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THE LITERARY POLITICS OF CELIBACY, 1880-1930

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To my parents,
and to Kyle Kaplan

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Abstract

Insignificant Others: The Literary Politics of Celibacy, 1880-1930

This dissertation redresses aneroticism's absence from literary, historical, and queer theoretical accounts of the emergence of sexuality at the end of the 19th century. During this period, sexuality rapidly became the prototypical human drive, inescapable and uncontrollable. Uncoincidentally, late-19th-century print culture was populated with celibate figures (e.g. the spinster, the odd woman, the bachelor, the neuter) who problematically failed to embody sexuality's emerging compulsoriness. In chapters 1 and 2 especially, I argue that these archetypes mediated entwined anxieties of depopulation, reproductive labor shortages, underconsumption, and white racial vitiation, all of which fueled the period's sexual biopolitics. The celibate, and the affective logic of libidinal indifference it embodied, was thus a complex cultural figure bearing a contradictory temporality: a uniquely late-19th-century problem, registering as a social and biological crisis, she was simultaneously rendered a residual social form, a holdover of outdated repressiveness from which *fin-de-siècle* culture was revolting. I consider the celibates of this dissertation queer figures in part because of their negativity: their aneroticism was explicitly framed as at odds with modernity, antithetical to racial futurity (chapter 1), but in America, also as the modern consumer's negative image (chapter 2). More positively, they are occasions for writers to explore intimate modes and narrative trajectories freed from romantic/erotic drives. They figured centrally in late-19th-century formal innovations around the short story as their authors searched for a form less obligated than the novel to narrative drive.

Methodologically, I approach the historical problem of aneroticism through its literary politics, by which I mean its intervention in debates around the disappearance of "reticence in literature" (Hubert Crackanthorpe, Arthur Waugh) at the end of realism's aesthetic dominance.

Literary histories often narrate this transitional period as a fairly homogeneous ramping up of libidinal currents, in content, genre, and form. The celibate texts I examine recalcitrantly dig their heels in against the juiced-up intensity of decadence, naturalism, impressionism, and other early modernist movements. The anerotic affective and intimate tendencies of these texts' celibate subjects functioned as a prism through which to develop literary modes running *contretemps* to a transition into modernist aesthetics (emphasizing affect, the unconscious, and stylistic and formal fluidity). If love and sex monopolized the novel at the turn of the 20th century, it makes sense that celibate texts adopted alternative forms to render non-libidinal life and sociality, e.g. unfashionably long novels (chapter 1), short stories (chapter 2), and short story collections (chapter 3). I explicate these marginal forms' affordances to rendering celibate life in an age of sexuality, providing an architecture to explore ambient, distanciated, and driveless relationality to which the novel's emphasis on narrative drive and formal unity was less amenable.

This dissertation's title, "Insignificant Others," designates the celibate lives and their aesthetic forms which were at once immiscible with, yet oddly central to, sexual modernity. They trouble sexuality's new indispensability to worldmaking projects (intimately, in sexual identity's structuring of attachment; racially, in the development of eugenics; and politically, in the sexual utopianism of feminist and early homophile cultural production). Taking the neglected queerness of these texts' aneroticism seriously, I further consider how contemporary queer studies has rendered aneroticism desire's repressed other.

Introduction

Motivations

In "Is the Rectum Straight?," a field forming essay of queer literary studies, Eve Sedgwick cautions critics not to uncritically impute libidinous desire onto texts pointedly indifferent to sex. Sedgwick critiques Teresa de Lauretis' recent popularization of the term "sexual indifference" to designate homoerotic attraction emerging from sexual undifferentiation, outside the heterosexual binary.[1] Overriding the vernacular meaning of indifference (neutrality, detachment, "having no inclination or feeling for or against a thing"), de Lauretis leaves little room to discuss the shaping force of *an*eroticism on aesthetic and social forms.[2] "Libidinal indifference," Sedgwick insists,

> is a force in its own right. It changes lives. And it doesn't only operate in the exceptional case of the would-be love object who is, shall we say, the "wrong" gender for the lover: the plain fact is that most people in the world, whatever their gender or sexuality, don't form or maintain libidinal cathexes toward most other people in the world, whatever theirs. Not that they fail to, not that they can't, not that they do and then repress them, just that they don't: a plain but not especially simple fact; a negative space in theories of desire, but one that has a shaping impact, as well, on desire itself.[3]

Sedgwick offers this critique in part to give herself cover for reading the sexual blankness of Lionel Croy in Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) as a signifier of homosexuality, the "love that dare not speak its name." Her writing on James here and in *The Epistemology of the Closet* renders his and other late-Victorian writers' sexual reticence as repressed sexuality in need of decoding, figured as readerly fisting at the end of the essay.[4] As a later Sedgwick would argue, this foundational writing

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[1] Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theater Journal* 40, no. 2 (1988): 155–177.

[2] Oxford English Dictionary Online, (March 2023), s.v. "Indifferent, adv."

[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Is the Rectum Straight?: Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*" in *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 81.

[4] Sedgwick concludes the essay with her famous discussion of *fisting-as-écriture*. "Anal erotics," she notes, "function especially saliently at the level of sentence structure" in James, his syntactically recessed meanings "placing the reader less in identification with the crammed rectum and more in identification with the probing digit" facing at first "a blankly

on *fin-de-siècle* queer literature helped center a paranoid hermeneutic predicated on a "repressive hypothesis," rendering sexual neutrality always a symptom of latent sexuality.

In the last decade, scholarship on asexuality and celibacy has incisively argued that queer studies' ongoing investment in repression imposes sexuality onto texts and historical subjects that lack sexual signification. This hermeneutic makes historical and aesthetic asexuality into a blockage of sexuality, rather than as "an elegant formation in and of itself," as Kahan writes in *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*.[5] Affirming asexuality and celibacy as kinds of "sexuality that [do] not aspire to normative sexual acts," however, this body of scholarship tends to impose its own compulsory *erotics* (nongenital sexual desires) on potentially anerotic texts and figures.[6] Kahan, for example, theorizes celibacy as a "sexuality without sex" that points to "the sexiness of no sex."[7] Similarly, Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* places eroticism at the heart of asexual identity, which abounds with the "life energy of refusal and revolt."[8] Nathan Snaza aligns genital sexuality with "superficial erotics" while locating asexuality in a deeper "field of joy extending well beyond the sexual as a restricted realm" with "more diffuse possibilities" for "swerv[ing] away from the patriarchal capture of joy and pleasure."[9] In these accounts, celibacy's dominant note is expansive desiring and deterritorialized pleasure. Important as affirming the queer

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baffling, 'closed' grammatical facade, which yet as one arduously rounds a turn of the sentence will suddenly open out into a clear, unobstructed, and iron-strong grammatical pathway of meaning," Sedgewick, "Is the Rectum Straight?," 101.

[5] Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5.

[6] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 5.

[7] Kahan, 27.

[8] Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 23.

[9] Nathan Snaza, "Asexuality and Erotic Biopolitics," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 134. Both Przybylo and Snaza turn to Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic to underline the compatibility of asexuality with *nongenital* erotic feeling.

credentials of asexuality is, such work risks doubling down on queer studies' equation of queer with erotic excess, leaving non-erotic relationships and feelings "a negative space in theories of desire."

Sometimes the absence or loss of sexual desire is not arousing but depressing, not expanding but estranging. This dissertation is interested in the kinds of relating that take place through detachment and social distance rather than conjuring a compensatory intimate, albeit nongenital, erotics. Revisiting the period 1880–1930, termed the "emergence of sexuality" or the Great Paradigm Shift, from which queer studies has derived so much energy, this dissertation foregrounds the figures of aneroticism that populated literary culture, but in the intervening years have become insignificant others to the period's more libidinally juiced-up archetypes (e.g. the dandy, the New Woman, the hysteric, the closeted queer). Each chapter takes up related anerotic figures important to late nineteenth-century literary culture: the odd woman, the erotically liberated New Woman's desexualized other (Chapter 1); the New England nun, the modern female consumer's minimally appetitive antecedent (Chapter 2); and the broader category of the celibate, whose recessive intimate style eluded emerging sexual taxonomies (Chapter 3). I argue that these figures refract cultural ambivalences around the emergence of eroticism as a powerful biopolitical drive recruited by a variety of turn-of-the-century worldbuilding projects, feminist, queer, eugenic, and consumerist alike. The celibate embodied, positively, a pessimism toward the utopian social promises of eroticism; negatively, it was considered an obstruction to social regeneration dependent on human erotic potential, a threat to reproductive futurity.

Holding these positions in tension, the texts I examine embody aneroticism *representationally* (through libidinally indifferent figures), *formally* (through brevity, discontinuity, and redundancy), and *stylistically* (reticence, affective flatness, and cleft syntax). My corpus largely constitutes periodical writing and fiction published between 1880–1930, written by transitional British and U.S. authors

claimed as both late realists and proto-modernists, e.g. Olive Schreiner, George Gissing, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, George Moore, and Henry James. Aneroticism, I argue, is central to these transitional writers' mediation of historical and generic upheavals. Centering the cultural and literary politics of celibacy complicates conventional critical histories about the shift from realism to modernism. By aneroticism, I mean that these texts stage their own frustrated failure to achieve narrative drive. In his indispensable study of literary form's sexuality, Peter Brooks declares, "Narratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots, and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire: the need to tell as a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener."[10] From a literary historical perspective, this was no more true than at the *fin-de-siècle*, when the "textual force" of eros became a literary "engine beyond human control," resulting in the formal inventiveness of naturalism, decadence, impressionism, and eventually fully-fledged modernism.[11] Brooks is not idiosyncratic here; his argument chimes with other major literary histories, which narrate the transition from realism to modernism as the triumph of a "doctrine of intensity" and of "libidinal currents" that drove a "detachment from the assumptions of formal realism" and its "strictures of conscience or morality.[12]

A key aesthetic question raised by the texts of this dissertation: is literature without erotics an impossibility, when so much twentieth and twenty-first-century literary theory joins Brooks in making sexuality compulsory to narrative itself, driving emplotment, style, formal unity/fracture, character dynamics, readerly pleasure, and, of course, the psychoanalytic territory of metaphor and

[10] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 61.

[11] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 46–7.

[12] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 76; Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 145.

symbol?[13] Or, as this dissertation suggests, might some literary modes that strike modern readers as repressively prudish actually grapple with the aesthetic mandate to be libidinal, intervening in this injunction by declining to "seduce," "subjugate," and pleasure the reader? Perhaps one reason literary theory has made drive so indispensable to narrative is its focus on the novel as the prototypical narrative form. The novel, especially the "post"-Realist novel, requires constant narrative propulsion to keep its plot moving forward, as well as continuously generated narrative tension to keep the reader wanting more.[14] Desire further functions to incorporate the novel's elaborate parts into a common storyworld.[15] The novel's requirement of drive thus depends to some extent on its length, its extended need of narrative production.

Like the non(re)productive celibates that star in most of their works, the writers featured in this dissertation take up literary forms less obligated than the standard novel to narrative production. They are characterized by diminishing narrative drive. Chapter 1 deals with novels about desexualization which adopt "ungainly" multi-volume plots in which narrative energies dissipate and emplotment stagnates.[16] The loss of narrative drive tracks with the obstruction of characterological

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[13] For paradigmatic accounts of desire's central role in plotting, formal unity/disunity, and characterology, see René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1976); and D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Desire's role in literary style is foregrounded in Eve Sedgwick's oeuvre; for a more recent account, see Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For the classic account of readerly erotics, see Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973). For a thorough critique of erotic desire's centrality within novel-oriented narratology, see Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, eds. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 660–718.

[14] The Victorian novel incorporated the sketch's synchronic analysis and narrative stillness, aspects of the novel pared away with Realism's decline. See Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[15] Thus, Brooks predicated his concept of "narrative desire" on Freud's Eros, a drive that "seeks 'to combine organic substances into ever greater unities.'" Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 37.

[16] Here I am borrowing Jed Esty's description of Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), which launched the New Woman fictional genre. All three novels examined in Chapter 1 were written as multi-volume novels; Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* (1894) were published as triple-deckers right as the form went extinct in 1894. Jed Esty, "The Colonial Bildungsroman: *The Story of an African Farm* and the Ghost of Goethe," *Victorian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2007): 407–30.

desire. These novels' resultant length and superfluity of plot set them at odds with shifting tastes not only for more sexually explicit fiction (the rise of naturalism and decadence), but also novels with intensified pacing.[17] Chapters 2 and 3 argue that celibate plots were uniquely associated with short stories. In *Philosophy of the Short Story* (1903), likely the first theoretical work on the form, critic Brander Matthews comments on this association: "While the Novel cannot get on easily without love, the Short-story can…The Short-story, being brief, does not need a love-interest to hold its parts together."[18] The spinster regionalism of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, for example, almost exclusively inhabited very short stories. Contemporary reviewers tied the short form's need of reticence, omission, and economy of plot to the New England spinster's recessiveness, her modesty, stillness, and narrow economic and affective expenditures. Wilkins Freeman and Jewett join other pioneers of the short story collection, George Moore and Henry James, who, in works like *Celibates* (1895)*, The Untilled Field* (1903), and *The Better Sort* (1903), think through the unique relational affordances of the collection via celibacy and vice versa. What content and form have in common is an aversion to incorporation through expansion, to conjugality through the transgression of boundaries.

This work suggests that the developments of sexual modernity and aesthetic modernism were uneven and frictional, a point that chimes with Kahan's excellent *Celibacies*. The anerotic texts of this period of social and literary transition move slantwise to historical currents, taking up celibacy and celibate sociality, increasingly residual social forms, through interesting, even experimental, uses of form. Their aesthetic experiments, however, are not those typically associated with modernism

[17] This would result in the near discontinuation of the multivolume form in the 1890s. Protestations by authors like George Gissing over the "Procrustean length" of the three-volume novel were among the most frequent late-Victorian complaints about the form. Guinevere Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 45.

[18] Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., [1901] 1917), 21.

(e.g. formal fluidity, narrative fracture, stylistic opacity); they are, in many ways, throwbacks to domestic realism, emphasizing precision, formal closure and rigidity, and reticence. Thus, the "literary politics" of this dissertation's title refers not only to the political issues of sexuality, reproduction, and consumption which literary representations of celibates mediate, but also the politics of literature's transformation around the *fin-de-siècle*, with which this project's texts engage.

The Great Paradigm Shift Revisited: Erotonormativity and Friendship

The late nineteenth century saw a general eroticization of culture and the subject, with the eruption of sexology, the hardening of sexual identities (especially the hetero/homosexual binary), marriage's heterosexualization, and the formal criminalization of homosexuality (as opposed to sodomy). Deeply informing queer histories of this period is Foucault's argument that homosexuality and homophobia emerged when the *act* of sodomy became "a personage, a past, a case history, … a type of life, a life form, and a morphology."[19] In the early nineteenth century, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration;" by the century's end, "the homosexual was now a species." Queer scholarship has tended to position *queer* sexuality as antithetical to the work of sexology to structure sexual desire, taxonomize it, and cohere it into identity terms. To risk oversimplifying, in much of this scholarship, 'bad' sexuality constrains eroticism's inherently unpredictable and transpersonal fluidity, while 'good' sexuality counterdiscursively exceeds language and shatters coherence. The partitioning of desire into two libidinal economies, one heteronormative (repressed, structured, reified) and one queer (excessive, destructuring, and resisting reification), upholds a fantasy of prelapsarian eroticism that is structureless and always on, while relegating libidinal indifference to

[19] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

"those invincible forces (both in the world and in ourselves) which have condemned us to the loss of ecstasy."[20]

This is a key theoretical and interpretive problem my dissertation addresses. It does so by foregrounding an analysis of erotonormativity over—but not in exclusion of—homophobia. "Erotonormativity" names the coordinated set of epistemic, political, and intimate privileges afforded erotic dynamics since the end of the nineteenth century—instantiated, for example, in sexuality's emerging compulsoriness, identitarian force, status as prototypical drive, and as an affect according to which we prioritize some relationships over others. I consider homophobia less in repressive terms than as bound up with a more general autonomization of erotic feeling as a force of radical potential therefore requiring radical regulation.[21] I center the productive forces of erotonormativity to make sense of the significant phobia celibacy inspired across the later nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In my retelling, the Great Paradigm Shift is an adjustment in intimate norms and human capacities responding to crises of disaffiliation—namely, mass celibacy, overproduction/underconsumption, and tensions between regionalism and economic nationalization—spanning the transition into the twentieth century.

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[20] Leo Bersani, *Future for Astyanax*, 13. The fantasy of structureless/destructuring desire has loomed large in the queer critical imaginary. Bersani's early work divides desire into a "polarity" of *"*structured*"* desire (the "impoverishment of desire" into "sublimated…emotional 'faculties' or passions…thereby providing the basis for the notion of a distinct and coherently unified personality") and *destructive* desire ("the potentially limitless aggressiveness" of "desublimated" desire, which might even produce "pleasure intense enough to shatter the desiring self")," Bersani, *Future for Astyanax*, 5–6, 13–14.

[21] "Eroticism," describing a state of erotic arousal or object suffused with erotic energy, first appeared in print in the 1880s. Oxford English Dictionary Online, (March 2023), s.v. "Eroticism, n." Jameson argues that sexuality's autonomization subtended its expansion into a base ontology of the human: "The psychoanalytic demonstration of the sexual dimensions of overtly nonsexual conscious experience is possible only when the sexual 'dispotif' or apparatus has by a process of isolation, autonomization, specialization, developed into an independent sign system or symbolic dimension in its own right; as long as sexuality remains as integrated into social life in general as, say, eating, its possibilities of symbolic extension are to that degree limited, and the sexual retains its status as a banal inner-worldly event and bodily function," Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982)*,* 64. Because sexuality has been so charged with exceptional intensity and meaning, it touches on a deeper plane of being than other quotidian activities. Critics face a dilemma: doubling down on its exceptional status in the world as given, further autonomizing it while neglecting its non-exceptionality for many (compared to e.g. platonic interactions, eating, listening to music, experiencing illness); or try to de-autonomize it, which risks neglecting its exceptionality to many.

