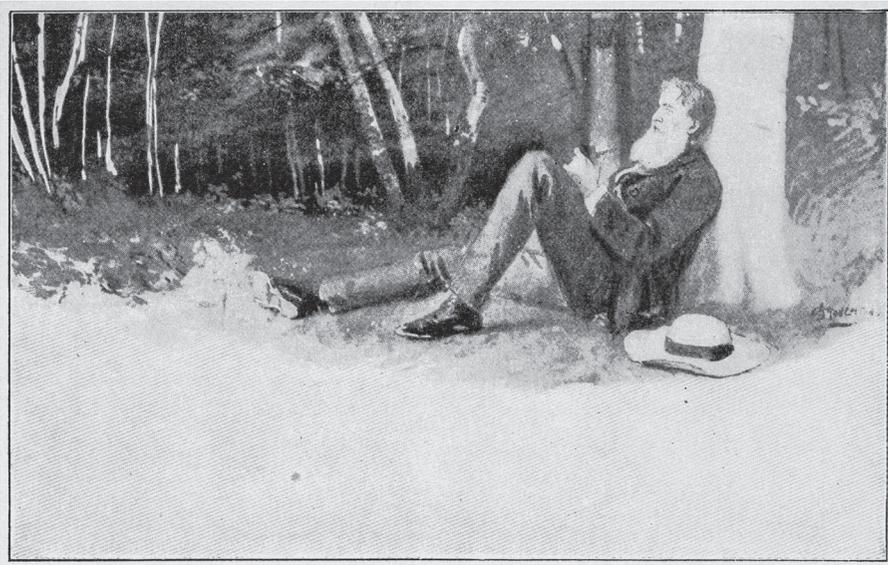


Figure 14.2 “The White Birch.” *Six Trees*, 1903. Image courtesy of Thompson Library Charvat American Fiction Stacks, Thompson Library Special Collections, The Ohio State University Libraries.

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1 system of referentiation; the text prolongs the indeterminacy as much as it can,
 2 and toys with this emergent continuity between humans and . . . human trees,
 3 a continuity that only dismisses difference to conjure it up again as variation.
 4 Man and tree touch, and the body of the one responds to the swaying body of
 5 the other as the sibilants join the two in an erotic textual dance. But what do
 6 they say?

7 One of the problems addressed by anthropologist Eduardo Kohn is that no
 8 matter how hard posthumanist studies try to sidestep the anthropological bina-
 9 risms of human/nonhuman, *because* nonhumans are devoid of linguistic abilities
 10 and capacities for symbolism, they will always be the passive objects of human
 11 cognition. One of Kohn's solutions, then, is to downplay the symbolic function
 12 of the sign and focus rather on its iconic and indexical value, something he bor-
 13 rows from Charles Sanders Peirce, a contemporary of Freeman. Monkeys know,
 14 Kohn notes, that when a tree crashes, it means—indexically—that they have to
 15 leave in haste: “Significance is not the exclusive province of humans because
 16 we are not the only ones who interpret signs . . . representation exists in the
 17 world beyond human minds and human systems of meaning” (Kohn 31). A more
 18 embracing semiosis brings together humans and other life forms. The beginning
 19 of “The Great Pine” offers an illustration of such enlarged semiosis.

20
 21 It was in the summer-time that the great pine sang his loudest song of
 22 winter, for always the voice of the tree seemed to arouse in the listener
 23 a realization of that which was past and to come, rather than of the
 24 present . . . The man who lay beneath the tree had much uncultivated
 25 imagination, and, though hampered by exceeding ignorance, he yet saw
 26 and heard that which was beyond mere observation . . . He did not
 27 know that he heard the voice of the tree and not his own thought, so
 28 did the personality of the great pine mingle with his own. (“The Great
 29 Pine” 69–71)

