In 1901, Sarah Orne Jewett sent her latest historical romance, *The Tory Lover*, to Henry James, to which he quickly responded: “Go back to the dear *Country of the Pointed Firs*, come back to the palpable present *intimate* that throbs responsive, & wants, misses, needs you, God knows, & that suffers woefully in your absence.” For James, Jewett’s mistake was profound: she had abandoned her place in the turn-of-the-century literary world they shared, and the sooner she returned, the better. Placing Jewett, however, and placing the text that, for James and others, then and now, remains her masterpiece, remains a tricky affair. Opening with “The Return,” and closing on “A Backward View,” *The Country of the Pointed Firs* maps out a place indeed, an eponymous country, which forever eludes the narrator’s, writer’s, and reader’s, grasp. “I cannot tell you just where Dunnet Landing is except that it must be somewhere ‘along shore’ between the region of Tenants Harbor and Boothbay, or it might be farther to the eastward in a country that I know less well,” Jewett wrote to a friend in 1899. A writer’s quip, no doubt. Unless one should read Jewett’s response metafictionally—the country of the pointed firs is to be found in the book itself (“along shore” being one of the chapters of the book). From that perspective, Jewett’s *Country* is a literary locus. One of the author’s “tales of New England”—what else?—is indeed written in the tradition of her fellow local color artists Mary E. Wilkins Freeman or Hamlin Garland, and yet, maybe because it also pays its due to Thoreau, with, in passing, a somewhat ironic salute to Emerson, a knowing nod to Hawthorne, and a homage to Stowe and Sand, Jewett’s *Country* is hard to situate on a literary map. Is it a novel? a plotless assemblage of stories? Is it the last epitome of a dying genre—the local color cycle? or, the beginning of a modernist vision of place at the crossroads of multiple viewpoints? And who’s telling the story anyway? How to place the voice that tells of this country? Not unlike Sarah Orne Jewett herself, the narrator’s pendular movements between country and city, home and not-home, the familiar and the foreign, the “parish” and the “world” make it difficult to grasp country or *Country*, to find, that is, generic, formal, historical, categories to enclose them, be they literary modes, subject positions, or narrative forms.

One of the challenges of Jewett scholarship, from the contemporary reviews of Jewett’s day to present, has been the “plotless” structure of her texts, something that she appeared to acknowledge herself when as a young writer she wrote to her editor: “I don’t believe I could write a long story [...] The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of character and meditations. It seems to me I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there never is any play! I could write you entertaining letters perhaps, from some desirable house where I was in most charming company, but I couldn’t make a story about it.” This self-portrait of a female artist in search of a plot has served as a linchpin in the reception of her work, launching a series of ambiguous tributes that pointed to her “delicate” humor, her “slender” song, her “modest and delightful art.” Henry James himself rallied and famously praised her as a “mistress of an art of fiction all her own, even though of a minor compass,” calling *The

---

1. HJ to SOJ, Lamb House, 5 Oct. 1901 (quoted in Ferman Bishop, “Henry James Criticizes The Tory Lover.” *American Literature*, vol. 27, 1955, p. 264, emphasis in the original)
3. *SOJ* to Horace Scudder, 15 March 1890. “You do not express any disapproval of the title which I put on the cover: *Tales of New England*. It says itself well and easily and perhaps will do as well as another, though I was not sure of that first. You do not think it is too ambitious? But what are they Tales of, if not? says Yours sincerely, S. O. Jewett.” (Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, 1967, p. 63)
4. “One of the few really helpful words I ever heard from an older writer, I had from Sarah Orne Jewett when she said to me: “Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world *so well* before one can know the parish.” (Willa Cather, Preface to: *Alexander’s Bridge*, Houghton Mifflin, 1922, p. vii)
5. SOJ to Horace Scudder, 13 July 1873 (Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, 1967, p. 29)
Country of the Pointed Firs her “beautiful little quantum of achievement.”7 Jewett, then, was stamped, categorized as a talented specimen of a woman’s literary tradition, whose sketches could impart a sense of a vanishing world, yet could not make a plot out of it. Willa Cather, however, proposed an entirely different perspective in her 1925 preface: “The design is, indeed, so happy, so right, that it seems inevitable. The design is the story and the story is the design.”8 For Cather, form follows function, and the form that “does itself” (to take up Jewett’s phrase) in adequation with the story told will not abide by the conventions of traditional linear protagonist/antagonist plotting and closure. Jewett’s “plotlessness” is a choice, a strategy, and a formal necessity, something that the feminist critique of the 1980s would later emphasize, reading her choice of “going in circles”910 as an experimentation in female geography and narrative. The case is not yet closed; but one thing seems clear: “story-writing,” for Jewett, “is always experimental,” and such an experimental dimension is palpable not only in the narrative structure of Country, but also in the literary modes that the book negotiates—realism, regionalism, local color.