My telling of this story begins with the English census of 1851, which began tracking marriage. This and subsequent censuses revealed nearly one-third of women would never marry. Chapter 1 examines how the fathers of eugenics, William Greg and Karl Pearson, used these demographics to fan fears of mass female celibacy. Merging the apparent spread of sexual disinterest among women with nascent social Darwinism, these writers transformed the once glorified spinster into an agent of race suicide, withholding reproductive power necessary for racial futurity. New Woman writers made it their cause to unleash feminine eroticism to redress this mass of what George Egerton, one of the most infamous writers of this group, would call "desexualised half-men with a pride in the absence of sex feeling."[22] Egerton explicitly pitches her *Rosa Amorosa* (1901) as modeling "finer eroticism" to middle-class Englishwomen, given her belief eroticism is "the only factor which can negative" the spreading estrangement from vital energy "which threatens to swamp all human efforts towards spiritual advancement."[23] Chapter 2 shows that a similar anxiety over celibacy gripped the turn-of-the-century United States, becoming a trope of the periodical press and naturalist fiction, amplified by no less than Theodore Roosevelt. Celibacy, no longer a mode of abstinence related to circumstance, economy, or Malthusian restraint, came to represent enervated sexual and spiritual drive asphyxiated by social rationalization.

At the same time, the emergence of sexuality saw a cultural divestment from singleness-sustaining friendship as a site of relational possibility. As both Lilian Faderman and Eve Sedgwick's classic work on homosocial friendship argue, sexuality's emergence as "the foremost instinct—in women as well as men—inescapable and uncontrollable" made once sanctioned close homosocial

[22] George Egerton, *Discords* (London: John Lane, 1894): 199.

[23] George Egerton, *Rosa Amorosa: The Love-Letters of a Woman* (London: Grant Richards, 1901), 15.

friendships newly paranoid sites of homoeroticism.[24] Queer accounts of friendship's end tend to mourn friendship as a lost site of erotic potential, rather than as a mode of intimacy offering relational alternatives to sexual and erotic attachments. Implicit in these early queer accounts of nineteenth-century friendship is an assertion that friendship is most valuable to queer subjects (and queer politics) in its erotic intensity. Faderman, for example, focuses on the prohibition against "*erotic* love relationships without genital sex," such that "a whole area of joyful, nurturing experience which women of other centuries enjoyed freely has…been closed in our liberated times."[25] Acknowledging that friendship can crescendo to the level of the erotic, my focus in the dissertation, especially Chapter 3, is in friendship as a zone of intimacy not necessarily ascending to the passionate, high-intensity, and drive-laden heights of eroticism. As Sharon Marcus' *Between Women* argues, far from all female friendships looked like Faderman's charged romantic friendships. "The question of how to conceptualize friends in relation to same-sex lovers," Marcus writes, "has haunted modern gay discourse since its inception," and typically involves "conflat[ing]" the two, "ironically obscur[ing] everything that female friendship and lesbianism did not share and [hiding] the important differences between female friends and female lovers."[26]

Not all nineteenth-century friendships were same-sex in nature, nor did they all result in the live-in companionship of Faderman's exemplar erotic friends, Sarah Orne Jewett and Annie Fields. Friendship often involves aneroticism, boundaries, distance, and negotiation that uniquely emerge when the other is not one's primary attachment or prioritized object of desire. It often stabilizes isolation and consoles loneliness, without liquidating either in *jouissance*. James, who identified as a

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[24] Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981), 311.

[25] Faderman, *Surpassing the Love*, 251.

[26] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 29–30.

"lonely celibate" throughout his life, expresses this in a brief letter written in 1914 to his friend Annie Fields.[27] Both James and Fields cultivated rich, arboreal networks of friends, to which they ministered through epistolary correspondence, memoir, biography, tender book reviews, and salons. James mourns in his letter to Fields an era in which friends "who know" what it means to live on friendship have become "now of the fewest":

> Dear Mrs. Fields, I have left so many days unacknowledged the so beautiful & touching letter prompted by your generous appreciation of my volume of *Notes*. The reason is largely that even still the high pressure London of June & July is always at some big interrupting assault on one's time or one's preferences, & that I have been but within a few days able to break away from it & get down into these quieter conditions. The arrears of my correspondence—a very desperate quantity—have had more than ever to wait. It is meanwhile the sympathy of all old friends from far back like yourself, of "those who know," as Dante says, that is the reward of my attempt to reach back a little to the unspeakable past. I really like to think of those who know what I am talking about—& such readers are now of the fewest. We both have had friends all the way along, however; & I mustn't speak as if we were too bleakly stranded today. The only thing is, none the less, that almost nobody understands what we mean, do they?—we can say that to each other (and to Mrs. Bell & to Miss Howe) even if we can't say it to them. I think of you very faithfully & gratefully & tenderly, & am yours affectionately always Henry James.[28]

Peter Coviello compellingly reads this scene as James turning toward a pre-sexological moment, in which "styles of erotic being that exceed, or precede, or fall aslant of, or otherwise escape captivation by" recognizable modern sexual identities flourished.[29] At the same time, I understand James' letter as in part a complaint about nascent erotonormativity, shrinking celibate sociality, a reaction to what Kahan describes as the period's "increasing eroticization of all dyadic relations."[30] Coviello might call this a "diffuse" or detached style of erotic being. I differ in emphasis from

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[27] Henry James, *The Complete Letters of Henry James: 1876–1878*, vol. 1, eds. Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zachary (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 37.

[28] Quoted in Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1.

[29] Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties*, 11.

[30] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 37.

Coviello in wanting to bring out the particular diffuseness, distance, and reserve that is also part of friendship, and of "lonely celibacy" especially, which frequently falls aslant of what could be described as erotic.

James' letter evokes the shades of friendship often downplayed in accounts of friendship, the recessed, often dormant, and tenderly formal kinds of attachment that friendship distinctively encompasses.[31] His friendship with Fields is characterized by a sympathetic feeling of estrangement that does not offer to solve that estrangement. Their friendship moves unevenly, often on pause or "in arrears," muffled out by the "high pressure" of modern urban life. It offers quietude and distance. This is a sustaining friendship for James, who counts Fields as one of those few friends "from far back" "who know" what it is to be "bleakly stranded today." "Those who know" nods to Aristotle (Dante's "Master of those who know") and an Aristotelian tradition of friendship which Heather Love glosses as "an autonomous space away from the tremors of eroticism, and also from eros's relentless narrative logic of pursuit, consummation, and exhaustion."[32] By 1914, this distinctively anerotic aspect of friendship seemed to be relegated to an "unspeakable past." Michael Cobb points out that sexual modernity is shot through with "persistent cultural, social, psychological, and affective biases" that construct "the uncoupled"—widows, bachelors, and longterm celibates—in terms of "singleness [that] marks being alone in a nearly paralyzingly profound manner."[33] Rubbing up against celibate bachelorhood's shrinking social margin, James feels "bleakly stranded today," yet also intimates that reserve and solitariness need not be so anathema to intimacy.

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[31] I am thinking here with Anne-Lise François' description of recessivity's "coolness," "a complacency toward desire that neither moves toward seizing it nor exerts itself to deny it." Ann-Lise François, "Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives," in *Theory Aside*, eds. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 39.

[32] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 78.

[33] Michael Cobb, *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 6.

I dwell on James' letter because it provides a different image of friendship's fate in sexual modernity than queer studies typically presents. I am not interested in constructing a picture of friendship tragically sapped of its erotic potential. Instead, I focus on the vanishing field of celibate intimacies structured by attachments much limper than erotic bonds. Doing so points us to an expanded version of queer intimacy, one that is not exclusively erotic. In prioritizing the *always erotic* nature of intimate bonds that exist at the margins of regulatory sexuality, queer studies has effaced affectively 'cooler' attachments—platonic friendships, practical cohabitation, diffuse care networks of strangers and acquaintances, transactional intimacy, anerotic sex—that frequently sustain life at the margins of romantic and erotic normativity. In focusing on recessed, non-cathective, and lower-intensity modes of attachment, my point is not to reinstate what Heather Love critiques as the "stabilizing" idealization of platonic friendship, which she argues "tends to emphasize fairly familiar and reassuring qualities of friendship over uneasiness, desire, or the 'improbable'" that queer studies generally associates with "the shocks of desire."[34] My point is that we need not forfeit platonism as a naively milquetoast style of relation. James' inconsolable loneliness suggests that celibate sociality is anything but easy or stable, especially when "sex [has become] not just desirable (energizing) but also a communitarian necessity."[35] It is a kind of relating predicated on asymmetry, contingency, estrangement, and misrecognition. George Moore, another celibate author whose work I explore alongside James' in Chapter 3, turned to Nietzsche to name the estrangement of platonic intimacy "star friendship," which his short story collections attempt to formalize.

A full accounting of *why erotonormativity at this moment?* is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, a common pattern emerges across the chapters: the breakneck pace of industrial

[34] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 79, 77.

[35] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 4.

production had overtaxed the population's biological and social reproductive capacities.[36] Erotonormativity placed perpetual drive at the core of the civilized subject and made a science of obstructions to this drive. The celibate, and the affective logic of libidinal indifference it embodied, was thus a complex cultural figure bearing a contradictory temporality: a uniquely late nineteenth-century problem registering modern fears of enervating alienation, she was simultaneously rendered a residual social form, narrow, sickly, and moribund, a holdover of outdated repressiveness from which *fin-de-siècle* culture was revolting. Late nineteenth-century celibacy thus both fueled sexual modernity (a threat needing to be vanquished) and troubled it (a social form unable to be completely residualized).

Case in point, we presently live in an age of "sex deficits," "pleasure deficits," "sexual anorexia," and the violent rage of *involuntary* celibates denied their right to sex.[37] Zoë Heller's "How Everyone Got So Lonely" surveys the recent spate of books on declining American sexuality, fueled by a 2022 demographic study which demonstrated a 12% decline in sexual activity between 1996 and 2018, as well as statistics quantifying the COVID-19 pandemic's "anaphrodesiac effect."[38] Heller turns to cultural theorist Laura Kipnis, who blames the decline in sexuality in part on "conservative" "puritanical" elements of #MeToo for creating a "dystopian moment" in which "neurotic self-

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[36] English cultural critic Hugh Stutfield makes just this point in 1895, attributing the celibacy crisis to overwork and mental malnourishment: "We have fallen on a temporarily sterile time, an age of 'mental anaemia'... The world seems growing weary after the mighty work it has accomplished during this most marvellous of centuries." Hugh Stutfield, "Tommyrotics," *Blackwood's* 157 (1895): 842. In the American context, Lears documents widespread anxiety about "overcivilization" producing both "bodily and spiritual enervation…reinforced by intersecting racial and class anxieties" linked to "unprecedented labor unrest, waves of strange new immigrants, and glittering industrial fortunes. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 28.

[37] See Jenny A. Higgins and Jennifer S. Hirsch. "The Pleasure Deficit: Revisiting the 'Sexuality Connection' in Reproductive Health," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 39, no. 4 (2007): 240–47; Catherine Hakim, "The Male Sexual Deficit: A Social Fact of the 21st Century," *International Sociology* 30, no. 3 (2015): 314–335; Debra Soh, "What's Driving Gen Z's Aversion to Sex?," *Newsweek*, 1 October 2021; Tonya Mosley and Samantha Raphelson, "Americans Are Having Less Sex—And Researchers Want to Know Why," NPR *WBUR*, March 31, 2022.

[38] Zoë Heller, "How Everyone Got So Lonely," *The New Yorker,* 4 April 2022. Subsequent references to Kipnis refer to Heller's piece.

contradiction" lurks everywhere, especially in the "libidinal position" of young feminists. Making a very New Woman argument, Kipnis suggests that if the "heterosexual compact" is to be restored to avoid the catastrophe of widespread celibacy, feminism must "embrace the transgressive nature of desire." Kipnis echoes queer feminist theorists who critique mainstream feminism's attempt to render sexuality free of the risks that make it erotic.[39] For theorists like Halley, Bersani, and Dean, sexuality's force is intrinsically bound to the "appeal of psychic violation;" from a Freudian perspective, "the point of sex [is] not just to come but to come undone."[40] When subjects and theorists turn away from sex and sexuality as an exemplary site for encountering negativity, this is described as "puritan" and "erotophobic" repression.[41] As Chapter 2 especially suggests, discourse around erotophobic "puritanism" has never been simple, the upshot of which is that queer theory may need to adopt a more complex approach to the cultural functioning of "puritan" anerotics, rather than rendering it a mirror of normative, disciplined sexuality.

Although this dissertation does not extend to later twentieth and twenty-first-century queer and feminist histories, it does help us to understand the unwieldy scaling of the above rhetoric, which takes declining rates of (reported) sex and sexual desire as an absolute chilling of the modern subject's capacity for intimacy. This dissertation illuminates the continuity between this present-day discourse and early erotonormative culture. As Berlant and Edelman put it, "sex is *exemplary*, in the way it powerfully induces…misrecognition of our own motives and desires," a privileged site of contact with the "resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks…the fixity of social forms

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[39] See especially Janet Halley, "The Move to Affirmative Consent," *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016): 257–279.

[40] Oliver Davis and Tim Dean, *Hatred of Sex* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 51, 69. This is the meaning of famous opening sentence to Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave": "There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it." What most people—those who do and do not have a lot of sex alike—do not like is sex's inherent potential for bodily and psychic destructuring. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October* 43 (1987): 197.

[41] See Gila Ashtor, *Homo Psyche: On Queer Theory and Erotophobia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021); and Davis Dean, *Hatred of Sex*.

that seem to define the possibilities for and the limits of relationality."[42] What this dissertation points out is that even when subjects stop having sex, or sexual drives, they continue to encounter challenges to coherence, self-sovereignty, and relationality, be it in aging, illness, or overwork. Far from upholding hegemonic puritan standards, this libidinal diminishment has for a long time threatened both mainstream and queer thinking, evidence of its destabilizing potential rather than its mere norm-enforcing suppression of transgressive desire.

Note on Terminology

Celibacy. Unto itself, celibacy describes a pattern of behavior: the extended abstinence from sex acts. Thus, celibacy is compatible with intense eroticism, the basis of much recent writing in the field of asexuality studies. In contrast, my dissertation charts celibacy's gradual association with desirelessness. Although celibacy is not reducible to aneroticism, it culturally embodied aneroticism in the period I examine, such that I often use the two synonymously, except where texts distinguish them.

Eroticism/Aneroticism: Two sets of related terms are central to this dissertation: eroticism/sexuality/libido/drive/desire and aneroticism/asexuality/libidinal indifference/celibacy. Because I am working foremost with imaginative works of literary fiction thinking through provisional versions of each cluster, my use of these terms is sometimes heuristic rather than adhering to the precise, but often shifting and contradictory, definitions ascribed to each within the fields of psychoanalysis and sexology. In this section, I discuss definitions of each set and the relationship between terms I take as roughly synonymous.

[42] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), vii–viii.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, sexuality encompasses distinct erotic and death drives, the former constituting a synthetic, cathectic force, the latter a destructive, decathectic force. Freud's notion of the erotic as a nongenital life instinct resonates with later, queer and feminist utopian formulations of the erotic, especially Audre Lorde's, for which it denotes the "creative energy" of "the lifeforce of women…empowered."[43] Here, the erotic distinctively names the creative, life-giving capacities of sexuality, including but beyond genital activity—in Lorde's words, "providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person."[44] Similarly, some queer and feminist scholarship positions the erotic against or beyond sexuality, the latter indicating discipline, identity, and normativity, the former, dereified, anti-discursive desire/pleasure. In this dissertation, I tend to use sexuality synonymously with eroticism. This is partly to avoid repetitive language, but also because the sexuality/erotic (reified/dereified desire) binary proves unwieldy and untenable in the cases on which I focus, wherein this binary is already deployed by historical agents and texts to ideological ends (e.g. the Men and Women's Club).

Throughout, I turn to psychoanalysis as a lens to think about the affective structure of the erotic. Jean Laplanche's definition of Freudian libido frames my thinking about eroticism and aneroticism as distinct affective and intimate styles. Laplanche takes up Freud's contrast between instinct and drive to underscore the radicality of the latter, which I take as the basis of eroticism within sexual modernity. Instinct designates a narrow, primitive, and banal set of reflexes, aimed at relieving tension and preserving homeostasis (e.g. drinking to relieve thirst). Freud's radically modern move was to separate human sexuality from the shallow instinct for genital intercourse to relieve sexual desire, reframing it as an encompassing, degenitalized drive, or what Laplanche calls

[43] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 55.

[44] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 56.

"enlarged" sexuality. Laplanche provides a precise list of the qualities that define sexuality's enlargement beyond instincts::

> 1. A sexuality that absolutely goes beyond genitality, and even beyond sexual difference; 2. A sexuality that is related to fantasy; 3. A sexuality that is extremely mobile as to its aim and object; and 4. […] a sexuality that has its own 'economic' regime in the Freudian sense of the term, its own principle of functioning, which is not a systematic tendency towards discharge, but a specific tendency towards the increase of tension and the pursuit of excitation.[45]

Although Freud's work was revolutionary, he was not alone in conceptualizing eroticism as mobile, transgressive, and sometimes destructively motivated by pleasure. It was a defining feature of decadence, naturalism, and modernist treatments of desire.[46]

Laplanche's (and Freud's) contrast between libidinal and nonlibidinal energetic economies (Figure i.i) provides a template for differentiating the form and economy of eroticism from aneroticism. It usefully presents two separate orientations to intensity, rather than a repressive framework in which one is merely a pent-up version of the other. Nonlibidinal sexuality is oriented to "real" materials (rather than unattainable fantasy), is "fixed" in its attachments, and leads to a "sustained *relaxation*" of tension, rather than amplifying excitement in pursuit of pleasure, even to the point of organismic shatter (*jouissance*).[47] Like more banal appetites, and unlike modern human sexuality, this narrower economy of desire is oriented to homeostasis and self-preservation. For this reason, Laplanche calls it "atavistic," a reflexive impulse aimed at biological homeostasis rather than higher-order pleasure, creativity, and transformations of the self, which require subjectivity.[48] It lacks libidinal desire's destructuring and destructive force. On this basis, a psychoanalytic queer theorist

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[45] Jean Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual: Essays 2000-2006*, trans. John Fletcher, Jonathan House, Nicholas Ray (New York: Unconscious in Translation, 2011), 142.