30
 31 The tree's song—outside the linguistic realm—is not devoid of meaning. The
 32 man understands it, as if it were his own voice talking to him. The man is dumb,
 33 so is the tree which, unlike the horse, or even the cat of *Understudies*, “cannot
 34 project itself beyond its own existence to judge of it” (73). However, a message
 35 has traveled from tree to man—maybe through the mediation of the bird, cast-
 36 ing a glance at the human figure “from an eye like a point of bright intelligence”
 37 (71)—a bird who, if we believe Kohn, has made the most of the indexical signs
 38 delivered by the tree and passed them on to the more vulnerable and weaker
 39 form of life—man that is. At the end of the story, Dick goes back to the moun-
 40 tain, a redeemed man, only to find the pine lying prostrate on the ground. Has he
 41 been able to read, on his way, what the text calls the “ice-mailed branches” of the
 42 trees (98, my emphasis)? We will never know. What we know, however, is that a

larger semiosis than the one we humans have been confined to has done its office. 1
 The tree has transformed the human, at the expense of his own life. Reading *with* 2
 the trees of Freeman’s book has forced us to read outside our narrative comfort 3
 zone, and invited us to share with her forest if not a language, at least an ensemble 4
 of significant signals—the “nodding” of leaves, the gleam of a white branch, the 5
 “rocking” of a bough—of which we have learned to make sense. 6

For the Runa of the Amazonian forest, Kohn explains, “all beings, and not 7
 just humans, engage with the world and with each other as selves—that is, as 8
 beings that have a point of view” (132). What Freeman’s *Six Trees* teaches us 9
 is to engage with the leafy world of trees as selves indeed, yet not as the pro- 10
 tectively bounded selves that we have inherited from our engrained dualisms. 11
 Paradoxically, then, the more sustainable selves—David, Dick, and Joseph— 12
 may well be those that accept some level of porosity, some quivering of their 13
 own borders, “the intimate connection with and reciprocal influence of” other 14
 selves. In between Freeman’s leaves, there vibrate the premises, or the dream, 15
 both untimely, of a community of contingent and volatile selves—not so much 16
 a community, then, as a commons born of singular encounters, or combina- 17
 tions, *across* species. 18

QUEER ASSEMBLAGES, OR FREEMAN’S ODDKIN 19

Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each 21
 other in unexpected collaborations and combinations. 22

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. 23

Freeman’s *Six Trees* takes stock of the age of extinction and deforestation that 25
 was as much hers as it is ours. In “The White Birch,” the birch trees were a 26
 family, but only one sister has survived; “The Balsam Fir” takes place at Christ- 27
 mastime, a dire time for trees, while the beginning of “The Lombardy Poplar” 28
 resumes the same lamento, “Now they were all gone, except this one, the last 29
 of the sons of the tree” (131). In a context of devastation, when “families” 30
 and genealogies are going extinct, new forms of kinship need be reinvented. 31
 Freeman’s *Six Trees* poignantly “speak back” to us, as we read into her bold 32
 fictional oddkins a future that may not yet have come to pass. 33

“The White Birch” projects us into the spectral temporality of embodied 34
 loss, a disjuncted present that both vibrates with a deadly past and repeats the 35
 postscript that is our “now.” Tree-kinship, as described in the incipit of the tale, 36
 relies on proximity and entanglement—what the devastated and lonely present 37
 is precisely missing. 38

At one time the birch-tree had *sisters*, and they stood *close together* in 40
 sun and wind and rain, in winter and summer. Their pretty, graceful 41
 limbs were *intertwined*; their rustling leaves were so *intermingled* that 42

1 one could not tell to which they belonged; . . . But all her sisters were
2 gone; one or two had died of themselves, the others had been lopped
3 down by the woodsman, and there was only the one white birch left.
4 ("The White Birch" 43, my emphasis)

5
6 The elegy, however, soon yields to more uncanny developments: what the
7 "tree alone" endures is less separation than a spectral embodied connexion
8 beyond death.

9
10 The white birch felt always, *as a man will feel a missing limb*, the old
11 spread of the others' branches, the wind, and rain, and the sun in them.
12 She never fairly knew that she was alone, that her sisters were not there.
13 When the snows of winter fell, she felt them, soft and cool and shel-
14 tering, *weighing down her sisters' limbs as well as her own*; when the
15 spring rain came, there was not a young leaf of the trees which were
16 gone but was evident to her *consciousness* . . . (44–5)

17
18 An extension of the phantom limb syndrome that affected so many Civil War
19 soldiers, the tree alone can feel what her dead sisters (would) feel.