The interest in realism, and the mimetic imperative that goes with it, was something Jewett claimed to have inherited from her father, a country doctor in South Berwick, Maine: “My dear father used to say to me very often, “Tell things just as they are! […] The great messages and discoveries of literature come to us, they write us, and we do not control them in a certain sense.”11 But Jewett did not consider the artist to be a mere recorder of life. “The trouble with most realism,” she confided to Thomas Bailey Aldrich in an 1890 letter, “is that it isn’t seen from any point of view at all, and so its shadows fall in every direction and it fails of being art.”12 The writer, then, must develop a point of view—and in a sense, Pointed Firs is nothing but a long-winded search for a place from where to see and write; the story of a frustrated writer who comes to Dunnet Landing to finish a belated piece, the book itself perhaps, only to be confronted with this aesthetic, ethical, political and epistemological question: who is allowed to look, and from where can one see? Critics have long debated the text’s adherence to the local color mode, “written from the perspective of a narrator defined as superior to and outside of the region of the fiction,” or, alternately to regionalism defined as a writerly perspective “from within, so as to engage the reader’s sympathy and identification.”13 The fluctuating point of view of Jewett’s texts, however, undoes such a distinction, and unsettles any fixed epistemological standpoint, or better still, invents a new epistemology based on the constant translation of the subject position between center and periphery, generality and particularity, between variegated positions of power and resistance.14 Could this be why her regionalism never exhausts “the life of things”?15 In Jewett’s texts as in William James’s pluralistic universe, “something always escapes.”16 “It is those unwritable things that the story holds in its heart, if it has any, that make the true soul of it,” Jewett wrote.17 There is no point in “do (ing) all the reasoning and all the thinking”18 for the reader. The thing that Jewett wants to “just tell”—be it place, or relation itself as the only possible ontology—remains elusive to a narrow version of mimesis, and the restriction of one point of view. Jewett, like Dickinson, tells all the thing, but tells it slant.

15 SOJ to Sarah Whitman (Fields, Letters, 1911, p. 112)
Since its “recovery” in the 1980s by feminist critique, The Country of the Pointed Firs has been read from a variety of standpoints, each throwing its light on this delusively simple text. First praised as the delineation of an alternative female world of love and ritual rooted in a local community at a time when the United-States stigmatized as “unwholesome” and “anti-American” the “over-exaltation of the little community at the expense of the great nation,” 19 Jewett’s text, in which empathy displaces war, in which the world of mothers’ gardens supersedes the world of men (Donovan20), was hailed as a site of feminist resistance to an unpalatable nationalism aggravated by new forms of imperialism, as a community of neighborly bartering and giving that contested a masculine capitalism. An alternative to nation-building from above, Jewett’s Country, not unlike her earlier text, Deephaven, was therefore understood to do politics in its own literary way, attempting to “make people acquainted”21 with each other, especially urbanites with country women, and performing a national reunification based on one-to-one encounters, from below.

In the early 1990s, however, the tide suddenly turned. The same scholars that had read Jewett’s Country as a narrative of (inclusive) female community revisited it as complicit with the very imperialism that it had been said to contest. The bond of womanhood, writes Zagarell, are “tacitly creat[ing] a racially specific community and contribut[ing] to the figurative exclusion of those significantly different from community members.”22 Focusing on texts such as “The Foreigner,” one of the late Dunnet Landing stories, or the chapter “The Bowden Reunion,” Jewett scholarship historicized Country differently, insisting on how the nativist thinking of Jewett’s elite cosmopolitan class had in fact shaped her vision of community. There is no denying that a certain Nordicism traverses Jewett’s Country. But while this point must be acknowledged, it does not preclude other readings. For Zagarell and others, Country’s intricacies and discontinuities (e.g. racial exclusiveness and woman-centeredness) should rather be understood as “registers” or “crosscurrents,”23 that co-exist, even enable each other, textually. More than ever, the tensions that constitute Jewett’s project remain. For the better.

Today, Jewett’s regionalism is no longer seen as a mere reflection of a world gone, a charming, if minor, preservationist mode striving to represent dialect and folkways of a vanishing place and time. Historicizing Jewett has not resulted in relegating Pointed Firs to a foreign country of the past. Rather, it has helped us recognize that our reading of this text exposes our own historical condition and the concerns of our own present (Howard24). Recently, Jewett’s Country has been read from the perspective of the global (Storey25); her regionalism has once again been unsettled by allowing Afro-Creole cosmology (Kuiken26) or Native American lore to deconstruct the very “origin” of region; her Swedenborgian animism is now revisited as another mode of negotiating the kinship between human and non-human beings (Alaimo27). This unfinished business is perhaps Jewett’s “palpable present,” the one we are invited to “go back to,” as James suggested to Jewett, to share, and create, again and anew.