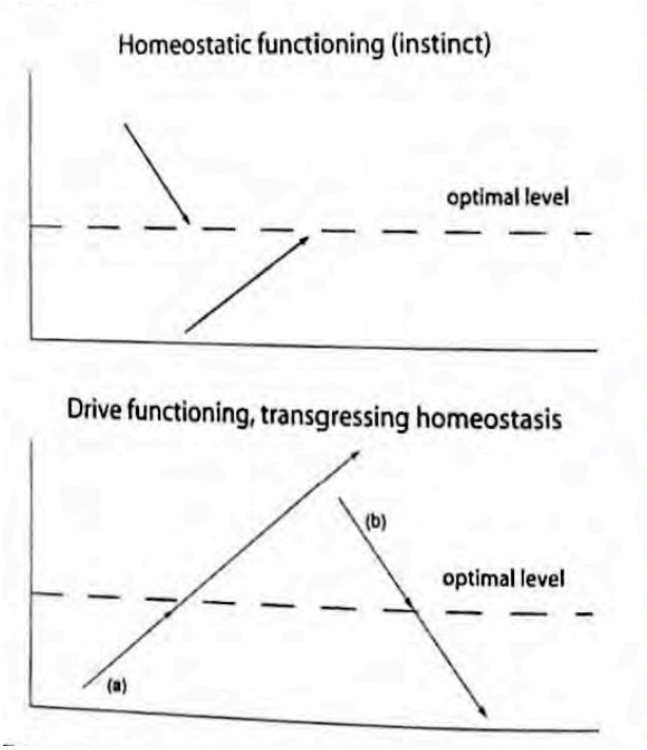
[46] See Boone, *Libidinal Currents*.

[47] Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual*, 30, 38, 12.

[48] Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual*, 11.

like Gila Ashtor associates nonlibidinal sexuality with erotophobia because it "empties sexuality of its radical meaning," namely, its limit-subverting force.[49] Although nonlibidinal sexuality is oriented to sex in Laplanche's model, it is affectively constrained, whereas libidinal sexuality pushes beyond all limits. It is de-eroticizing in that it discharges tension, diminishes desire, and neutralizes drive. It has a relatively limited and inflexible set of desires. It promotes stasis rather than disturbance and disorder. It lacks sexuality's compulsion to psychic violation. For these reasons, it models the affective dynamics of this dissertation's celibate figures and forms: these celibate lives are cellular and detached from one another; so too are their short story forms.

Figure i.i: Laplanche's diagram of the inverse relationship between homeostatisis (instinct) and drive (libido).[50]



[49] Ashtor, *Homo Psyche*, 16.

[50] Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual*, 40.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 introduces the archetype of the odd woman, who functioned as a popular foil to the feminist figure of the erotically liberated New Woman, who dominated novels and periodical fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. This chapter traces the sexually indifferent odd woman to the oft-forgotten celibacy crisis that shook up Victorian culture beginning in 1851, the year the English census began tracking marriage rates. In the decades that followed, celibacy fell from an ennobled position to a practice associated with pathological sexual repression and racial degeneracy. Turning to George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), Emma Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* (1894), and Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883) and *Women and Labour* (1911), as well as periodical texts, I show how New Woman writers explicitly framed the New Woman's sexual robustness to redress nineteenth-century anxieties around high rates of celibacy amidst 'well-bred' women, embodied by the odd woman. Centering the odd woman illuminates what I call the racist life of eroticism in this period: the New Woman's erotic liberationist politics and aesthetics were effective insofar as they remade sexual norms to preserve a racial order threatened by the odd woman's lack of sexual drive. Underwriting much New Woman fiction is an explicitly eugenic hierarchy of sexuality, wherein creative, nongenital, fantasy-laden eroticism is a privileged capacity of evolved races, while primitive races exhibit narrower, more rigid, and less affective sexual instincts.

I argue for taking up the odd woman as a queer historical archetype insofar as her aneroticism was an increasingly non-normative sexual mode associated with antisocial unproductivity. This association stamped upon her an odd racial hybridity in late-Victorian texts; Olive Schreiner, for instance, likens her to the "Hottentot" and "Bushwoman," a likeness structured by a logic of stunted sexual potential. Turning to form, I consider the 'odd woman novel' a queer form, exhibiting, in the cases I examine, a deflationary narrative logic operating through the

dissipation of narrative drive, resulting in drawn-out and recursive plotting. I consider this narrative logic queer in that it gives form to its odd woman subjects' queer dissipation of libidinal drive, and that it countervails the period's development of accelerated, fluid novels in the wake of the triple-decker Victorian novel's collapse in 1894. I suggest there is something additionally queer about these forms, given that theories of queer form typically ground queer form in unmanageable erotic excess, rather than its unmanageable absence, making these forms unconventional *as* queer forms.

Chapter 2 moves from late-Victorian England to explore the odd woman/New Woman dialectic within the context of the United States' burgeoning consumer culture. Like in late-Victorian culture, racial anxieties underwrote this contrast in femininity, but it was also inflected by a uniquely American obsession with consumerism. Focusing on the "New England nun" archetype central to what I call Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman's "spinster regionalism," I argue that what has been enduringly fascinating and disturbing about the nun figure is her underconsumption. Paradoxically, these figures were a popular feature of middle-brow vehicles of consumption like *Harper's Bazar* in the 1890s, magazines which explicitly advertised to a generation of New Women. The New England nun's appetitive minimalism sharply contrasted with consumer capitalism's emergent ideal of the flexibly and potentially limitless desiring female consumer. A negative image of the modern female consumer, the nun complexly mediated issues of underconsumption and the rapid growth of the United States from a principally agrarian to consumer economy over the course of 100 years. Departing from prior criticism (e.g. Amy Kaplan, Richard Brodhead) that understands regionalism as simply offering touristic, pastoral fantasies to the urban bourgeoisie, I argue regionalism's images of constrained appetites functioned frictionally to urban readerly desires, leading, in part, to its precipitous fall in popularity at the dawn of the twentieth century. Turning to form, I link Wilkins Freeman and Jewett's fiction's reputation as the high-water mark of the

American short story to their spinster subjects. Nineteenth-century critics saw in these spinsters' reticence and narrow social lives material perfectly suited to the short story's requirement of omission and economical language.

Chapter 3 looks more directly at issues of form. Here, I ask why so many short stories and short story collections took up the issue of celibacy at a moment when the social margin for celibacy was in decline (sometimes periodized as "the end of friendship"). I argue that George Moore and Henry James, both pioneers of the modern short story collection, thought about the unique affordances of the collection through the topic of celibacy. The collection's relatively disintegrated, open texture allowed both writers to explore distanced, cleft, and ambient relationships, without the novel's drive to conjugate plotlines into a common storyworld. I highlight *transfictional diffusion* as a tactic of anerotic narrative relations. Transfictional diffusion creates relationships between characters and disparate storyworlds through resonances that operate across diegetic limits, without exploding those limits. James and Moore's collections, I show, subvert libidinal reading practices, inviting readers to attend to texts in a less intensive and more recursive manner. The readerly revision James and Moore's collections require in their modularity also interrogates the revisability of sexual categories, especially celibacy's contemporaneous revision into a cover for closeted homosexuality. I argue for treating these celibate collections as queer forms insofar as they trouble sexual histories that consolidate sexual identity and sexuality more broadly as a force autonomous from history.

I conclude with a few thoughts on recessive form. Recessive forms are marked by reticence. They shrink from the reader, speaking at a remove. They encode social distance and intimate estrangement, not as grand ruptures, but foremost as banal conditions of intimacy. I turn to Benjamin's essays on storytelling and their association of narrative recessiveness (e.g. "chaste brevity") with a mode of historical anachronism that punctures the present's value system.

Throughout the dissertation, I am at pains to show reticence's infidelity to repressive Victorian morality, as well as modernism's libidinal currents. Reticence engages with relational negativity (the divisions and distances that trouble fixed identities, feelings of intimate coherence, and acquisitive drive), in ways resonant with the negativity queer scholars often locate within sexual excess. In the recessive texts I examine, negativity functions not as a moment of *jouissance* or shattering intensity, but as an ordinary and irresolvable condition of collective life, an indispensable and sometimes enabling rift between all intimates—a vision of estrangement's ordinariness lived out rigorously by the celibate.

Chapter 1

Extinction of the Heart

Odd Women, New Women, and the Late-Victorian Problem of Women's Sexual Indifference

The late-Victorian period has cast a long shadow over sexuality studies. Enshrined, after Foucault, as the very birth of sexuality, it is often conjured as a moment of "sexual anarchy" marked by a proliferation of stigmatic but also enabling perversions.[1] It is a moment that has provided sexual history with an influential cast of sexually dissident characters, from the dandy and the invert to the hysteric and the sex-positive New Woman. These figures appeal to the liberationist ethos of much queer and feminist history as glimmers of erotic excess troubling hardening sexual norms. Feminist critics, for instance, have celebrated the New Woman for cultivating a new cultural image of white womanhood that yoked together erotic liberation and feminist worldmaking, challenging "hierarchically organized binary opposites that pit men against women, 'good' women against 'fallen' ones, the middle class against the working class, and European against non-European cultures."[2] Recent turns in sexuality studies, however, demand critics think more complexly about what Kadji Amin has called the "disturbing attachments" arising from contemporary queer studies' romanticization of erotic excess.[3] Sharon Patricia Holland likewise enjoins critics to interrogate the assumption that "the erotic 'functions' as a means to undo difference"—subverting racist, patriarchal oppression—"rather than facilitate its entrenchment" in what she calls "the erotic life of racism."[4] These critics remind us that the erotic can be as diminishing as it is expansive.

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[1] See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* (New York: Viking, 1990).

[2] Ann Ardis, *New Woman, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 27.

[3] See Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*: *Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[4] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 59.

This chapter sketches an incident in the *racist life of eroticism*, reversing the emphasis of Holland's analytic and tracing the galvanizing role eugenic anxieties played in evolving norms of white femininity, which began to trade Victorian values of modesty and passionlessness for eroticism and sensuality. The New Woman, a cultural type developed in the periodical press and many of the *fin-de-siècle*'s most popular novels, embodied and helped shape the normalization of women's erotic desire as a set of energies distinct from biological reproduction. The New Woman figure ushered in a more expansive imaginary around women's sexuality at the same time as she reified race and class hierarchies. Writers explicitly framed the New Woman's sexual virility as a means of redressing nineteenth-century anxieties around high rates of celibacy amongst 'well-bred' women. This scourge of female asexuality was embodied by the "odd woman," a crucial, but largely overlooked, foil to the New Woman. Centering the odd woman illuminates how New Woman erotic politics and aesthetics were effective insofar as they promised to preserve the racial order destabilized by the odd woman's lack of erotic energy.

The novel, as late-Victorian culture's primary site for imaginatively exploring models of worldbuilding, grappled with the unsettled question of whether erotic liberationist projects could bring about socially utopian ends—the promise of the New Woman. Emblematic here is George Gissing's novel *The Odd Women* (1894), whose titular "odd women" are the Madden sisters: orphaned, ejected from their upwardly-mobile middle-class existence, they are forced to take up profitless and exhausting work in the overcrowded fields of shop clerking, governessing, and secretarial labor. Making just enough to avoid incarceration in the workhouse, they are left "hard-hearted" and "unsex[ed]" because of their hard work: they live "altogether independent of sexual things," with few hopes of marriage or erotic liaison to rescue them, even if only fantasmatically.[5]

[5] George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (Ontario: Broadview, [1893] 1998), 72.

Gissing parodies late-Victorian reformers who attempted to rectify these "evils of celibacy" by making the odd women, neither economically productive nor sexually reproductive, worth something.[6] Bourgeois feminists attempt to transform these women's "revolt from sexual instinct" into "a great reserve" of workers disciplined to do "the world's work."[7] Others believe the odd women need an education of the flesh, a training in the "infinite series of modes of living" afforded by the "ceaseless exercise of all one's faculties of pleasure."[8]

As the novel progresses, under the influence of these projects, the odd women's erotic desires awaken: the youngest sister, Monica, is rescued from hard labor by a man who is crazy about her, to whom she bears a child; the older Madden sisters are inspired to open a school to grow their meager savings; the devoutly celibate feminist activist, Rhoda Nunn, falls passionately in love with a worldly libertine. In a refusal to entrain the odd women to sexual regimes of (re)productivity, however, Gissing deflates these narrative energies just as they ramp up to climax: Nunn returns to her celibate cause after rejecting the libertine's offer of a free-union (an open, not legally codified marriage); the older Madden sisters never open their school, falling into ill-health and alcoholism; and Monica Madden dies in childbirth after having left her abusively obsessed husband. In the end, the older Madden sisters are recalled from narrative stasis to care for Monica's baby after her death in childbirth. The novel ends with the future placed in the tremulous hands of the oddest of the odd women, heretofore resigned from the world and its (re)production.

MacPike reads Gissing's ending as a containment of the New Woman's radical feminist potential, denying her erotic and reproductive agency to preserve Victorian norms: "If the New

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[6] Gissing, *The Odd Women*, 62.

[7] Gissing 84, 64. For a history of the spinster's transformation into productive career woman, see Arlene Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Victorian England* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

[8] Gissing, 105.

Woman were to become capable of reproducing herself, Victorian culture might shatter."[9] However, Gissing was not invested in preserving Victorian culture, going so far as to call for an anti-natalist movement to end its violence.[10] In this light, I see Gissing's desexualized odd women less as a misogynistic containment of women's sexuality than as an account of the biopolitical demands to be erotic that were increasingly placed on women at the end of the century. *The Odd Women*'s abrupt cancellation of desire perversely gives the non(re)productive celibates the future as it lands on a form of kinship oblique to family, romance, or eros—a form of kinship amongst the unviable. Whether their maybe-not-good-enough-care will make for a pattern of life with a future remains an open question at the end of the novel. Their oddity opens up the possibility for what queer theorist Lauren Berlant calls "an immanentist staging of the *nonreproductive making of life*…generating a form from within brokenness," but "beyond…and alternatively to it."[11] In this light, *The Odd Women*'s strange narrative terminations are better understood not as closures on intimate, political, or feminist possibility, but as a refusal to forget the brokenness of its world and the complicity of sexuality in this brokenness. *The Odd Women* insists: if the world has made you ugly, be ugly.

If, at least for Gissing, the odd woman's attenuated relationship to eroticism provides an orientation to worldmaking that is alternative to reproductive futurity as well as erotic utopianism, why does she remain mostly absent from sexuality studies' cast of queer historical figures? To the extent that she has received critical attention, she has largely been treated as synonymous with the

[9] Loralee MacPike, "The New Woman, Childbearing, and the Reconstruction of Gender, 1880–1990," *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 3 (1989): 381.

[10] George Gissing, "The Hope of Pessimism," in *George Gissing: Essays & Fiction*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 75–98.

[11] Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 393–4, emphasis added.

New Woman, or else with early, veiled lesbianism.[12] Certainly, women's performance of celibacy could provide much needed cover for deviant sexual relationships. Yet both New Woman writers and sexologists distinguished celibacy and its "erotic blindness" from sexual perversion.[13] Interpreting women's apparent celibacy primarily in terms of dissident erotic excess misses what I suggest is the keynote of its threat to late-Victorian culture: the odd woman's independence from and indifference to sexuality. Her estrangement from sexual desire underwrote her status as a queer figure of nonreproductivity, bearing deflation and the cancellation of erotic energy encoded in Gissing's novel. I consider the odd woman, then, a cultural figure that embodied fears, both eugenic and feminist, of womanhood blanched of erotic desire, and of the white race blanched of sexual and maternal drives. Recovering the odd woman, I redress sexuality studies' orientation to subversive erotic *excess* by attending to the historical subversiveness of women's erotic *lack*. My aim in this chapter is to rethink late-Victorian celibacy as a queer orientation to sexuality insofar as it resisted demands to be sexual. This is in sharp contrast to ecstatic male bodies central to classic articulations of antisocial queer politics, problematic, as Elizabeth Freeman puts it, insofar as "those with the heaviest burden of embodiment are least able to reach even a queer apotheosis of self-negation."[14] The late-Victorian odd woman, by contrast, embodied a distinctively feminine mode of nonreproductivity proceeding through desexualization—in Gissing, a reaction to capitalism's exhausting slow violence and social requirements to be sexual—rather than spectacular *jouissance*.[15,]

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[12] See, for example, Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 10 and Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For a more nuanced comparison of these figures, see Emma Liggins, *Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s–1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

[13] For example, see Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. VI: Sex in Relation to Society* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1913), 178–217.

[14] Elizabeth Freeman, "Sacra/mentality in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood,*" *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (2014): 747.

[15] Gissing, *Odd Women*, 747. Oddness's perceived antisociality was most heavily burdened by women. Whereas male celibacy did not fundamentally interfere with men's productive capacity as workers, and was even supposed to enhance

Furthermore, tracking the odd woman's historical denigration makes good on Holland's injunction to think more complexly about the historical interplay of eroticism and racial hierarchy. If criticism's tendency to read erotic blankness as erotic excess is one reason for the odd woman's historical marginality, the New Woman's racial denigration of her is surely another. It is an appealing fantasy that New Woman feminism's radical valorization of female sexuality undid raced and classed hierarchies and moral distinctions between "'good' women" and "'fallen' ones."[16] Nevertheless, New Woman writing produced the odd woman as the New Woman's racially abject antithesis. Although New Woman feminism was a largely cultural, sometimes contradictory feminist movement, Laura Chrisman points out that one overarching project was to newly found "white women's identity…on an eroticism, and intense potential for social, professional and aesthetic power."[17] She argues that New Woman feminism shared with late-Victorian eugenics an urgent concern for "making of racial bodies" amidst cultural anxieties about whiteness' racial exhaustion in the wake of the Victorian era's breakneck industrialization and colonial expansion.[18] To this end, New Woman writers often depicted odd women as *declassé*, disabled, unfeeling, and with a jarring likeness to non-white others,

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it, female celibacy represented a dislocation from the traditionally female labor of reproduction (broadly construed) necessary to replenish social and laboring worlds.

"Unsex" and "desexualize" could indicate *hyper*sexuality in the earlier nineteenth century (i.e., a woman having the sexual appetites of a man). However, its dominant usage at the *fin-de-siècle* was to designate aneroticism, meaning to castrate, sterilize, or otherwise "minimize the sexual or erotic character" of a person, which are the meanings mobilized within the post-celibacy crisis corpus examined here. See Oxford English Dictionary Online (June 2022), s.v. "Unsex, v." and s.v. "Desexualize, v."

[16] Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 27.

[17] Laura Chrisman, "Empire, 'Race' and Feminism at the *Fin De Siècle*: The Work of George Egerton and Olive Schreiner," in *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, eds. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 55.