20 Trees, scientists have recently shown, communicate through root systems
21 that "intersect and grow into one another," with the help of fungi that "act as
22 intermediaries to guarantee quick dissemination of news" (Wohlleben 10). But
23 after they have died? To say it with Peter Coviello, Freeman, here, allows us to
24 uncover "broken-off, uncreated futures" (20), something that science has not
25 (yet?) unearthed—a postmortem kinship that prolongs the loving entanglement
26 of sister trees well into the age of the Anthropocene. In that sense, our present
27 is indeed haunted by "the ghost of future pasts" (Coviello 15), those "errant
28 possibilities" of Freeman's present that have not yet come to pass. But these
29 possibilities, in Freeman's time, were already both contemporaneous with her
30 and redolent of a "pre-modern" nonindividuated form of being."¹¹ Freeman's
31 untimely present, then, meets *off*, and recasts our "now" as irreducibly het-
32 erogeneous and open.

33 The postmortem kinship that opens "The White Birch" allows for more radi-
34 cal cross-species affections, still. As we have seen, the heteronormative plot—
35 the marriage of old Joseph to young Sarah—will not obtain. Sarah will marry
36 Harry—Harry Wyman ("why man" or "women," we will never know)—leaving
37 the reader unsure about the reproductive futurity of this union. Joseph, on the
38 other hand, will make up for the loss of Sarah with the birch tree he already loves,
39 a love which, to take up Donna J. Haraway's words, "is a historical aberration."

40
41 We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the
42 flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify

in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a historical aberration and a natureculture legacy. (*When Species Meet* 16)

“The White Birch” is the story of this legacy that speaks back to us as an errant future possibility, distinct from the heteronormative plot—an oddkin, indeed. That Freeman’s stories resist the heteronormative story is old news. But the alternative that *Six Trees* proposes is not. When Joseph decides to turn away from his fellow humans in order to hook up with . . . a tree, something goes amiss in the system that we call the world.

“The Lombardy Poplar,” another story of extinction, also tells of the need to craft new forms of kinship. But this time the rewriting of the romantic plot verges on comedy. Starting with the dire observation that the Lombardy poplars are “all gone,” except for one, “the last of the sons of the trees,” the narration immediately pairs this with human history. Sarah Dunn is herself “the last of her” family. Sarah and Marah Dunn were twins. Marah died. And Sarah Dunn became closer to her cousin, also called Sarah Dunn and looking very much like her. There starts the comedy. “The Lombardy Poplar” is a tale of sameness and difference, a tale about how to order and classify amidst the confusion created by “unexpected collaborations and combinations.” In botanical terms, the story raises the question of how to measure variation, how to draw lines between species.

Sarah and Cousin Sarah’s first disagreement starts with the “poppole-tree.” While Sarah has a special tenderness for it—“it seems like my own folks, and I can’t help it” (145)—Cousin Sarah regards such affection as sacrilegious. How can a tree replace a human? All the more so when the tree, *that* tree, does not even look like a tree: “It ain’t a tree. It’s a stick tryin’ to look like one” (147). “That’s why I like it,” answers Sarah. “I’m sick of things and folks that are just like everything and everybody else. I’m sick of trees that are just trees. I like one that ain’t” (148–9). The violence of Cousin Sarah is significant. She cannot deal with a tree that does not belong to any species, nor category, a tree that is one of its kind. She cannot understand Sarah’s “goin’ on so queer;” (151) and taking risks indeed when she decides that her family, her kinship, no longer defines her.

She was a creature of as strong race-ties as the tree. All her kin were dear to her, and the cousin had been the dearest after the death of her sister. She felt as if part of herself had been cut away, leaving a bitter ache of vacancy, and yet a proud self-sufficiency was over her. She could exist and hold her head high in the world without her kindred, as well as the poplar, the last. (154–5)

At the moment when whole species go extinct, when trees lose their kins and are turned into solitary units, or loners, Sarah shifts allegiances, and turns from

1 her human kin to her “popples” oddkin; letting go of the advantages (and con-
 2 straints) of a community of similarities, she chooses not to abide by the law
 3 of the category, and ally with a tree “that ain’t a tree,” so as to be free to be a
 4 woman that also isn’t just a woman. “The Lombardy Poplar” ends with Sarah’s
 5 coming out, her extravagant red outfit serving as a sign that she no longer
 6 belongs to the Dunn’s family as defined by the law of strict similarities, but is
 7 “a Dunn apart” (165). Sarah has not renounced *any* kinship; she has crafted
 8 her own, she has chosen her companion species—the “popples” that she loves.