Selective Bibliography

1. EDITIONS

Recommended edition

Other editions
*The Country of the Pointed Firs* was first published in 4 instalments in *The Atlantic Monthly* from January to September 1896 (http://www.sarahornejewett.org/soj/cpf/at-cpf-1.html). The text was then organized in different ways after Jewett’s death, a possible testimony of the malleability of plot and design. The various editions are available on the Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project.


EDITING *POINTED FIRS*: THE HISTORY OF A TEXT


In an unpublished manuscript chapter of Jewett’s book, she crafted an ending featuring an economically powerful rural heroine no longer subject to the tourist’s command. Argues that

---

28 The Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project website is a trove where most primary and secondary sources are available. http://www.sarahornejewett.org/soj/contents.htm. The short summaries provided here are adapted from those to be found in the SOJ Text Project, or from the authors’ abstracts.
Jewett thought critically about her representational practices as a cosmopolitan author depicting rural people for a national audience.


2. TRANSLATIONS


3. OTHER TEXTS BY JEWETT


Also a short-story cycle. Two young city outsiders spending a summer on the coastal town of Deephaven. Of particular interest are the two prefaces Jewett wrote for the 1877 and 1893 editions. [http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/dph/prefaces.html](http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/dph/prefaces.html).

*** The 1893 preface is reproduced in the Carlin.


Semi-autobiographical early novel about a female country doctor choosing the medical profession instead of following the path to marriage.

A SELECTION AMONG HER NUMEROUS STORIES


In *The Mate of the Daylight, and Friends Ashore*, 1884. ***“Tom’s Husband” (gender); “The Confession of a House-Breaker” (boundaries).***

In A *White Heron and Other Stories*, 1886. ***“A White Heron”***

In *The King of Folly Island and Other People*, 1888. “Miss Tempy’s Watchers” (to be read with “The Foreigner”)

In *The Life of Nancy*, 1895. “A Neighbor’s Landmark” (on trees)

In *The Queen’s Twin and Other Stories*, 1899. “Martha’s Lady” (gender)
4. LETTERS

http://www.sarahornejewett.org/soj/let/let-frm.htm

http://www.sarahornejewett.org/soj/let/cary2.html

5. BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAYS

All of these essays contain analyses of Jewett’s texts.


emphasizes feminist themes, such as female-centric life, struggles of the female artist, and the redemptive power of matriarchal communities. Attends to Jewett’s aesthetic theory—that one of the purposes of art is to suggest a dimension of meaning beyond material reality.

explores the visual record of the Jewett-Fields relationship, specifically through a close reading of photographs and objects in Jewett’s bedroom.


http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/fields/james-henry-atlantic.htm


http://www.sarahornejewett.org/soj/bio/matthies.html


Examines the Demeter/Persephone story as a means by which 19th-century writers expressed an understanding of how women achieve identity in a patriarchal culture. Studies Jewett’s life and major works to show how she imagined women of power and independence in a feminine community.


6. AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECEPTION

Early reviews of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. 1896-1897.
http://www.sarahornejewett.org/soj/cpf/cpf-reviews.htm


Westbrook, Perry D. *Acres of Flint: Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Contemporaries.* Scarecrow, 1981.

7. **FORM, NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, GENRE (S)**


Reverses the sketch’s reputation of being a minor art form and recalibrates *Pointed Firs*’s accomplishment in terms of the tenuous and unfinished practice of attachment.

Argues that *Pointed Firs* treats time neither as relentlessly forward-moving nor entirely stagnant, but rather as an always-fluctuating present whose expansive, cyclical, and repetitive movements manifest in the material pleasures of seemingly mundane domestic chores. The link is made with labor reform debates of the end of the 19th century.

Good historical assessment of “local color.”

Argues that the narrative unfolds into five distinct circular enclosures which the narrator, carefully guided, must pass through to reach the “secret center” she desires to transcend. Like Theresa of Avila’s seven mansions of the soul, they show the reader the progress of Jewett’s pilgrim into the sacred sanctuaries of Dunnet Landing.


How Captain Littlepage’s tale reproduces, in ironic miniature, a unifying narrative structure for Jewett’s work.

*Pointed Firs* is a double narrative, one about the people of Dunnet Landing, the other a metafiction about “Jewett’s struggles as a writer engaged in the difficult task of gaining an adequate perspective on the people and place.”