[18] Chrisman, "Empire, 'Race' and Feminism," 62.

ultimately conjuring them as specters of race suicide.[19] The odd woman, in short, embodied anxiety over women alienated from their race's regenerative capacity, a crisis the New Woman redressed.

A January 1895 edition of *The Idler* profiling bestselling New Woman novelists (e.g., Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Mannington Caffyn, Mary Pendered) provides a neat distillation of the dialectic between the odd woman and the New Woman. Sarah Grand, who likely coined the phrase "New Woman," here and elsewhere rails against the spate of "modern spinster[s]" and so-called "'Nature's Nuns,'" as "morbid types developing amongst us," menacing the dawn of the twentieth century.[20] George Egerton, whose *Keynotes* and *Discords* are among the most celebrated New Woman fiction, condemns the "desexualized" woman whose "cultivation of her intellect has produced atrophy of her heart."[21] This tracks with Egerton's sexually radical short stories, which position the New Woman's "untamable" "love-fever" against the odd women, "desexualised half-men with a pride in the absence of sex feeling."[22] Mannington Caffyn depicts odd women as degenerate women to be redeemed by more evolved New Women. She is optimistic that sexually disinclined "female prig[s]" are "only preparing the way" for a new generation of women who are better lovers, who will bear "a nobler, purer race… [so that] England will be Merry England once again."[23] This is the plot of her popular novel, *A Yellow Aster* (1894), which concerns a woman whose over-rationalization (by scientific training) has suppressed her erotic energies and atrophies her capacity to feel deeply. It is only when her son becomes ill that the "latent truth in her own nature" blossoms, leaving her a

[19] In a jarring racialization of odd womanhood, the protagonists of Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) are reduced by hard work to the status of "n—s" until they realize their romantic and eventually professional potential. Amy Levy, *The Romance of the Shop* (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, [1888] 1889), 151.

[20] Sarah Grand and Sarah A. Tooley, "The Woman's Question: An Interview with Madame Sarah Grand," *Humanitarian* 8, no. 3 (1896): 167. Grand saw Hardy's Sue Bridehead as the emblematic Nature's Nun.

[21] George Egerton, "Man is Inferior," *The Idler* (January 1895): 194–196.

[22] George Egerton, *Keynotes and Discords* (London: Virago Press, [1893/1894] 1995), 22, 44, 199.

[23] Mannington Caffyn, "The Coming Girl Will Be Nice," *The Idler* (January 1895): 197–199.

"beautiful sexual mother-woman" who "abandons herself" to deeply feminine erotic-maternal instincts.[24] *The Idler*'s brief survey demonstrates how New Woman authors conjured the odd woman's estrangement from sexuality to articulate the potentials of women's erotic, feminist, and racial revitalization.

If a critical identification of queerness with erotic excess, alongside the New Woman's denigration of the odd woman, are two causes of the odd woman's historical occlusion, a final problem besetting her discursive excavation is the variety of names the odd woman went under, evident above: nature's nuns, desexualized hermaphrodites, female prigs, but also neuters, unsexed epicene automotons, redundant, superfluous, and parasitic women. Or, speaking sexologically, these women were sexually anaesthetized, erotically blind, and frigid. Acknowledging the risk of homogenizing these terms, I nonetheless gather them under the capacious figure of the odd woman to discuss their common designation of gender deviance resulting from a detachment from sexual feeling. Tracing her evolution across the last half of the nineteenth century, this chapter sketches three paradigmatic 'moments' in the discursive career of the odd woman. Across these moments, I track the expansion of the odd woman category; initially contained to chronically celibate, unmarried women, it came to encompass a general alienation from sexual desire that could affect women single or married, celibate or sex worker.

I begin with the "redundant woman," a midcentury category that initially constructed the problem of mass female celibacy as a demographic problem of sex-ratios, there being more women than men, leaving an excess of unmarried women. With the formal foundation of English eugenics, however, the crisis of women's celibacy became a crisis of female asexuality threatening to castrate the race. The second section focuses on Emma Frances Brooke's enormously popular *fin-de-siècle*

[24] Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 94.

novel, *The Superfluous Woman* (1894). By the end of the century, New Woman writers shared with eugenicists an investment in replacing the odd woman with sexually robust femininity. Their novels offered an important venue for modeling female eroticism to a mass audience in phenomenological, rather than eugenicists' coldly rational, terms. Brooke's late-century fictionalization of the odd woman offers a punishing vision of sexual indifference as racial degeneration. This novel illustrates the transformation of the redundant woman figure from demographic aberration to racially catastrophic asexuality. From Brooke's rather literal allegory of eugenic feminist ideals, I turn to Olive Schreiner's social utopian vision of women's creative erotic potential, a vision that redresses women's subordination to a patriarchal social order, but which is insidiously underwritten by a racial hierarchy of erotic capacity. Schreiner's pivotal *Story of the African Farm* (1883) and New Woman manifesto, *Women and Labour* (1911), position the New Woman as a solution to the un(re)productive "parasite female," whose social conditions have estranged her from the virility necessary to successful feminist worldmaking. Moving across redundant woman, superfluous woman, and parasite woman brings out celibacy as an important node in the entwined histories of eugenics and feminism.

While the odd woman/New Woman dialectic colored periodical debates, it functioned as a powerfully structuring logic of some of the late-Victorian period's most popular novels, which filled a demand for mass narratives about women's sexuality. I reread three important New Woman novels (Gissing's *Odd Women*, Brooke's *Superfluous Woman*, and Schreiner's *African Farm*) as odd woman novels, pointing out that that their narrative action is contingent upon an odd woman's erotic transformation into New Woman, but are distinguished from other New Woman novels by the failure of this transformation. What marks them out as odd woman novels is their distinctively deflationary narrative logic, by which I mean Gissing's relentless cancellation of characterological

desire on which narrative progress depends, resulting in forms that circle back and stall out. This deflationary logic is encoded in the three-volume form of each novel, a form that was becoming, in the century's final two decades, unpopular for its conventionality, excessive length, and superfluous plotting (narrative padding). This growing criticism of the form drove it extinct in 1894, the year of *Superfluous Woman*. Nonetheless, the three-volume novel's tendency to unproductive plotlines suited the superfluous lives of odd women. In contrast to popular, sexually transgressive New Women fiction like Egerton's "A Crossed Line" and Caffyn's *A Yellow Aster*, in which narrative progress follows a logic of erotic escalation, these texts explore fictive worldmaking through stagnation, recursion, and dissipation of narrative energies. Picking up on this narrative logic, in which "characters never reach the point of being in a position to desire," Fredric Jameson sees Gissing's novels as emblematic of realism's "windless closure" at the end of the nineteenth century.[25] Jed Esty similarly calls attention to the "ungainly" form of Schreiner's *African Farm*, a generic mish-mash that switches protagonists half-way through.[26] I raise the question: can we consider these deflationary aesthetic moves instances of queer form, albeit one grounded in aneroticism rather than narrative desire?

Redundancy: The Celibacy Crisis and the Rise of Eugenic Sexuality

The nineteenth century began as the era of the asexual woman and the glorified spinster. Nancy Cott writes, "sexual appetites contributed a very minor part (if any at all)" to the ideal middle class woman's "motivations… Lustfulness was simply uncharacteristic."[27] Cott links the bourgeois

[25] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 205, 206.

[26] Jed Esty, "The Colonial Bildungsroman"

[27] Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 (1978): 220.

ideal of the asexual woman to the rapidly expanding middle class's consolidation of power over an aristocratic order rooted in feudalism. Exploiting Malthusian anxieties—that human sexual desire's insatiability would overpopulate the nation's capacity to sustain life—middle class moralists elevated "sexual control highest among human virtues…[making] female chastity the archetype for human," and racial/national, "morality."[28] The bourgeois woman was uniquely imbued with natural chastity, in contrast to the sexual excess of the aristocracy and the desperation of the poor. Lilian Faderman concurs, noting that "throughout much of the nineteenth century in Britain and America, sex was considered an activity in which virtuous women were not interested and did not indulge unless to gratify their husbands and to procreate." This belief in "the genteel woman's essential asexuality" afforded women "a latitude" of homosocial "affectionate expression" that "narrow[ed]" as "pseudosophistication regarding sexual possibilities between women" emerged at the end of the nineteenth century.[29] The ideal of female asexuality likewise afforded the celibate woman social sanction. With homosociality, female celibacy's stock fell as the century progressed, becoming, as *The Odd Women* and *The Idler* indicate, a social problem.

To understand why, we must understand that passionlessness functioned as more than a moral tactic on the part of capitalist classes. It served as a structural solution to what Nancy Fraser calls the "social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism," or capitalism's "orientation to unlimited accumulation" which "tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies."[30] At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Fraser writes, a crisis of social reproduction amidst poor and working class women "stretched…capacities for sustenance and replenishment…to

[28] Cott, "Passionlessness," 223.

[29] Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 152.

[30] Nancy Fraser, "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press: 2017), 21.

the breaking point" that ignited "a moral panic among the middle classes."[31] In response to this, the bourgeois model of marriage and family, "centered on the full-time housewife's unpaid reproductive labor, was generalized in the working class."[32] The ideal asexual woman, Mary Poovey writes, was an affective logic that subtended this sexed separation of spheres, which in turn buffered the industrial revolution's brutality: desire's "insatiable and potentially transgressive" nature, presumed to be a distinctively masculine quality, suited it to the competitive working world of men; feminine passionlessness, concentrated in the domestic sphere, promised to "stabiliz[e]" and "neutraliz[e]" desire, providing calming respite and repair to its lacerations.[33]

By the mid-century, this ideal of female asexuality was disturbed, gradually aligned not with the preservation of marriage and women's reproductive labor, but marriage's attenuation. This shift can be conveniently, if imprecisely, dated to the 1851 English Census, which first tracked national marital rates. The 1851 census revealed that approximately a third of English women never married, triggering a crisis of mass celibacy. Unprecedented numbers of news accounts, periodical features, and letters to the editor wrung their hands over the "surplus woman" problem and debated the relative merits of "Marriage or Celibacy?," raising the specter of a future without marriage—or worse, without sex.[34] In these debates, ramping up in the 1860s, female passionlessness was gradually reframed as an obstacle to, rather than syncretic with, bourgeois marriage and its function as a site of repair from the masculine world of alienated productive labor. The earlier Malthusian value of sexual abstemiousness waned as fears of depopulation grew. Fears around mass celibacy

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[31] Fraser, "Crisis of Care," 26, 8.

[32] Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 98–99.

[33] Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 90.

[34] See John M. Robson, *Marriage or Celibacy? The Daily Telegraph on a Victorian Dilemma* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

were intensified by the fact that England had just gone through a period of intense industrial growth and was entering a period of sharply declining fertility rates.[35] Furthermore, concurrent anti-colonial uprisings, especially the First War of Indian Independence (1857–8), "suggested that the empire could only be secure if the British themselves were present in large numbers in the colonies," requiring a larger populace.[36] Anxieties about maximizing women's reproductive power to expand the nation's productive and imperial powers displaced Malthusian anxieties around sexuality's insatiability.

The census's revelation of mass female celibacy, however, did not immediately spark backlash pathologizing women's passionlessness. The first decade or so of debate on the "redundant woman problem," as the celibacy crisis was initially termed, was not a libidinal crisis but a "crisis of institutional arrangements."[37] In 1862, liberal industrialist William Rathbone Greg published the essay "Why Are Women Redundant?," which ushered the class of unmarried women from a feminist and philanthropic concern to a problem of national policy. In the essay, he argues that women remain celibate because too many men have emigrated to the colonies. Critically, he diagnoses mass female celibacy as a symptom of disequilibrated sex-ratios, *not* a problem of sexuality. The bulk of celibate women, he argues, are not "natural celibates."[38] "There are women," he concedes, "who seem utterly devoid of the *fibre féminin*, to whom Nature never speaks at all, or at

[35] Alongside declining child mortality, scholars such as Siân Pooley have suggested the decline of fertility rates was an effect of the success of the bourgeois family, which resulted in a "shift from the child as an economically-useful asset within the household economy to the economically-dependent 'sacred' child within the affective nuclear family." See Siân Pooley, "Parenthood, Child-rearing and Fertility in England, 1851–1914," *The History of the Family: An International Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2013): 83–106.

[36] Katherin Levitan, "Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' Problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 3 (2008): 363.

[37] Judith Worsnop, "A Reevaluation of 'the Problem of Surplus Women' in 19th-Century England: The Case of the 1851 Census," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13 (1990): 22.

[38] William Rathbone Greg, "Why Are Women Redundant?" *The National Review* 28 (1862): 439.

least speaks not in her tenderest tones," although these congenital celibates, he assures the reader, are "more rare than any other natural anomalies."[39] The bulk of "redundant" celibates are women left behind by male emigration. He therefore calls for the expansion of philanthropic social reforms, like Caroline Chisholm's Family Colonisation Loan Society, which helped middle-class women emigrate to male-dense colonies. Once exported, Greg reasoned that celibate women would eagerly marry. This was an appealing solution, for it promised to expand the settler colonial power of the English through a more efficient arrangement of women's reproductive power, while preserving the bourgeois ideal of marriage (celibacy being merely a problem of management). It also served as an alternative to mid-century feminist proposals like those of Frances Power Cobbe, who advocated opening more labor opportunities to unmarried women needing to support themselves, a solution that risked (a) undercutting the ideal separation of private/public spheres, and (b) further diminishing the reproductive power of the nation, raising specters of the social reproductive crisis that had occurred around proletarian women earlier in the century.[40]

By the late 1860s, however, Darwinian theories of sexual selection, in conjunction with emigration's failure to appreciably make a dent in celibacy, transformed Greg's diagnosis. In an 1868 essay, Greg targeted the Malthusian ideology of passionlessness that he had affirmed in his earlier essay. "On the Failure of 'Natural Selection' in the Case of Man" argues vehemently that Malthusian mores around passionlessness had artificially suppressed middle-class sexuality. As Greg writes in *Enigmas of Life* (1872), an expansion of his 1868 essay:

> Malthus maintained…that mankind could only [achieve] a condition of virtue and comfort…by resisting and foregoing, habitually and generally, sometimes altogether, always during the most craving period of life, those imperious longings of the senses, and that

[39] Greg, "Why Are Women Redundant?" 439.

[40] Frances Power Cobbe, "What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?" *Magazine for Town and Country* 66, no. 395 (1862): 594–610.

> equally imperious 'hunger of the heart,' which, combined, constitute the most urgent necessity of our nature.[41]

Greg makes an about-face from his earlier position that "sexual desire [in women]…is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited…by actual intercourse."[42] He now takes sexual desire to be "the most urgent necessity of our nature," which the "prudent intermediary classes" have suppressed in favor of "resolute, self-enforced, and prolonged celibacy."[43] Middle-class celibacy leaves the degenerate aristocracy and the desperate poor reproducing at higher rates than the healthy middle-class, a condition, if left unchecked, resulting in impotent racial stock. Thus, although celibacy might begin as an effect of bourgeois moral norms, the result is widespread biological castration.

The stakes of middle-class celibacy, then, were no less than the erosion of white supremacy, the destruction of what Greg calls natural selection's "preservation of favoured races and individuals in the struggle for existence."[44] Europeans have so far proven to be the evolutionarily favored races, a point proven by the fact that "everywhere the savage tribes of mankind die out at the contact of the civilized ones" who are the "abler, the stronger, the more advanced…the favoured ones."[45] The force of sexual selection that Greg credits with preserving this order of racial fitness, however, has been "neutralize[d]…retarded and endangered" in "our existing civilization" by bourgeois morality.[46] Greg called this the "non-survival of the fittest," a situation demanding a reformulation of social norms to effect better breeding.[47] This idea was so magnetic that early histories of eugenics credit

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[41] William Rathbone Greg, *Enigmas of Life* (London: Trübner & Co., 1872), 55–6.

[42] William Rathbone Greg, "Prostitution," *Westminster Review*, 53 (1850), quoted in Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 5.

[43] Greg, *Enigmas*, 46.

[44] William Rathbone Greg, "On the Failure of 'Natural Selection' in the Case of Man," *Fraser's Magazine* (1868): 356.

[45] Greg, "Failure," 356.

[46] Greg, 356.

[47] Greg, 356.

him with co-founding the field, alongside Francis Galton and later, Karl Pearson.[48] Case in point: Darwin, whose recently published theory of evolution Greg's thesis metabolized, in turn cited Greg's 1868 essay in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). He credits Greg's essay with advancing his own theory of artificial selection, concluding, "It is surprising how…care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race."[49] In Greg, then Darwin, celibacy shifts from a demographic problem to a problem of sexual vigor artificially suppressed by "care wrongly directed"—a situation Gissing's *Odd Women* brazenly makes the novel's conclusion by placing the infant in the care of celibate women.

The arc of Greg's thinking illustrates the central role celibacy played in eugenics' epistemic and institutional rise in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The degenerate odd woman, no longer the glorified spinster of the pre-1850s moment, or even merely the demographic surplus of the 1850s and 1860s, quickly became the *raison d'être* for new sexual norms that made sexual vitality, especially women's, compulsory to racial health. In spite of their disagreements, feminists and antifeminists alike joined eugenicists in denigrating the odd woman while championing women's sexual vigor. This played out most dramatically around the New Woman, a highly visible and contested social archetype of sexually liberated womanhood that dominated the British imaginary during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The New Woman embodied anxieties and excitement over feminism's successes in expanding (white) women's employment, educational, and erotic possibilities, which commentators, pro- and anti-feminist alike, argued was transforming the very nature of femininity. Sally Ledger reminds us that New Womanhood operated primarily at the level of ideology and cultural imagination, rather than on the ground as a political movement: "the

[48] James A. Field, "The Progress of Eugenics," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 26, no. 1 (1911): 8–9.