9 “Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and
 10 genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters,” writes Haraway.
 11 “What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth,
 12 including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?”
 13 (*When Species Meet* 2) Freeman leaves us, and “them,” whoever they are, that
 14 chance. *This* is her untimeliness. *Understudies* and *Six Trees* will give us no
 15 straightforward answers to the pending questions that are ours. As fictions of the
 16 early 1900s, they tell us neither of a world gone by, nor of a future, our present, of
 17 which they would be the harbingers. Rooted in a place, Freeman’s New England,
 18 and in a time, the turn into the twentieth century, they uncannily echo the voice
 19 speaking at the opening of another fiction, written in another turbulent time, ours:
 20 “That’s the trouble with people, their root problem,” murmurs the voice that
 21 introduces Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (4). Against essentialisms and rooted
 22 selves, Freeman entreats us to listen to another story, and read her otherwise. Not
 23 unlike the voice that resonates in Powers’s prelude, Freeman’s texts sing to us: “If
 24 your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we’d drown you in meaning . . .
 25 Listen. There’s something you need to hear” (Powers 4). Paying attention to
 26 Freeman’s volatile selves and oddkins neither brings us *back* to a pre-modern
 27 episteme nor projects us into a desirable utopia; her fictional propositions are
 28 unforeclosed possibilities that open our present (reading) to broken-off futures
 29 and suspended designs. In that sense, she is our contemporary *because* she is
 30 untimely. Because her “now” is always out of joint, her present and ours may
 31 meet, time and again, in the staggered dischrony that we happily share.

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NOTES

- 23 1. I’m borrowing the phrase from Cristanne Miller’s title, *Reading in Time: Emily*
24 *Dickinson and the Nineteenth Century*, in which she forcefully defends a reading
25 of Dickinson in the context of the Civil War.
- 26 2. Coviello uses the notion of the “untimely” in the context of the history of sexual-
27 ity. He is interested in “the contours of a series of erotic possibilities that were not
28 quite, not yet, legible in the terms of the century’s impending sexual taxonomies”
29 (11). I extend his use of the “untimely” to consider how Freeman’s texts challenge
30 other taxonomies as well, in particular our binary ontologies opposing animals and
31 humans.
- 32 3. Fetterley and Pryse quote Carl Rogers who wrote in 1959: “The state of empathy,
33 or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with
34 accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto,
35 as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (Rogers
36 210–11, quoted in Fetterley and Pryse 346).
- 37 4. There are also six plant stories, which I am not looking into here. For an analysis
38 of “Arethusa,” see Susan Stone’s chapter in this volume.
- 39 5. The neologism “intra-action” signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agen-
40 cies. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are
41 separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-
42 action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through,
their intra-action- (Barad 33).

6. See Vesna Kuiken for a study of how Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and especially the chapters around Shell-Heap island, “collapse the future and the past into one vast present.” She writes: “[T]ime becomes a physical repository of simultaneous—idiorrhhythmic—possibilities” (100). I argue here that contemporaneity as untimeliness does just that. 1
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4
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7. The Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War (1898–1902) came to represent a critical milestone in the development of the US as an overseas empire. The US was now ready to vie with other world powers to take up the “white man’s burden.” Many among Freeman’s contemporaries, among them Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, William James, or Jane Addams, enrolled in the Anti-Imperialist League. The political and cultural work of acquaintance performed by regionalism was impacted by the racial plurality of selves that this turn to global imperialism made more visible. See Jewett’s tale “The Foreigner” (1899); see also Roudeau, Walsh, Zagarell. 6
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8. “Somehow, the flowers and the animals seem to me not to combine very well. They are so essentially different, one being symbolic, the other psychological.” (Letter to Harper’s, 6 October 1900; Kendrick 244). 13
14
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9. See Susan Stone’s article in Phyllis Cole and Jana Argersinger (eds), *Towards a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism*. See also Stone in this volume. 16
17
10. In 2001, Terrell Dixon read these stories as a call for a displacement of focus, for the need to put back “nature” at the center of the stage in Freeman’s studies. For Dixon, *Six Trees* could even be read as “a type of ecological teaching tale” (166). I argue that Freeman goes further. For an ecofeminist reading of Freeman, see also Stacy Alaimo. 18
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21
11. For a thought-provoking exploration of alternative (“pre-modern”) forms of kinship in Jewett, see Nancy Bentley. 22
23