This essay is concerned with region, period, and the relation between those two categories in the narratives of American literary history.

Shows how Jewett maps new relationships among sexuality, temporality, and narrative structure by challenging both hegemonic nineteenth-century conceptions of sexuality and the dominant narrative conventions of the realist novel.

Mehlman, Gabriel. “Jewett in the Systems Epoch.” Novel, vol. 53, no. 2, 2020, pp. 235-253. Pointed Firs both encodes and observes the gradual denaturing and collapse of its own classical-realist premises, which cannot abide the drawing into equivalence of character, interiority, and interpersonal communication with the inhuman formalism of systems. In the wake of the collapse of its classical-realist premises, the novel offers a final, speculative vision of a realism for the systems epoch.


Scudder represented a changing publishing market for literature during the nineties to which Jewett, like Henry James and other major writers, responded and adapted. How Scudder initiated and influenced the form of Jewett’s work.

Smith, Jennifer Joan. “Locating the Modernist Short-Story Cycle.” Journal of the Short Story in English, vol. 57, 2011, pp. 59-79. Jewett’s cycle [The Country of the Pointed Firs] makes especially clear how late nineteenth-century cycles borrow from the conventions of earlier cycles, such as romantic renderings of the geographical features and the use of tourist narrators; however, they also initiate the irony, skepticism and disjunction that figure largely in [Anderson’s] Winesburg, Ohio and later modernist texts.


Subbaraman, Sivagami. “Rites of Passage: Narratorial Plurality as Structure in Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs.” The Centennial Review, vol. 33, no. 1, 1989, pp. 60-74. Argues that each one of the tellers (who make up the embedded narratives) is but a splitting of the main narratorial voice.


8. REGIONALISM


**Fetterley, Judith. “‘Not In the Least American’: Nineteenth-Century Literary Regionalism as UnAmerican Literature.” College English, vol. 56, 1994, pp. 877-895. Argues that the work of 19th-century literary regionalists has been systematically excluded from the definition of American literature because they do not reproduce the national narrative of violence or the definitions of masculine and feminine, American and foreign, which such a narrative presents as our national interest. It is time, then, to take treason as our text and to begin reading “unAmerican” literature.


**Hsu, Hsuan L. “Literature and Regional Production.” American Literary History, vol. 17, no. 1, 2005, pp. 36-69. How the book’s references to immigration, voyages of discovery, and Maine’s lumber industry exceed the protocols of regionalism’s spatial and formal constraints. How a community fused together by deeply rooted feelings and day-to-day interactions depends, both economically and emotionally, on commodities and experiences acquired abroad.

Analysis of the Bowden reunion. In the regionalism of *Pointed Firs*, local Norman Americans must not only absent themselves from the modern processes of mixing and massification; they must also distance themselves from the excessive particularity of other ethnic groups.

** Kuiken, Vesna. “Idiorrhythmic Regionality, or How to Live Together in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs.*” *Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2018, pp. 87-118. Embedding Joanna in the scientific debates of the times around shell-heaps helps reformulate traditional definitions of literary regionalism, and postulates idiorrhythmic relationality (Barthes) as a novel theory of region.


*Storey, Mark. “Local Color, World-System; or, American Realism at the Periphery.”* *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism*, by Keith Newlin, editor, Oxford UP, 2019, pp. 101-118. Argues that regionalist fiction is better understood as a compromise between a dominant form of realism and the persistence of nonrealist generic registers.

Terrie, Philip G. “Local Color and a Mythologized Past: The Rituals of Memory in The Country of the Pointed Firs.” *Colby Library Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1987, pp. 16-25. On the uses of the past. Dunnet Landing is a place where memories of the past often define present reality, where the translation of memory into myth is the predominant social activity.


**Zagarell, Sandra A. “Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896).” *Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century*, by Christine Gerhardt (ed. and introd.), Walter de Gruyter, 2018, pp. 525-42. This essay situates The Country of the Pointed Firs within Sarah Orne Jewett’s life and oeuvre and within regionalist literature. Because the text has differed at different historical junctures, the essay asks what genre theory, book studies, and queer theory reveal about how it has been and can be read.

ON “THE FOREIGNER”

A psychoanalytical approach.


### 9. GENDER


Works on the Biblical context from which Jewett’s humorous representations of widows emerged.


Even though Jewett never formally articulated her critical ideas; they are found scattered through her correspondence, mainly in the form of advice to such younger writers.


Intersection of class and gender.


Studies the sexual politics of mythmaking with a specific focus on the relevance of this mythmaking to representations of lesbian sexuality.