[49] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray Press, [1871] 1901), 206.

relationship between the New Woman as a discursive construct and the New Woman as a representative of the women's movement of the *fin-de-siecle* was complex, and by no means free of contradictions."[50] Nevertheless, the wide reach of New Woman writing helped shape gender norms, public feminist culture, and the feminist imaginary. New Woman fiction dominated best-seller lists of the 1890s, "establish[ing] a tradition of feminist political literature written for and consumed by a female mass market," a space of feminist imagining linked, "for the first time in British history, to an organised women's movement."[51]

Recent scholarship on the New Woman's eugenic entanglements tends to elide the role her claims to "untameable" erotic passion played in her race-making and soul-saving projects.[52] My argument here is that the New Woman reached cultural dominance precisely because she asserted herself as an erotic supplement to England's de-eroticized odd women. Further, New Woman literature operated as an aesthetic supplement to eugenics' cold abstractions, putting them into sensory terms with which a mass, largely female, reading public could identify. In the wake of Greg's and Darwin's writing on artificial selection, the 1870s through the 1890s saw a gradual transformation of celibacy into an early version of asexuality. This transition had everything to do with the availability of feminine passion as a reproductive resource to redress the alienation of an increasingly commercial world. Perversely anticipating Nancy Fraser's critique of capitalism's

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[50] Sally Ledger, "The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism," in *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle*, eds. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

[51] Ann Heilman, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1–2.

[52] Egerton, *Keynotes and Discords*, 22. Angelique Richardson argues that the New Women advanced a version of "eugenic love [that is] the antithesis of passion, a replacement of sexual love." In a similar vein, Chrisman argues that any suggestion of woman's "lawless…unfettered sexual appetite" in New Woman texts are a "largely rhetorical gesture," deflated by their eugenic politics. My argument is distinct from these critics in that it takes seriously the ideological work of erotic desire, as an ungovernable affective force, in advancing New Woman and eugenic projects. See Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56–7; and Chrisman, "Empire, 'Race' and Feminism," 63.

reproductive instability, antifeminist cultural critics of this period (e.g., Eliza Lynn Linton, Hugh Stutfield) diagnosed the English *fin-de-siècle* as an epoch of celibacy, desexualized by overproduction during industrial revolution. Stutfield writes, "We have fallen on a temporarily sterile time, an age of 'mental anaemia'…The world seems growing weary after the mighty work it has accomplished during this most marvellous of centuries."[53] He conjures the odd woman, "desexualised half-man," as a victim of this overstimulating work and culture, a condition only exacerbated by feminists attempting to make more employment opportunities available to middle-class women in particular.[54]

New Woman feminists and their allies joined antifeminists in pathologizing the odd woman. Before writing *The Woman Who Did* (1895), one of the bestselling New Woman novels, Grant Allen condemned early feminists like Cobbe for prioritizing the needs of unsupported celibate women above the needs of *real* women: "For what is the ideal that most of these modern women agitators set before them? Is it not clearly the ideal of an unsexed woman?"[55] Allen instead advocated for a feminism that would center women's sexual desire, a sexually progressive stance subtended by Greg's specter of racial castration: "Every sexual act…committed without desire and without affection is a sin against the race; because, if it happens to result in offspring, it must tend to hand down in an enfeebled and degenerate state the natural impulses which leads to the reproduction of the species."[56] Even a socialist feminist like Eleanor Marx (Karl Marx's daughter) treated the odd women as sexually damaged victims on whose behalf feminism must act:

> Let us call to mind the terrible proportion of women that are unmarried. For example, in England, in the year 1870, 41 per cent of the women were in this condition. How is it that our sisters bear upon their brews this stamp of lost

[53] High Stutfield, "Tommyrotics," *Blackwood's* 157 (1895): 842.

[54] Stutfield, "Tommyrotics," 840.

[55] Grant Allen, "Plain Words on the Woman Question," *Fortnightly Review* 52 (1889): 452.

[56] Allen, "Plain Words," 343.

> instincts, stifled affections, a nature in part murdered? Our marriages, like our morals, are based upon commercialism.[57]

On the heels of Greg, women's celibacy, once a valid, even valorized, social position, became an affective deformity on whose behalf eugenicist, anti-feminist, feminist, and socialist projects alike rushed to act.

Superfluity: Eugenic Feminism's Language of Desire

When I note that the New Woman movement collaborated with an emergent eugenic regime of female erotics, I do not merely mean ideological kinship. This collaboration was intimate *and* institutional. Several of the most prominent New Woman writers—Emma Frances Brooke, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Jane Hume Clapperton—were members or associates of the short lived but influential Men and Women's Club. Running from 1885–1889, this debating club was founded by Karl Pearson, the first professor of eugenics, with the intention of discussing the impasses of contemporary gender politics and to "search for a new language of desire" as a way out of these impasses.[58] This new language of desire reframed sexuality as a site foremost of affection, desire, and pleasure, apart from procreation. This transformation of women's desire anticipated the later sexological orthodoxy articulated by Havelock Ellis (also an associate of the Men and Women's Club), who theorized eroticism as the basis of sympathy, altruism, love, and health, in opposition to the celibate's "erotic blindness."[59] The Club is worth pausing on, not only because it represents an interesting case in which sex-positive feminists and eugenicists collaborated

[57] Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, "The Woman Question: From a Socialist Point of View," *Westminster Review* 125 (January 1886): 212.

[58] Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 143.

[59] Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology*, 213.

in theorizing the politics of women's sexuality against the older ideology of passionlessness, but also because these theories deeply informed several of the most popular novels of the 1880s and 1890s.

Members of the Men and Women's Club were largely unified in a belief that the imperiled relations between the sexes could only be repaired by re-acquainting men and especially women with sexual feeling. In the Club's inaugural paper, Pearson, merging Greg and Eleanor Marx, argued that relations between sexes had become corrupted by the "taint of commercialism," which had subordinated marriage and reproduction to artificial, rather than sexual, selection.[60] Marriage, he argues, must "become again a matter of pure affection," freed from socially imposed economic and procreative duties, which obstructed "pure" sexual affection. To this end, members promoted the importance of erotic desire, foregrounding creativity, fantasy, pleasure, and attraction distinct from "sexual impulse" (a narrower desire for the sex act itself). In a talk titled "Note on the Sexual Feeling," Pearson proclaims sexuality a form of human "potential energy" akin to that of that of the steam-engine and planetary systems. This potential energy "plays a very great part in our modern social life, and is of an extremely complex character," yet "we are too apt to confuse the manifestation of the impulse [to have sex] and the attraction."[61] Olive Schreiner similarly foregrounded a virtual notion of "Eros," arguing, according to Club notes, that "there is something sexual at the root of all intellectual and artistic inspiration."[62] Another member, Reginald Ryle (philosopher Gilbert Ryle's father), took this further, arguing, by way of psychiatrist Henry

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[60] Karl Pearson, *The Ethic of Freethought and Other Addresses and Essays* (London: Adam and Charles Black Press, 1901), 429.

[61] In a remarkably prescient moment of his paper "Note on Sexual Feeling" Pearson emphasizes that, in spite of their confusion, erotic energy is frequently most potent precisely with it remains unconsummated: "In cases also of strong sexual attraction, the sexual impulse may be wholly wanting and would, if consciously there, destroy the attraction. It often happens that sexual attraction takes such forms of manifestation that it defeats the very object." Karl Pearson, "Unpublished Manuscript (Autumn 1885)," Karl Pearson Papers, University College London Special Collections, Kew National Archives [*KPP* hereafter].

[62] Schreiner's comments are recorded in a book of minutes taken by the Club's secretary (later, Pearson's wife) Maria Sharpe. See "Men and Women's Club Committee Minute Book (June 1889)," *KPP*, 14.

Maudsley, the proto-Freudian point that sexuality undergirds all "vital principle[s]": "The existence of sexual instinct is necessary to the development of normal human character. Physiologists agree with the novelists, 'Eliminate the sexual system and you eradicate the vital principle of morality, of civic and artistic emotion and of religious feeling among mankind.'"[63]

This move may seem counterintuitive in that it yokes heteronormative reproductive futurity to an expansive and nongenital eroticism foregrounding desire, pleasure, and affect. However, eroticism, as a kind of sexuality *freed* from instrumental ends, was essential to maintaining the white subject's creative uses of sexuality in the face of her rationalization. Freeing (women's) sexuality from the social duty to reproduce, the thinking went, might promote a kind of erotic resiliency, overcoming middle-class sterility and resulting in greater reproduction among women newly inhabiting sexuality as pleasurable. From the angle of feminist politics, the equality of the sexes depended on creating conditions for equal sexual intensity across the sexes. If eros was potential energy, admitting a sexed discrepancy in erotic desire might suggest women were inherently weaker than men, leaving "the world's regeneration [to] rest with men" rather than women.[64] Female sexuality was just as intense as men's, even if, within imperfect patriarchal conditions, "sexual intercourse is an unpleasant and fatiguing obligation" for many women.[65] Members deployed a Darwinian logic to underscore the feminist necessity of a universal sexuality; if free women were truly averse to sex with men, they argued, racial evolution would *require* woman's sexual subjection and rape for reproduction.[66] With these motives established early in the Club's tenure, members set

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[63] "Minute Book," 21.

[64] Karl Pearson, "Notes on Sexual Feeling," *KPP*, 22.

[65] Pearson, "Note on Sexual Feeling," 13.

[66] Given the assumption that women are less sexual than men, "it seems possible that in societies where women were free, the number of births would be fewer than when they were in a state of subjection. Thus on Darwin's principles, the societies where women were slaves having a tendency to survive, the subjection of women might be scientifically explained." Pearson, 20.

to work theorizing, describing, and articulating the utopian potential of cultivating a sexuality autonomous from sexual difference while critiquing an older Victorian ideology of female asexuality.

The Club's lone dissenter was Henrietta Müller, a feminist activist, publisher, and staunch advocate of spinster empowerment (her 1884 tract *The Future of Single Women* is dedicated to "all happy spinsters"). Müller saw this principle of equal sexuality as the conscription of womanhood into a masculinist affective regime of sexual passion, and presciently argued that the Club's sexual liberationist politics would create a condition of compulsory sexuality for women desiring freedom from sexuality. At a talk delivered before the Club on 12 October 1885, she sharply disagrees with the Club consensus that "the sexual instincts are absolutely equal in intensity of force in men and in women," or that this is a logical extension of a feminist project of equality.[67] Instead, she reclaims the older ideology of female passionlessness for an early difference feminism. Woman's relative sexual dispassion, she argues, is the basis of her superiority, not inferiority, to man. Whereas men regularly speak of the overwhelming nature of sexual passion to justify sexual violence ("it is said men's passions are so strong that they cannot control them"), and in "the conquest of the material world" more broadly ("it has been their mission to clear the forests and destroy wild beasts, to bring together the furthest ends of the earth by steam and electricity"), women's relative indifference to sexual instinct grants her freedom: "no passion dominates [women] as it dominates men, therefore she is sexually and morally free, while man is sexually and morally enslaved."[68] For Müller, freedom is not sexual freedom, but freedom from compulsory sexuality. To this end, she attacks German Democratic Socialist August Bebel's assertion of "the necessity which every sound person is under

[67] Henrietta Müller, "The Other Side of the Question," October 1885, *KPP*.

[68] Müller equivocates as to whether women are better at self-control or whether they actually have less intense sexual instincts, ultimately suggesting either and both (women, on average, have less intense sexual instincts, and, on average, are better at controlling them).

of satisfying amatory desires," which she presents as part of a broader pathologization of celibacy (specifically, its association with hysteria). She writes, "It is as tyrannical of Bebel to insist upon the satisfaction of amatory desires as it would be in another to refuse this right to those who claim it." Compulsory sexuality, she continues, is a patriarchal tool to enforce marriage and motherhood on women who might otherwise "emphatically elect for perpetual celibacy." Müller's paper was met with general opposition. She eventually resigned from the Club over ideological differences.

The ideological contrast between Müller and the rest of the Club neatly illustrates how a newly permissive (though in Müller's view tyrannical) project of sexual expansion gathered steam, transforming sexuality from a primarily male-reproductive instinct to a universal psychic energy. In spite of their commonalities, however, women members especially were "frustrated by the limits" of male members' "rationalist formulations to express desire."[69] Perversely, members spoke of freeing sexuality from the trappings of convention, yet the language they generated around desire relied on clumsy references to laws of physics and inheritance that struck members, Müller included, as masculinist. New Woman novels influenced by the Club, like Brooke, Schreiner, and Clapperton's, redressed this problem by developing and broadcasting a phenomenological language of women's eroticism relatable to a mass readership. Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* is paradigmatic here, novelizing in sensuous language the eugenic theories expounded at the Club. Brooke and Pearson explicitly discussed Brooke's novels as pedagogical tools to modernize Victorian morality in line with the Club's eugenic socialism. In a discussion of Brooke's *The Heir Without a Heritage* (1887), *Superfluous Woman*'s predecessor, they sharply disagree about the role of didacticism in their mutual project of "mould[ing] public opinion" toward a modern eugenic morality.[70] Pearson apparently

[69] Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Night*, 137.

[70] Emma Frances Brooke, Letter to Karl Pearson, 15 July 1887, *KPP*.

wished it be more explicit in its moral politics, while Brooke defends not ideologically "over-loading" the novel with exposition on artistic grounds. She insists the politics come through in its plotting, if not its narration. She quotes him telling her, "We are to mould public opinion—only 'not attempt it openly,'" and her method of showing, not telling, suits this principle of covert influence.[71]

A Superfluous Woman, one of the most popular New Woman novels of the 1890s, partially corrects her prior novel's insufficient didacticism. It does so through the Pearson-like eugenic physician Dr. Cornerstone, who opens and closes the novel with scientific didacticism. In the opening chapters, he announces the novel's political point, condemning the marriage market as a force of artificial selection while framing late-Victorian existence as a competition between the righteous expression of erotic desire and its repression by Victorian moral conventions. Its proper protagonist, the titular "superfluous woman," is Jessamine Halliday, who, at the start of the novel, is catatonic with ennui. Jessamine's mother-figure, Aunt Arabella, calls in Dr. Cornerstone, who diagnoses her depressive stupor as symptomatic of an upbringing for the marriage market which has smothered her natural "pagan" and "primeval" fervor, leaving her "cold and virginal as snow."[72] He prescribes hedonism to her, offering "an exhortation from the pagan school to partake of life's feast freely, genially, and without fear" as a "revolt against invalidish prudence."[73] Although Cornerstone typically treats the impoverished, rather than the upper classes, he takes Jessamine's case because it represents the "pent-up grief of a race": the reduction of England's fittest women into "dainty bit[s] of flesh which some great man would buy" like "Circassian slaves [who] are sold to a Turkish

[71] Brooke, Letter. "Artistically considered," Brooke explains, "it was not possible" to make her protagonist into a political mouthpiece; instead, she asserts the novel's political message works indirectly through its description and emplotment.

[72] Emma Frances Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, [1894] 2015), 85.

[73] Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 34–5.

harem."[74] The Circassian slave was, by the 1890s, a motif of pure Occidental femininity submitted to Oriental concubinage.[75] Brooke weds this Orientalist trope to eugenic science to make a feminist critique of the marriage market. Conventionally, the Turkish harem trope invited a "fantastical display of projection, sympathy and titillation," while Brooke deploys it as a site of desexualizing racial violation.[76] This move is characteristic of the novel's overall eugenics-inflected feminist politics, which infuses a basic feminist plea for women's liberation from patriarchal oppression with a racial and sexual logic that makes Jessamine's aneroticism a pathology of broader racial degeneracy.

Jessamine is not, like the old Madden spinsters, impervious to Cornerstone's erotic reform. Cornerstone rouses Jessamine from ennui into "a revolt [of] sheer nature and primeval emotion."[77] With this erotic awakening, Jessamine takes over the narrative from Cornerstone. In Volume II, the novel departs from Cornerstone's naturalist narration, dominated by omniscient eugenic excursus. Jessamine travels from London's commercial hell for the "untrodden wildness" of the Scottish Highlands, plunging both Jessamine and the reader into an expanded sensorium of color, motion, and tactility: "the sun flung light and shade, as seed scattered from a sower's hand, upon the loch, and the clouds (beautiful players) moved, floated, changed, catching the light and hiding it…with the noiselessness of serene nature, the great sweet sport of universal beauty at one with itself, content."[78] This atmosphere of erotic energy soon condenses around love interest Colin, a Highland peasant whose "rude forceful pressure…upon [Jessamine's] slender figure" triggers a deep sexual attraction to him: "suddenly an electric something flashed into Jessamine's face…Now a vivid uncontrollable

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[74] Brooke, 32, 162.

[75] The Circassian people are indigenous to the North Caucuses and were renown for the unique ethnic beauty, making them desirable sex slaves.

[76] Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2004), 129.

[77] Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism*, 129.

[78] Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 78–9.

spontaneity animated her."[79] Lit up with desire, she feels, fleetingly, capable of "rebellion" against London's oppressively conventional social world, compelled to make "a heart-felt resistance to an order which she suddenly found was laying a cold prosaic claim upon her intimate devices for warm and natural joy."[80]

Brooke's likening of London's social conventions to cold prose tips off the novel's aesthetic project. If Jessamine's sexual awakening is a literal casting off the "cold prose" from her "intimate devices," the text mirrors this in its own stylistic shift, casting off the first volume's didactic realist narration for an immersion into the New Woman's erotically enlivened sensorium. Through the odd woman's conversion, the novel stages the period's broader aesthetic transition from realism to a modernism concerned with inhabiting the inside of perception. Contemporary critics credited New Woman fiction with developing just such an impressionism as relief from realism's reticence toward the body. As one reviewer typically put it, New Woman novelists "reproduce lovingly…a feeling, be it of touch, or taste, or scent, or vision" playing upon "unstrung nerves."[81] Stutfield, a conservative antifeminist, more derisively described New Woman fiction as "consumed with a desire for new experiences, new sensations."[82] Although literary historiography often credits male authors as the key pioneers struggling to break out of Victorian realism's rut,[83] feminist critics have long pointed out that the New Woman novel did much the same at a more popular scale.[84] In this view, we can read a novel like Brooke's as a self-aware supplement to the Club's analytic approach to female

[79] Brooke, 64, 73.

[80] Brooke, 116–7.

[81] A. MacDonell, "Three Sensitivist Novels," *The Bookman* (February 1895): 154.

[82] Hugh Stutfield, "The Psychology of Feminism," *Blackwood's* 161 (1897): 105.

[83] See Jameson, *Political Unconscious*; and Michael Fried, *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[84] See Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*; and Heilman, *New Woman Strategies*.

desire. Whereas Pearson (and Cornerstone) remained problematically cold and prosaic in describing passion, New Woman fiction vividly modeled the experience of erotic desire in relatable sensory terms.

However, unlike many other New Woman texts (e.g., Caffyn's *The Yellow Aster*, Egerton's "The Regeneration of Two"), but akin to Gissing's odd woman novel, Brooke abruptly terminates Jessamine's conversion from odd woman to New Woman. Jessamine confesses to Dr. Cornerstone that her oppressive bourgeois upbringing has made her constitutionally too weak to bear intense erotic feeling. By Volume III, she has fled Colin for London where she marries a degenerating aristocrat, Lord Heriot, for monetary reasons. Heriot is an ugly, degenerate man stricken with syphilis, his "minutest tone…saturated with mental disease and feebleness," an effective contrast to Colin's uncorrupted vitality.[85] The novel undergoes a tonal enfeeblement of its own, focally returning to Cornerstone's coldly naturalist narration. Through Cornerstone, we learn that a decade has passed and in that time Jessamine has birthed, out of duty to reproduce the Heriot line rather than her own maternal desires, two children with severe deformities. Deformity—the children's, the race's, and also the novel's—serves as narrative punishment for Jessamine's "invalidish prudence."[86] Jessamine's erotic invalidism binds her to "falling form": the "crime [of becoming] a mother by [Heriot's] effete and dissipated race."[87]

As if this were not lurid enough, Jessamine's disabled six-year-old daughter finally strangles her older brother, a rather literal manifestation of what Jameson calls Victorian realism's "windless closure" in the 1890s. By this, Jameson describes what he sees as realism's inability to overcome the "asphyxiating conditions" of bourgeois life that made "libidinal investment and Utopian wish-

[85] Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 182.

[86] Brooke, 35.

[87] Brooke, 215, 201.

fulfillment" impossible, blanching life of even the "desire to desire."[88] The deflationary logic that grips late Victorian realists like Gissing (and Brooke), he suggests, derives from their inability to sustain desire beyond bourgeois life's "universal commodification of desire."[89] Jameson's account of late-Victorian realism faltering under aneroticism strikingly resembles Jessamine's struggle to free her sexual instincts from commodification. Volume II is telling in its yoking together Jessamine's libidinal awakening with the text's ascent into impressionistic style. As Jameson tells it, literary impressionism succeeded where realism failed, taking perception and sensuality as its primary object, rather than social systems and historical detail. Impressionists, Jameson writes, "libidinally transcode and Utopianly transfigure...the broken data and reified fragments of a quantified world."[90] In Jameson's account, this more libidinal mode succeeded by meeting the hunger of a "quantified" society for an aesthetic realm of sensation and fantasy alien to their reified lives. The strands of modernism that rapidly superseded realism's aesthetic dominance at the turn of the twentieth century did so by freeing themselves from realism's fidelity to the reality principle. Jessamine's anhedonic relapse suggestively accompanies a similar generic shift from the New Woman novel's impressionism back to didactic realism, as Dr. Cornerstone takes over and the novel relapses into rationalist language and a realist mode.

At a formal level, the novel also relapses into a format tainted by an association with aesthetic commodification: the three-volume novel was culturally dominant in order to maximize profits for the private lending libraries (e.g., Mudie's) which had a monopoly on the book trade. As Richard Menke notes, the triple-decker's "multiple plot lines and their rhythms of introduction, complication, and resolution…were tied to the economics of its standardized distribution and

[88] Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 200.

[89] Jameson, 202.

[90] Jameson, 239.

consumption in volumes."[91] Brooke's novel was published the year the three-volume novel went extinct, as circulating libraries bowed to joint artistic, critical, and popular revolt against the form that had been mounting since the 1880s. 1894 saw writers as various as Wilde, Kipling, and Ella Hepworth Dixon offhandedly refer to the format "as a residual literary form."[92] Significantly, the novel enters its third volume with Jessamine's return to London, so that protagonist and novel simultaneously enter what Brooke calls "falling form." Gissing's *The Odd Women* likewise took a three-volume form, even though Gissing was one of the form's staunchest critics. His 1891 *New Grub Street,* also a triple-decker, grapples directly with the literary politics of its format, its anti-hero Jasper Milvain referring to it as "a triple-headed monster, sucking the blood of English novelists."[93] He further describes it as a "procrustean" bed requiring novelists to pad out their fictions with superfluous plotlines, conventional tropes, and deferred climax, resulting in fiction vitiated by its forced standardization.[94]

Without eliding the economic factors that may have obligated them to adopt the form, Brooke and Gissing both self-consciously deploy its vitiated and moribund status to suit their subject's own vitiated forms. Brooke emphasizes this point through her novel's frequent textual metaphors for

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[91] Richard Menke, "The End of the Three-Volume Novel System, 27 June 1894," *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* 2013, ed. Dino Franco Felluga. https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=richard-menke-the-end-of-the-three-volume-novel-system-27-june-1894. Menke explains this relationship between form and the economics of lending libraries: "The most crucial aspect of the Victorian three-volume novel was that it wasn't priced for sale to readers at all. Rather, the main buyers of novels in this expensive format were the private circulating libraries that came to dominate the trade in new fiction, especially Mudie's (which began lending books in 1842) and W. H. Smith (which added a subscription service to its railway bookstalls in 1860)… Lending out triple-deckers by the volume meant that the libraries could circulate a single "copy" of a novel among three subscribers at once. And, although in practice the basic format could be quite flexible, the circulating libraries depended on maintaining the norm of long novels that called for slow reading… Short novels might be rapidly read and exchanged for others, allowing subscribers to consume more individual works for their subscription fee. The form and scale of Victorian fiction, then — including its multiple plotlines and their rhythms of introduction, complication, and resolution — were tied to the economics of its standardized distribution and consumption in volumes."

[92] Menke, "The End of the Three-Volume Novel System," n.p.

[93] George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode (Oxford: Oxford Unniversity Press, [1891] 1993), 160.

[94] Gissing, *New Grub Street,* 160.

Jessamine's aneroticism, which obliquely engage with the contemporary politics of stodgy literary form that peaked the year of its publication. For instance, Jessamine blames her inability to sustain erotic passion on her own inflexible aesthetic form: "Supposing that when you were a little, little child, with heart as the *softest clay*… and a mind *like an unwritten page*, your Aunt Arabella *wrote all over it*, and gave a twist to your heart…you can never, *never*, NEVER get rid of."[95] Gissing, I suggest, makes use of the deflation and "slow reading" necessitated by the long novel, turning these increasingly reviled aesthetic qualities into sites of queer non-reproductivity. For Brooke, the adoption of an extinct form is unambiguous in its moral critique, signifying an inability to escape the Victorian era's rationalization. As Brooke wrote in the Introduction to the novel's fifth edition: "The designation 'superfluous' appears to me to belong to persons who fail, from whatever cause, to find and fulfill the function nature has intended them to perform in life."[96] Volume III constitutes Jessamine's failed escape from her own social superfluity, a return to Volume I's anerotic London life that makes for a kind of narrative superfluity, no real progress having been made, except for the moral critique inhering in Jessamine's failed conversion narrative.

If a New Woman novel like Brooke's yokes narrative vitality to erotic vitality, this rhymes with 'modern' political narratology's making erotic desire synonymous with worldmaking. "Most novels," Peter Brooks observes, begin with "the image of a desire taking on shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop a textual energetics."[97] Queer and feminist narratology has long positioned the freeplay of textual erotics as the basis of narrative worldmaking that subverts realism's domestication of desire.[98] The odd woman novels I am tracking, however, trouble the

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[95] Brooke, *Superfluous Woman,* 48, emphasis added.

[96] Brooke, *Superfluous Woman*, 241.

[97] Brooks, 38.

[98] For Tyler Bradway, queer and feminist narratologists from Valerie Rohy to Teresa de Lauretis position "narrative as a conservative form that contains the unruly energies of sexuality." Bradway's move away from antinarrativity to

assumption that narrative is a burst of libidinal pursuit tempered into form by discipline: they open with images of desire failing to take shape; their interestingly retrograde forms center on the immense labor it takes to lather up "textual energetics" and the perpetual risks of that desire's dissipation before climax and denouement are ever achieved.

The odd woman novel's awkwardness when it comes to *narratological* worldmaking reflects larger anxieties about lost *social* worldmaking born by celibacy. That queer narratology tacitly assumes that desire is the raw material of queer narratives positions eros as a privileged and necessary force of queer world unmarking and remaking. My point here is not to deny either that "sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities," or that it contains a "revolutionary kernal of the impulse to…seek the end of a world on behalf of a fantasy" often necessary for radical world making.[99] What I am highlighting is the monopoly eroticism has on our woldmaking imaginary. At the same time, I am flagging the undervalued aesthetics of aneroticism that produced its own queer effects within *fin-de-siècle* literature. It is significant that the *fin-de-siècle*'s cultural sexual awakening was a reaction to the collective dread of what Jameson calls, again, the "asphyxiating conditions of a reified existence," the claustrophobia attendant within an increasingly managed social world.[100] If eroticism "always entails a breaking down of…the regulated social order," as Georges Bataille influentially has it, then I am arguing that this sense of eroticism's transgressive nature itself produces reification, not least the reification of intimacy and intimate worldmaking around erotic feeling.[101]

"relational formalism," while broadening critical appreciation of the many relational shapes that desire can take on, retains "erotic charge" and formal "promiscuity" as the keynotes of queer/feminist worldmaking. Tyler Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form," *PMLA* 136, no. 5 (2021): 712, 715.

[99] See Eve Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 185; Lauren Berlant, "A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 684.

[100] Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 200.

[101] Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (New York: Walker & Co., 1962), 18.

Parasitism: Leaching Erotic Worldmaking

Early feminist politics wielded this distinction between eros and alienated desire to attain sexual liberation for white women while further reifying class and race categories. Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* narrates the struggle of its protagonists to escape from their alienating milieu in colonial South Africa. As the original New Woman novel, it set the precedent for the tension between odd women and New Woman plots that became a hallmark of the 1890s New Woman novel. Today, it is remembered for its co-protagonist Lyndall, "the first wholly feminist heroine in the English novel."[102] Even so, critics have grappled with *African Farm*'s awkwardness. One is political: the novel issues a passionate plea for feminist liberation by constructing "sexual status by way of a potentially racist turn in [Darwinian thinking]" emphasizing female virility.[103] Another is narratological: despite its mass popularity, the novel is an "ungainly combination of parts," marred by Schreiner's difficulty sustaining narrative drive.[104] We cannot simply dismiss these two idiosyncratic features of the novel as merely symptoms of political and aesthetic transition. Rather, the former produces the latter, as Schreiner stages the libidinal death of her male protagonist, who is then replaced by the novel's famous New Woman in its latter half. Lyndall's erotic drive likewise falters, and she fades in and out of focalization. In the novel's Preface, Schreiner addresses the strange form her novel takes owing to the sudden, apparently unmotivated appearance and disappearance of protagonists: "There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away. When the crisis comes the man who would fit it does not

[102] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 199.

[103] Carol Barash, "Virile Womanhood: Olive Schreiner's Narratives of a Master Race," *Women's Studies International Forum* 9, no. 4 (1986): 334.

[104] Esty, "The Colonial Bildungsroman," 407.

return."[105] Schreiner thus justifies her novel's ungainly literary form with an appeal to realism. This "strange coming and going" of characters which causes the plot's uneven, often deflationary, movement, encodes the bleak reality of life, in which actors who should properly meet a crisis fail to endure it. Within the novel, we will see, these structural issues are thematized in terms of erotic resiliency, of its characters' capacity to sustain a sense of the erotic in the face of its continual disappointment. It thus resonates in theme and form with Brooke's and Gissing's ungainly odd woman novels.

By now, it should not surprise us that cultural desexualization haunted Schreiner. *Woman and Labour* (1911), the "Bible" of early twentieth-century British feminism, charts the effects of nineteenth-century industrialization and falling fertility rates on the social position of woman.[106] Schreiner contrasts modern women reduced to a "condition of morbid inactivity" with the "virile" Teutonic women of the past, who engaged in worldmaking "labour more toilsome and unending than that of man."[107] Modern "parasitic female[s]" waste social resources without regenerating them. Exemplary are the odd women, the "millions of women in our modern societies [who] are so placed as to be absolutely compelled to go through life not merely childless, but without sex relationship in any form whatever."[108] Celibate women, along with sex workers and upper-class women who, like Jessamine, marry for money rather than love, are Schreiner's key examples of parasitic women, who share in common a pathological estrangement from sexual instinct. They are "too enervated at last to care even to produce offspring," either foregoing creative labor altogether (like the Madden sisters) or worse (like Jessamine) "handing down effete and enervated constitutions to their race"

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[105] Olive Schreiner, Preface to *Story of an African Farm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1883] 2008), xxxix.

[106] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (New York: Penguin Books, [1933] 2005), 41.

[107] Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz), 46, 87, 30.

[108] Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, 61.

through transactional marital sex.[109] Parasitism is underwritten by Greg's "survival of the unfittest" thesis: kept women are more dangerous than celibates and sex workers because they are most likely to reproduce and "impres[s] [their] effete image indelibly on succeeding generations," whereas the latter only "negate childbearing" and "effec[t] no form of productive labour."[110] Schreiner, like her close friend Pearson, advocates for women's economic independence because were women forced to support herself, parasitic women, like unproductive men, would "ultimately be annihilated," revitalizing whiteness.[111]

Schreiner offers the New Woman as the solution to parasitic females: the New Woman heralds "sexual love['s return] after its long pilgrimage in the deserts."[112] Without this return, Schreiner warns, unchecked sexual estrangement will lead to women's racial degeneration, creating a rift between sexes akin to that between "distinct branches [of] races and classes which are in totally distinct stages of evolution."[113] "So wide is the hiatus between" such hierarchies, Schreiner elaborates, "that often the lowest form of sex attraction can hardly cross it. And the more highly-developed mental and emotional sex passion cannot possibly bridge it."[114] She hints further that the explosion of homosexuality in the *fin-de-siècle* is a result of this increasingly irremediable erotic and racial rift. She reminds readers that ancient Greece's "abnormal institution of avowed inter-male sexual relations" resulted from women having become too underdeveloped to serve men even as

[109] Schreiner, 87, 72.

[110] Schreiner, 105, 61, 100.

[111] Schreiner, 70.

[112] Schreiner, 241.

[113] Schreiner, 243.

[114] Schreiner, 243.

sexual commodities.[115] Schreiner's New Woman, in contrast, is brimming with the energy to racially and economically regenerate the world.

Racial hierarchy subtends Schreiner's distinction between New Women/sexual robustness and sex parasites/sexual alienation. "Savage" sexuality, she argues, is "almost purely physical attraction" oriented to childbearing.[116] Sexuality only ascends into eroticism, a realm of pleasure, fantasy, and creativity unfettered by biological demands, in "highly developed male and female[s]," where it "assumes its most aesthetic and intellectual form."[117] She wrote to Pearson, "as war, famine, & the hardship of life diminish…the demand upon the sex system to produce becomes necessarily small" and "surplus sexual power naturally adapt[s] itself to aesthetic use."[118] At the "height of evolution," sexual power is "used exclusively aesthetically for purposes of pleasure; for sympathy & union between human beings."[119] Sexuality, no longer merely an instrument of breeding, becomes an affective force binding up collectivity and motoring cultural regeneration. Yet this very distinction between instrumental and autonomous sexual desire is a means to abject odd women—exhausted laborers, sex workers, black South African women—from feminist worldbuilding projects. Instead, they remain radically kinless in their commodified desire: "The Bushwoman, like the lowest female barbarians in our own society, will often readily dispose of her infant son for a bottle of spirits or a little coin."[120]

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[115] Schreiner, 90.

[116] Schreiner, 222.

[117] Schreiner, 222.

[118] Olive Schreiner, Letter to Karl Pearson, 3 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription; lines 138–42.

[119] Schreiner, Letter to Pearson; lines 44, 156–157.

[120] Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, 229.

Schreiner's feminist sexual politics, and the larger eugenic ideology it draws from, is an iteration of what Kyla Schuller has called the "biopolitics of feeling" in a mid-century American context. Chrisman notes that "Black Africa functions as emergent white femininity's antagonist, the structural opponent of white female self-expansion through fantasy and imagination" in Schreiner's oeuvre.[121] The parasitic woman resembles "the bushwoman" insofar as she too is estranged from whiteness's world-creative capacities embodied by eroticism. Unsurprisingly, Schreiner grounds the New Woman's erotic freedom in her racial inheritance of free whiteness:

> We who lead in this movement to-day are those old, old Teutonic women… We have in us the blood of a womanhood that was never bought and never sold; that wore no veil, and had no foot bound; whose realised ideal of marriage was sexual companionship and an equality in duty and labour… And if to-day some of us have fallen on evil and degenerate times, there moves in us yet the throb of the old blood.[122]

Even in a degenerate world, the New Woman retains a blood link with virile Teutonic womanhood. Her link to historically free and virile women affords her erotic energy unsubordinated to the social order, which in turn sustains a reparative, rather than deadened, relationship to the world.

As sharply as Schreiner pathologizes oddness in *Women and Labour*, her novel *Story of an African Farm* expresses a deep ambivalence about the very possibility of actualizing a utopia of erotic worldmaking. *African Farm* novelizes the struggle of its two precocious, deeply romantic protagonists, Waldo and Lyndall, to hold onto erotic desire as advanced capitalism's alienating force creeps into their lives on the South African Karoo. Although *African Farm* is mostly remembered as the first English novel with an overtly feminist protagonist, Jed Esty reminds us that the first half is pre-occupied with capitalism's evolution. The backdrop of the first section is Cecil Rhodes' New Imperialist diamond mining endeavors in South Africa, spurred on by European whiteness's waning

[121] Chrisman, "Empire, 'Race' and Feminism," 62.

[122] Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, 139-41.

productivity, "a crisis in which the modernizing ethos and self-reliant bourgeois dynamism that drove Western industrialization began to dissipate."[123] This is key context for making sense of the feminist second-half of Schreiner's novel. Bonaparte Blenkins, a comic Rhodes stand-in, arrives by chance at a pre-industrial Boer farm and then schemes to make it profitable. The tyrannical regime of discipline he inflicts on the farm workers, especially Waldo, the novel's initial protagonist, allegorizes the incursion of brutal, alienating labor into South Africa. The Karoo, removed from civilization and crowded historical consciousness, affords Waldo space to dream and desire, relieved of reality's empirical weight. He occupies a polymorphous sense of the erotic, one that chimes with Schreiner's concept of the erotic as aesthetic energy: God, for him, is a "Mighty Heart" that "beats with great throbs of love," "awaken[ing] wild desire" that is "peopled with phantasies."[124] However, under Bonaparte's expropriative, fantasy-crushing discipline, Waldo enters a disillusioned state of anhedonia—until he stumbles upon a chapter on Fourierism in J. S. Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). Waldo's discovery of Fourierism is accompanied by a surge of erotic energy: he fingers the pages "as a lover feels the hair of his mistress" and his face flushes as if he has "been making love."[125]

Why does Mill's frankly dry text on political economy so arouse Waldo? Fourierism imagines a society in which libidinal energy effortlessly fuels productive labor, creating a harmonious social order free from alienated work. As Herbert Marcuse explains, Fourierism "makes for pleasurable co-operation…based on the *attraction passionnée* in the nature of man, which persists despite the opposition of reason, duty, prejudice."[126] Schreiner's novel is ambivalent toward this fantasy of

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[123] Esty, "The Colonial Bildungsroman," 409.