Homestead, Melissa J. “Willa Cather, Sarah Orne Jewett, and the Historiography of Lesbian Sexuality,” *Cather Studies*, vol. 10, 2015, pp. 3-37


Jewett’s “Martha’s Lady” proposes a theoretical history of sexual subjectivity in nineteenth-century America. Jewett’s revision of “Martha’s Lady” for its 1899 republication attributes to Helena a knowing recognition of Martha’s lesbianism, a recognition that Martha could not have shared herself because such ascriptive categories were unknown to her.


Roman, Margaret. Sarah Orne Jewett: Reconstructing Gender. The University of Alabama Press, 1992. shows how Jewett, through her personal quest for freedom and through the various characters she created, strove to eliminate the necessity for rigid and narrowly defined male-female roles and relationships. With the details of Jewett’s free-spirited life, Roman’s book traces a gender-dissolving theme throughout Jewett’s writing.

Seitler, Dana. “Small Collectivity and the Low Arts.” Reading Sideways: The Queer Politics of Art in Modern American Fiction, by Seitler, Fordham UP, 2019, pp. 43-74. Through an analysis of “The Queen’s Twin,” the chapter looks at women’s craft as an aesthetic form within, and not separate from, the larger realm of 19th century aesthetic and political resources employed by minoritized subjects. It traces the emergence of a politics of gender and sexuality inherent within the aesthetic of the low.


10. RACE, ETHNICITY AND IMPERIALIST OVERTONES


Johanningsmeier, Charles. “Subverting Readers’ Assumptions and Expectations: Jewett’s ‘Tame Indians’.” American Literary Realism, vol. 34, no. 3, 2002, pp. 233-50. Based on Jewett's visit to the Oneida Indian Reservation of Wisconsin in November 1872, her story “Tame Indians” rehearses Jewett’s dilemma about how best to represent the racial or rural “other” to what she perceived as her genteel, urban audience.
Argues that for both writers, national identity in its ideal form is constituted by both loyalty to a community of Anglo-ethnic origin and affiliation with a broader racial community of white Americans. 


Resituates Jewett’s Dunnet Landing narratives in the context of the standpoints, cultures, and continuing presence of native peoples in Maine. 

Jewett’s foreign correspondence reveals someone who identified with a far more transnational sense of rural identity than her nativist reputation has allowed for. They reveal a conception of New England regionalism that was able to find cultural similarity not just with historical lineages of Old World ethnicity but also with geographically distant regions of contemporary rural life. 


Revisits her first interpretation of Pointed Firs and offers a way of engaging with textual discontinuities, and by extension for adjudicating among ways of reading, without embracing the relativism such questions (gender, class, race) imply. 


Examines how Pointed Firs has affinities with nature writing and studies Jewett’s ecological focus and assertions that the human and nonhuman worlds are intimately intertwined.


Argues that Sarah Orne Jewett theorizes garden design—particularly the question of whether or not a garden should be fenced—in order to theorize the aesthetic and social implications of her local color genre. Specifically, Jewett’s polemical defense of the garden fence is central to her ability to incorporate foreignness into her fictional landscapes. A garden fence can become a mechanism for defining “the local” as a formal practice that embraces foreignness, in contrast to competing definitions of “the local” that privilege native plants and native persons.

12. THE SPIRITUAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL


In Jewett woman’s power as a healer and her connection to the spirit-world, traditionally the province of witchcraft, correspond: witches and healing go together. That conviction was basic to her lifelong interest in the relation between women and the occult.


Documents Swedenborg’s influence on the young Jewett and then explores the evolution of her symbolism from its didactic, overtly Swedenborgian form in Deephaven (1877) to the unique
symbolist use of realism (or what she called “imaginative realism”) in The Country of the Pointed Firs, where metonymy becomes metaphor.


“Self-forgetfulness” allows the narrator freedom to enter other lives even as it denies her full fictional presence in the book. In particular: an analysis of the relations between Mrs. Blackett and Mrs. Todd.


Pointed Firs as informed by spiritualist practices.


Analyzes Sarah Orne Jewett’s regionalist project, and argues for seeing religion as central to her work. Her beliefs offer a way of coordinating time and space, and inform her vision of transfiguring friendship. In terms of the concerns of the book as a whole, the center of Jewett’s world is the New England village, reimagined as a woman-centered, radically Christian democracy.


The intimate, “minor” genre of the sketch, serialized in periodic increments, unceasingly depicts the relations and processes of friendly intimacy. Each “event” in Pointed Firs centers on a station in friendship’s developmental path. The effect is to sacralize these intimate phenomena, resituating affection itself as a spiritual practice.