[124] Olive Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1883] 2009), 109, 44, 113.

[125] Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm*, 76–7.

[126] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1955] 1974), 217.

utopian collectivity through erotic de-repression. On the one hand, it chimes with her conviction that "surplus sexual power naturally adapt[s] itself to aesthetic use."[127] On the other hand, the novel frets that eros may not survive in a world as damaged as Rhodes' South Africa. Although Fourier makes possible once more Waldo's utopia of the Mighty Heart, one of the novel's most jarring shifts is his abrupt ejection from the role of protagonist shortly thereafter. Bonaparte precipitates this fall in a highly eroticized castration scene, in which he whips the "lust and desire" out of Waldo as punishment for reading Mill. This leaves Waldo libidinally dead: his "heart is as the heart of the dead for coldness."[128] Stripped of desire, Waldo loses the vital interiority required of a protagonist. He leaves the novel's world of the Boer farm for "grinding labor" transporting supplies to mining towns. The work is so dehumanizing that he drinks heavily to numb himself, sinking deeper into anaesthesis. For Schreiner, this is raced. Characters describe Waldo "walk[ing] about in that dead-and-alive sort of way, muttering to himself like an old K—r witch-doctor."[129] Later, blackout drunk in the street, a "Bushman boy" rescues him. For Waldo, this is a damning moment of racial identification: "It was as though he said, 'You and I are comrades. I have lain in a road too.'"[130]

The English novel's first New Woman emerged out of this narrative of male impotence. Lyndall takes over the protagonist position from Waldo, providing the erotic-aesthetic force to carry on the second half of the novel. This is what makes the novel distinctively a New Woman novel: Lyndall is tasked with creating the conditions for utopian desire to flourish, ushering in a "new time…when love is no longer bought or sold."[131] She understands this feminist project to be

[127] Schreiner, Letter to Pearson, lines 141–2.

[128] Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm*, 114–5.

[129] Schreiner, 198.

[130] Schreiner, 224.

[131] Schreiner, 161–2.

underwritten by a raced erotic hierarchy: the "Hottentot" and the "child of the nineteenth century," she explains, are both gripped by "animal appetites," but the latter's are "refined, discriminative, [and] immeasurably intensified…A great soul draws and is drawn with a more fierce intensity than any small one."[132] Lyndall here explicates Waldo's denigrating numbness: his once Fourierist eroticism has been crushed by dehumanizing labor, making him kin to the primitive "Hottentot."

Like Waldo, Lyndall faces existential threats to her desire: she becomes pregnant by an unnamed man, has a stillborn birth, and then, racked with illness and postpartum depression, eventually dies. But, unlike Waldo, Lyndall remains attached to desire; across the course of her illness, she keeps her gaze fixed on her own reflection in a mirror, as if staging a Lacanian mirror stage, the inaugurating scene of desire. In her dying moments, "the white face on the pillow looked into the white face in the glass."[133] Unlike Waldo's traumatic cross-race identification, whiteness reflects whiteness, and Lyndall becomes enshrined as a symbol of Teutonic womanhood's undying passion: "the wonderful yearning light was in the eyes still. The body was dead now, but the soul, clear and unclouded, looked forth."[134] Desire is the New Woman's work, and the New Woman's work is never done, even in death. Indeed, the embers of Lyndall's yearning inspired a generation of New Woman novelists to imagine utopias out of white women's desiring. Yet in positioning eros against reified dispassion, Schreiner reifies other hierarchies—white/black, (re)productive/non(re)productive, aesthetic/anaesthetic—endemic to the ruinous imperialism she sets out to undo.

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[132] Schreiner, 161.

[133] Schreiner, 252.

[134] Schreiner, 252.

'At-odds' with Erotonormativity

The antagonism between the New Woman and odd woman brings into relief the disturbing attachments to race science of late Victorian erotic politics. The odd woman points us to the broader ideological emergence, in the late Victorian period, of erotonormativity. Erotonormativity is a hallmark of twentieth and twenty-first century sexual cultures—what Aya Gruber calls the "deeply entrenched belief that sex is inherently more important than other forms of human labor, other endorphin-producing physical actions, and other human interactions that risk disease, injury, and pregnancy."[135] Queer and feminist theories of sexuality, cleaving to spectacles of erotic excess, tend to "ignore entire demographic categories of people…for whom sex is a low priority" or for whom erotic desire is not a prime motive in having sex.[136] "People should be liberated to not desire sex and to have sex without, or even against, desire. People can strike bargains in the shadow of desire/non-desire," writes Gruber.[137] This sense of sexual liberation as including freedom from sexual drive is left behind by theories in which eroticism necessarily underwrites liberationist worldmaking. The "social prerogative to avoid bad *and* have good sex," in fact, often further disciplines and stigmatizes nonnormative subjects and intimacies of all sorts, "engender[ing] public health and other institutional bureaucracies in the business of managing danger and pleasure."[138]

In this light, we can understand the odd woman as an important early site of resistance amidst erotonormativity's cultural ascendence. This was the case made by Coralie Glÿn, a now forgotten novelist and advocate for single working-class women. Intervening in a debate between

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[135] Aya Gruber, "Sex Wars as Proxy Wars," *Critical Analysis of Law* 6, no. 1 (2019): 106.

[136] Gruber, "Sex Wars," 123.

[137] Gruber, 122.

[138] Gruber, 106. We can see this dynamic at play in sex worker exclusionary feminisms, which "mine" sex work "for evidence of special harm or titillating edge" rather than theorize it as risky akin to nonsexual forms of labor. Heather Berg, "Reading Sex Work: An Introduction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021): 484.

sex-negative/pro-passionlessness biologist St. George Mivart and bestselling New Woman author Grant Allen, Glÿn worries, like Müller, that the compulsoriness of female desire imposed by Allen would only perpetuate and enflame the violences of masculine sexual desire:

> the lawless, ravenous, ungoverned passions of men, for what a mass of human ills are they not accountable? And shall we not *increase*, rather than decrease, the evils…by asserting, that one sex, as well as the other, shall be incited to abandon itself to the gratification of every passing whim…?[139]

She continues, linking passion to the same processes of capitalist development New Women writers suggested it would redress: "Passion…has surely its foundation" in a "monopoly instinct."[140] Glÿn invokes "Nature's Nuns" as an alternative way of living without conscription to a coercive regime of eroticism. These women, she writes, are kindred with "the neuter" of the ant and bee colony, "perform[ing] many of the most indispensable duties of the commonwealth."[141] Such neuters engage in social effort, even if that effort is illegible within rubrics of labor that narrowly recognize material production and family-building. Glÿn returns us to Gissing's odd women and their basic struggle that is barely (re)productive at all—to capitalism or, seemingly, the commons. Yet even these profitless neuters perform a kind of social work, slackening the bourgeois injunction to produce economic and erotic surplus.

Thus, in spite of a robust history of female political celibacy and sex strikes, celibacy and sexual indifference remain undertheorized in queer and feminist theories of worldmaking, in part due to their association with repression and outright erotophobia.[142] In 2014, bell hooks made

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[139] Coralie Glÿn, "Nature's Nuns," *The Humanitarian* 9 (1896): 421–2.

[140] Glÿn, "Nature's Nuns," 421.

[141] Glÿn, 426.

[142] Sylvia Federici suggests that "women's struggle to avoid pregnancy and to avoid sex, inside and outside of marriage, is one of the most common and unrecognized on earth." Sylvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020), 24.

international headlines by calling Beyoncé's brand of girl boss feminism "terrorism." The next day, an audience member asked hooks to imagine "a liberatory sex-positive framework for black women" that does not fall into the trap of Beyoncé feminism. The ensuing interaction embodies celibacy's ongoing inconceivability as a site of radical worldmaking:

> *bell books:* I think that's the critical question… What does that liberatory sexuality look like? I mean, let me theorize that it may very well be that celibacy is the face of that liberatory sexuality. That I would rather not be sexual than to be… [laughter in the audience interrupts hooks]
>
> *Moderator 1* [interrupting]: Now *that's* making me uncomfortable.
>
> *Moderator 2*: I can't fit in that box, bell.
>
> *b.h.*: I'm trying to be futuristic here. But what does it mean to be able to say I'd rather not be sexual than to be sexual in a context where I'm being mistreated, where I have doubt, where my feelings are not, where I am triggered as an abuse survivor or what have you…I think of Tim Dean's work on being queer, queer as not being about who you're having sex with…but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.[143]

What about divestment from sexuality as a political practice, or even visceral response to available kinds of intimacy within a given social order, is uncomfortable, comedic, and absurd in a space dedicated to radical worldmaking? In this chapter, I have attempted to excavate such divestment as a site of resistance to what we might call, following Holland, the racist life of eroticism. Acknowledging celibacy's deeply ambivalent and contradictory relationship to bourgeois ideology, I still want to insist that in the figure of the odd woman and her kindred we glimpse a form of early queerness committed to being "at odds with everything around it," including erotics. What would it mean to take that partial, exhausting, often embittered and unsexy relational orientation—"at

[143] bell hooks, "Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body" (lecture, Eugene Lang College, 4 May 2014).

odds"—as a serious political orientation, in contrast to all the shattering and *jouissance* and dangerous drive to pleasure that eroticism animates in the queer and feminist imaginary?

Chapter 2

Spinster Regionalism
The New England Nun's Anerotic Economies

"Acrid Virginity:" The *Fin-de-Siècle* Politics of Puritanism

The United States had its own version of the odd woman in the "New England nun," an archetype of puritan sexlessness that populated late nineteenth-century American regionalism, especially that of Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909) and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930). Jewett and Wilkins Freeman's "endless gallery" of aged spinsters and widows, in the view of one contemporary reviewer, did "what no other writer has ever dared to do in making them the heroines" of stories.[1] Their *fin-de-siècle* collections, largely centered on single, aged, seemingly celibate women, reinvigorated New England regionalism at a moment when New England seemed to have been "exhausted as a background for fiction," achieving new heights of popularity.[2] This was, however, a vexed success, part of regionalism's swan song as the dominant genre of American fiction. Literary tastes soon turned against these delicate, minute depictions of spinsters, which harkened backward to mid-century domestic realism, with the ascent of a more virile American naturalism centrally concerned with desire and its excesses, often embodied in New Woman protagonists. There is a radical difference between Louisa Ellis, the titular "uncloistered nun" of Wilkins Freeman's popular *A New England Nun, and Other Stories* (1891) and, for example, Dreiser's better remembered title character of *Sister Carrie* (1900): the former retreats into rural, self-isolated domesticity, while the latter grapples

[1] Agnes Macdonnell, "Mary E. Wilkins," *The Bookman* 1, no. 3 (December 1891): 102.

[2] Fred Lewis Pattee, *Side-Lights on American Literature* (New York: The Century Co., 1922), 184.

with insatiable desires awakened by urban life, "her craving for pleasure…so strong that it [is] the one stay of her nature."[3]

Although the latter feels (by design) significantly more modern than the former, as in Chapter 1, I suggest that these two social archetypes of femininity, one insufficiently erotic, the other excessively so, were intimately bound up in one another. Like in the British context, the American dialectic between New England nun and New Woman mediated anxieties around white enervation and race suicide, but it was uniquely inflected by the particularly aggressive culture of consumption burgeoning in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century. As Ann Douglas has argued, this period saw the United States transition into "the most powerfully aggressive capitalist system in the world," which saw the archetype of the ideal (white middle-class) woman especially shift from domestic producer, embodying a Protestant work ethic at home, to voracious consumer, which required a deconstruction of the former's austerity.[4] Moving from the British to the American frame puts the allegorical function of the celibate (an)erotic economy into focus: the nun's narrow erotic (and aesthetic) economy at once fueled and contested the construction of the hyper-desiring female consumer archetype.

I call this American odd woman figure the "New England nun" because Wilkins Freeman's story of the same name exemplifies the cloistered logic that underwrites many of these stories. Originally published as a standalone story in an 1887 issue of *Harper's Bazar*, and later the title story of the collection *A New England Nun, and Other Stories* (1891), the story is simple at the level of plot: Louisa Ellis and Joe Dagget, who live in a rural New England village, have been engaged for fifteen years, fourteen of which Joe has been in Australia saving money for the marriage. In that time,

[3] Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970), 24.

[4] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 6.

Louisa, bereft of family and fiancé, has taken up a contented solitary existence of domestic tasks (sewing, tidying, gardening, distilling aromatic essences from her garden), dawning "pretty but senseless old maiden ways."[5] Senseless here means both "graceful but half-needless," as well as without sensuality.[6] For Louisa, "the wind [of romance] had never more than murmured; now it had gone down, and everything was still.[7] Her "feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side."[8] Caesar, the dog she has cared for since her brother's death, emblematizes her self-detachment from the erotic. Caesar has been chained up as a "hermit," living, like Louisa herself, on "ascetic fare," ever since he bit a neighbor "in a flood of youthful spirits."[9] We can, and critics have, read the detail that Joe vows to free Caesar from his hermitage upon their marriage either as a sign of Louisa's fear of her own disturbing erotic awakening (her "sublimated fears of defloration"), or else as registering the threat of masculine conquest over her spinster life (picking up on Caesar's namesake).[10]

In the end, however, Wilkins Freeman's own narratorial restraint obstructs resolution as to Louisa's deeper motives. Wilkins Freeman offers the formal satisfaction of tidy narrative closure, without peering into any psychosexual derangement that might explain Louisa's romantic and erotic disavowals. Upon Joe's sudden return, both separately realize they are no longer in love: Joe has fallen for Lily Dyer, a "tall and erect and blooming" woman; Louisa, meanwhile, regrets the "dust

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[5] Mary Wilkins Freeman, *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 9.

[6] Wilkins Freeman, *New England Nun*, 9.

[7] Wilkins Freeman, 8.

[8] Wilkins Freeman, 7.

[9] Wilkins Freeman, 10.

[10] David H. Hirsch, "Subdued Meaning in 'A New England Nun,'" in *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991), 113.

and disorder arising necessarily from [Joe's] coarse masculine presence in the midst" of her still solitude.[11] When Louisa overhears Joe confess his love to Lily Dyer, she breaks the engagement, sparing both an unhappy marriage. The story ends placidly, but ambiguously, Wilkins Freeman declining to punish or pathologize Louisa's retreat into celibacy, but also declining to celebrate it as revolt:

> If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself. She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness. Outside was the fervid summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees… Louisa sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an uncloistered nun.[12]

Outside, there is "fervid heat," the passions of "men and birds and bees." Louisa, although formally free, cloisters herself away from these alien forces of sexuality.

This story exemplarily embodies the libidinal indifference central to so many of Jewett and Wilkins Freeman's most popular *fin-de-siècle* stories, which would also be what twentieth-century readers found most distasteful about this genre. Within Wilkins Freeman's lifetime, literary tastes underwent a dramatic about-face. Mary Reichardt writes, "Between 1887 and 1914 the social and cultural atmosphere around Freeman was rapidly and radically changing. Rural New England, 'female' homey and domestic ideals, the Calvinistic conscience: these subjects were passé—naive—in the mental and moral upheaval surrounding World War 1."[13] Naturalist writers themselves fueled this revolution in taste toward fiction about the *un*domestication of desire. Frank Norris argued that American domestic realism (of which regionalism was the most popular genre, and Jewett and

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[11] Wilkins Freeman, *New England Nun*, 16, 9–10.

[12] Wilkins Freeman, 17.

[13] Mary Reichardt, "Mary Wilkins Freeman: One Hundred Years of Criticism," in *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991), 73.

Wilkins Freeman among the most popular of this genre) had become a "drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner."[14] When he exclaims that "Realism is minute!," having "stultifie[d] itself" by becoming as "proper as a deacon," we can easily imagine he had a Jewett or Wilkins Freeman short story in mind.[15] He turns to Zola as the solution to this puritan prudery, rendering naturalism in terms of titillating scopophilia, "an instrument with which we may go straight through the clothes and tissues and wrappings of the flesh down deep into the red, living heart of things."[16] It is a "prying, peeping, peering" literary mode, penetrating through Jewett and Wilkins Freeman's amply veiled spinsters to access "the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man."[17]

A young F. O. Matthiessen, writing in 1929, felt a similar repulsion reading Jewett's overly dainty, dispassionate prose:

> If you read her letters, you are bothered by the too frequent use of the adjectives 'little' and 'dear.' A faint odor of rose leaves emerges. You are reminded of her inability to portray passion in her books…[in which] the fever and the thirst of avarice never throb.[18]

What bothers Matthiessen is that the pleasures on offer in Jewett are too quaint, never intensifying into "the fever and the thirst of avarice" of naturalism's Sister Carrie, Trina McTeague, or Lily Barton. Willa Cather credits the decline of New England regionalism's popularity to the twentieth century's new obsession with sexuality:

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[14] Frank Norris, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist, and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1903), 215.

[15] Norris, *Responsibilities of the Novelist*, 215.

[16] Norris, 214.

[17] Norris, 217.

[18] F. O. Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Gloucester: P. Smith, [1929] 1965), 118.

> It is easy to understand why some of the young students who have turned back from the present to glance at Miss Jewett find very little on her pages. Imagine a young man, or woman, born in New York City, educated at a New York university, violently inoculated with Freud, hurried into journalism, knowing no more about New England country people (or country folk anywhere) than he has caught from motor trips or observed from summer hotels.[19]

In her essay "Sex in American Literature" (1923), Mary Austin, a California regionalist, likewise wrote scathingly of what Freudian readers brought to bear on New England regionalism:

> I am as skeptical of the turgid nastiness which the psychoanalytic writers find below the level of American consciousness as I am doubtful that the monumental repressions of the Puritans are responsible for it. Why assume that they had so much to repress? Long before they came to New England they ceased to need or to find pleasure in ritual and symbol or any representative art; their religious mysticism was reduced to a pale phosphorescence of renunciation. The latter progression of their stock has been toward sterility, intellectual as well as physical.[20]

Cather and Austin, in different ways, both suggest that New England regionalism's aneroticism is the point, rather than a deep flaw, although it has come to be received as such in a culture "violently inoculated with Freud." Regionalism is frustrating to modern readers, they suggest, because it eschews plots predicated on sexual drives, tending instead toward small stillness.

In this chapter, I hold onto the disturbing quality of these stories too-smallness, dwelling in the oft-neglected politics of puritan aneroticism in spinster regionalism's more recent, affirmative criticism. Male, mid-century critics would interpret Louisa et al. as "case stud[ies] of an obsessive neurosis" resulting from "unqualified repression of sexual impulses."[21] Joe here "is actually abhorrent because precisely what [Louisa] does not want on at least one level of her psyche is the renewal of life and fertility that he promises;" these "anti-social Dionysian erotic impulses," Louisa's potentially "unchecked fertility and chaos," terrify her.[22] Reacting to the compulsory heterosexuality

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[19] Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1922] 1988), 92–3.

[20] Mary Austin, "Sex in American Literature," *The Bookman* 57, no. 4 (June 1923): 389.

[21] Hirsch, "Subdued Meaning," 107.

[22] Hirsch, 112–113.

of these readings, feminist critics like Marjorie Pryse and Josephine Donovan imputed "predisciplinary," "counterhegemonic" feminist desires onto these characters.[23] Pryse sees in Louisa Ellis and her kin a "quasimatriarchal" "sisterhood" that "threatens the patriarchal structure of American society," as women "achieve their vision and find consolation for their social stigma [as unmarried women] in the affections of other women," despite the isolation and emotional rifts that separate them.[24] Following Faderman's work on romantic friendship, Jewett's work especially has been positioned as a precursor of modern lesbian literature, "a transgressive space of errant and specifically queer attachments that precedes the codification of sexuality as 'either' hetero or homo. Jewett's work has been a foothold for recovering queer ancestors in the American nineteenth century, even though her stories are never about the sex that spinsters were having."[25] More recently, queer critics have grappled with the problem of how to discuss desire in a character like Louisa, who prefers isolated domesticity to strong social attachments, be they heterosexual or homoerotic, instead imputing onto these texts an "erotics of everyday life" and radically Lacanian "desire that fails to signify properly *as* desire."[26]

Generative as these lines of criticism have been, they imbue celibacy with an underlying eroticism that neglects these stories' regionally specific evocation of an *insufficiently desiring* puritanism that has outlived its historical moment into an age of desire. Louisa's life, and Wilkins Freeman's

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[23] Josephine Donovan, "Breaking the Sentence: Local-Color Literature and Subjugated Knowledges," in *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 229.

[24] Marjorie Pryse, Introduction to *Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1983), x.

[25] Jess Shollenberger, "The Sex Lives of Spinsters," *South Atlantic Review* 87, no. 3 (2022): 115.

[26] Valerie Rohy reads Louisa Ellis as "a corollary of Lacan's famous injunction not to cede one's desire… Refusing to cede one's desire does not mean believing that one's desire may someday be fulfilled by stubbornly embracing the *objet petit a* in all its impossibility.". The upshot is a sophisticated twist on Fetterley and Pryse's "poetics of empathy:" "The challenge is not how to forge identifications, but how to say: I have no idea why you enjoy that, but I will defend your right to do so." Valerie Rohy, "Freeman's Object Lessons," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 37, no. 1 (2020): 47–8.

reticent style of narration, is not oriented to deeply inward-turning or perverse pleasures; rather, Louisa is content with the "simple, mild pleasure" of small domestic tasks, "ascetic fare," and "placid narrowness."[27] These late New England regionalist stories evoked what a reviewer in *Godey's Magazine* called "New Englandism," the "fineness of prudery that mark[s] that region" culturally indebted to "mediaeval creeds" of "crucifying the flesh," "swaddl[ing] human society in crape," and making "the desire of the soul a thing always to be treated with suspicion and prejudice."[28] The reviewer notes the foreignness of this "barren" place to modern America:

> To one of the Latin races the stern and rockbound New England, with its still more stern and hide-bound people, as Miss Mary E. Wilkins describes them, would be an alien civilization indeed. But it is almost as strange and foreign to us that have been reared in other sections of this enormous country.[29]

This alienation from rural New England was particularly charged, given that in the national imaginary it was what Wilkins Freeman called "The Mother of America."[30] This ur-mother's barrenness indexed the United States' rapid transformation from a principally agrarian economy at the start of the nineteenth century, to the industrialized consumer culture burgeoning at the turn of the twentieth century. This was considered a decline in Protestantism's cultural supremacy, replaced by a softer, more liberal and pleasure-oriented culture. Regional stories emphasizing rural New England's aneroticism at once evoked nostalgia for a time past, but also pointed to the incompatibility of this way of life with the nation's rapid geographic and economic expansion. Considering the nun in terms of the appetitive minimalism with which she was received at the turn of the century helps to make sense of her geographic particularity, association with short forms, and

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[27] Wilkins Freeman, 9, 12, 17.

[28] Chelifer, "The New England of Miss Wilkins," *Godey's Magazine* 134 (March 1897): 316, 317, 318.

[29] Chelifer, "New England of Miss Wilkins," 316.

[30] Mary Wilkins Freeman, "Beautiful America: VIII. New England, 'Mother of America,'" *Country Life in America* (1 July 1912): 27–32, 64–70.

the reserved style in which she is rendered. This approach locates the nun's queer and feminist engagements not in her erotic exertions, but in a celibate politics of recalcitrance, withdrawal, and underconsumption.

Whereas New England regionalism's aneroticism made it distasteful to twentieth-century readers and canon-makers, to contemporaries, this is what made it representative of a distinctly American literature. In 1906, *The Bookman* ranked Wilkins Freeman alongside better remembered literary giants like Edith Wharton, O. Henry, and Joseph Conrad in its "Representative American Story Tellers" series. The reviewer, Mary Moss, herself a popular fiction writer, provides readers with a "census" of a Wilkins Freeman village:

> In the census of a Mary Wilkins village the proportion of inhabitants would approximate sixty women upwards of seventy years old, five old men, fifteen middle-aged women, eight middle-aged men, seven girls, three eligible bachelors, two children. Of these, forty old women would be intolerable, ten merely difficult, and ten victims to the rest. Three old men out of five could be set down as narrow, detestable tyrants, two (weak brothers) show amiability. The middle aged men and women are in good training to succeed their elders. Young girls represent every degree of voluntary and enforced repression. Of the young men, mark two as thoroughly developed mules, well-meaning, honourable, but as "set" as their fathers before them. The third may be a reasonable creature, who consents to defer the wedding for ten years till his betrothed can buy a silk dress or pay off her father's mortgage. Failing to be of heroic stuff, number three usually breaks down and marries a girl from another village. The life is as narrow as that of a K—r in his kraal.[31]

Although women outnumber men, the village is without a reproductive future: its young are poised to "succeed their elders" as crabbed spinsters (victims of "voluntary and enforced repression") and impotent bachelors ("thoroughly developed mules"). This is not the pastoral vision of rural abundance one might expect of regionalism; it is a portrait of a rural community blanched of its regenerative life force, which is to say, sexuality: "Thanks to generations of chaste living," writes

[31] Mary Moss, "Some Representative American Story Tellers: II—Mary E. Wilkins," *The Bookman* 24, no. 1 (September 1906): 22.

Moss (referring to the self-denial of old-stock Calvinism), "[its women] have evolved a purely celibate temperament," as if "reverting to an acrid virginity."[32] An unpleasant bitterness suffuses these celibate characters who deny desire and pleasure.

Moss' demographic treatment of the nun points to the similar biopolitical problem of superfluous women that gripped England and New England in the later nineteenth century. Reviews of Wilkins Freeman and Jewett's fiction frequently reminded readers that, owing to the Civil War, westward emigration, and the development of industrial mill towns, rural New England had been depleted of men. This was not merely a demographic problem, but a hereditary and racial problem. Generations of chaste living had made the New England women (and men) that remained celibate, akin to "k—r" in their "kraal." Moss' employment of a South African racial slur is surprising given the American context, but is likely an allusion to Olive Schreiner's New Woman analogy of desexualization and the "K—r"/"Hottentot" explicated in Chapter 1.[33] Recall that for Schreiner, the surplus sexual power required for feminist cultural regeneration was the distinctive capacity of the never-shackled Teutonic New Woman. The odd woman, and here, the New England nun, shut up alone in her house, is rendered primitive, geographically and erotically constrained to their *kraal*.[34]

Moss's racialization of celibacy was not original, but drew on a broader anxiety around desexualization and race suicide, which rural New England's widows and spinsters embodied. Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace* traces the political and cultural energies unleashed by fears that

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[32] Moss, "Some Representative American Story Tellers," 22.

[33] Recall Schreiner's likening of the "sex parasite" to the "bushwoman," or Lyndall's erotic hierarchy in *African Farm*, whereby "passions which replenish the race" are "immeasurably intensified" in the "cultured child of the nineteenth century," compared to the narrow wants of the "Hottentot." Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm*, 161. As Chrisman notes, "Black Africa functions as emergent white femininity's antagonist, the structural opponent of white female self-expansion through fantasy and imagination" in Schreiner's oeuvre. Chrisman, "Empire, 'Race' and Feminism, 62.

[34] A corral made up of stones and branches into which livestock is driven at night, as well as a village of huts surrounded by a similar enclosure.

"Anglo-Saxons were on the road to 'race suicide.'"[35] Declining fertility rates, combined with labor unrest, as well as an influx of European immigrants and African Americans into New England, left cultural commentators anxious that the "Spartan public spirit" of early America had languished, and that its white elites were therefore increasingly vulnerable to overthrow.[36] The pervasive sense was that the fierce Anglo-Saxon spirit had, through its own industriousness across the nineteenth century, brought upon itself "flaccidity," an over-domestication of desire.[37] These movements foregrounded the compulsoriness of sexual desire in hopes of promoting "greater fecundity," while singling out celibacy as a criminal betrayal of the race.[38] No less than President Theodore Roosevelt took up this cause, declaring celibacy "fundamentally infinitely more important than any other question in this country," continuing: "the man or woman who deliberately avoids marriage, and has a heart so cold as to know no passion and a brain so shallow and selfish as to dislike having children, is in effect a criminal against the race, and should be an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people."[39]

The non(re)productivity of the rural New England village in the wake of economic and national expansion signified the threat of Anglo-Saxon decline and the dilution of America's vitality. The writings of Rollin Lynde Hartt, appearing alongside Jewett's stories in *The Atlantic Monthly*, typifies the complicated enmeshment of economic and racial decline refracted through the depressed rural New England village. In "A New England Hill Town," Hartt offers a more explicitly

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[35] Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 30.

[36] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 30.

[37] Lears, 30.

[38] Lears, 30.

[39] Theodore Roosevelt, Preface to *The Woman Who Toils: Being the Experiences of Two Ladies as Factory Girls* (New York: Doubleday Page and Co., 1903), vii–viii.

naturalist decoding of a Wilkins Freeman story to alert urban audiences to the plight of rural New England. He blames its social and economic ills foremost on the "provincialization of personality" wrought by the "survival of stagnant, unthinking Puritanism," which has made villagers stiff and unfeeling, for "the starch has struck through to our hearts."[40] Louisa Ellis embodies this (pathological, for Hartt) puritan recessiveness, that makes the people of New England "solitary, self-centred, insulated," "shrink[ing] from one another" into an "inert and all but paralytic domesticity."[41] These shut-ins lack vital force to keep up with modernity's demands of consumption, expansion, and speed: the rural New England town "cannot maintain itself in opposition to the relentless forces of social reconstruction," of post-Civil War national integration through industrial development.[42] These are the very forces that blanched these areas of their vitality: with urbanization and Westward expansion, "all the spunkiest ones have up an' got aout," leaving the worst genetic stock to celibacy (depopulation) or inbreeding (producing "backward children," "belated ones").[43] Echoing William Greg, Hartt draws a line from vestigial puritan austerity and its "obsolescent standards" to racial enervation, "the survival of the unfittest" producing social and economic depression.[44] Now that rural New England has become "cursed with moral and mental and physical aberrations, it is time to recognize a problem of no less than national seriousness… We are evolving a race of poor whites."[45]

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[40] Rollin Lynde Hartt, "A New England Hill Town," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (January 1, 1899): 563.

[41] Hartt, "A New England Hill Town," 563, 568.

[42] Hartt sketches the conditions for rural New England's decline: "Quick transportation began the ruin; cheap transportation from the West and South will complete it. Montana and Wyoming, marauding giants, have reached across the content and stolen our 'beef critters;' Minnesota and Iowa have sown tares amongst our wheat; Pennsylvania has substituted its coal for our wood fuel; Virginia has filled the national pipe with its own tobacco instead of ours; and Florida tempts Bostonian epicures with early-grown dainties long, long before our first garden produce is ready for market… That is why there has not been a new house built in Sweet Auburn for sixteen years." Hartt, 572.

[43] William of *Pointed Firs* is one version of this archetype. Hartt, 569.

[44] Hartt, 572.

[45] Hartt, 574.

He underlines this warning with an image of racial replacement: poverty has invited "undesirable" newcomers to abandoned farms; "the people of [rural New England] are turning black."[46]

Hartt's cure for the provincialized personality is casting off of puritan prejudices against the flesh by injecting it with the "demoralization" of urban life, for without pleasure "we fail to develop normal symmetry of character."[47] This aligns with his agenda to expand tourism to the region as a means of economic revitalization.[48] Another reviewer of Wilkins Freeman's stories agreed that, beautiful as it is, puritan New England is in need of a "reorganis[ation] from the point of view of cheerful living."[49] These prescriptions track a broader cultural narrative forming around the decline of Protestant New England's cultural supremacy, a decline that hinged on its anachronistic prudishness. As Van Wyck Brooks narrates in his landmark work of American literary history, *New England: Indian Summer, 1865–1915*, Boston was ceding its privileged position as the nation's intellectual and cultural capital to New York. The transfer of taste-making from Boston to New York was accompanied by the rise of new popular genres (especially decadence and naturalism) that gradually superseded the regionalism (and, more broadly, domestic realism), dominant across most of the nineteenth century. New York critics and editors, James Huneker (of *Harper's Bazar*, *The New York Sun*, etc.) foremost among them, inaugurated a cosmopolitan aesthetic "doctrine" Brooks calls "universal hedonism."[50] Inspired by Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola, whom Huneker helped popularize in the United States, this new aesthetic catered to "the reader's pleasure" and "condoned

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[46] Hartt, 573.

[47] Hartt, 564.

[48] Rollin Lynde Hartt, "The Regeneration of Rural New England, I. Economic," *Outlook* 64, no. 9 (March 3, 1900): 504–9.

[49] "Rural New England," *The Spectator* 80 (April 9, 1898): 511.

[50] Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1940), 503.

all irresponsibilities" of literary topic and readerly enjoyment.[51] That Boston's intellectuals remained hostile to this new, overtly sexualized aesthetic led American writers to "generally now [regard Boston culture] with a certain rancour as illiberal, sterile, indifferent, censorious and petty."[52] By the early 20th century, "Boston was the schoolmarm, and the nation had grown too big for her."[53]

This is the politics of puritanism, and its "acrid virginity," that literally surrounded (on the pages of *The Atlantic*) spinster regionalism. The New England nun was a complex transitional figure. To Brooks, she represented vestiges of the Calvinist morality that still gripped parts of New England, but which the nation was outgrowing. At the start of the nineteenth century, the Calvinist spirit was considered essential to the northern United States' culture and economy (rooted in hardscrabble agrarian production and an early phase of settler expansion); by the 1880s, it seemed to have outlived its function within a country innovating modern consumer capitalist culture. Brooks writes:

> The Yankee power had spread over the world. It had launched a thousand clipper-ships, it had dispatched the Mormons to conquer Utah; it had transformed the South Seas with its missions and planted schools all over heathen Asia. Now, having lost its outlet in the Yankee homeland, this power, at last inverted, devoured itself.[54]

In the decades following the Civil War, fueled in part by the threat of overproduction and underconsumption, American capitalism underwent a cultural and ideological shift, wherein "consumer pleasure and indulgence rather than…work" were figured "as the road to happiness."[55] The Protestant work ethic, central to the initial settlement of the United States and subsequent

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[51] Brooks, 503.

[52] Brooks, 504.

[53] Brooks, 504.

[54] Brooks, 464.

[55] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 4.

industrialization, depreciated in value, at least for middle-class women, replaced by an injunction to produce through desire and consumption. In *Land of Desire* (1993), William Leach argues that one of the "cardinal" projects of the new consumer culture was the "democratization of desire," the production of "a new consumer consciousness" by "the diffusion of 'desire' throughout the entire population, not just through the 'elite.'"[56] Early theorists of advertising saw it as their task to open up "the imagination and emotion to desire," in the words of Emily Fogg Mead (author of *The Place of Advertising in Modern Business* [1901] and Margaret Mead's mother).[57] In support of these ends, "from 1880 onward, a commercial aesthetic of desire and longing took shape," an aesthetic undoubtedly linked to the cultural ascent of a sexed-up naturalism, sensuous impressionism, and libidinous New Woman figure through critics like Huneker and commercial women's magazines like *Harper's Bazar*.[58] With his 1909 Clark Lectures, which made Freud an instant celebrity in the United States, advertisers absorbed libido theory as a structured way of thinking about desire as an endless human resource, one that could be stimulated and manipulated by appeals to the unconscious.[59]

As Douglas and Leach argue, this cultural embrace of desire required the softening of older Protestant values in order to take root. Pioneers of consumer culture, like John Wanamaker, were active in developing a more liberal, urban American Protestantism, which was less dogmatic and more encouraging of consumer pleasure than Calvinism. This modernized Protestantism was "far

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[56] Leach, *Land of Desire*, 37.

[57] Quoted in Leach, 37.

[58] Leach, 9.

[59] Freud's placement of "sex, sexual pleasure, and sexuality…at the epicenter of" the self "resonated with the quest for authenticity that was at the epicenter of the nascent and intensive consumer culture." See Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 8–9. Frederick Pierce's *Our Unconscious Mind and How To Use It* presents an interesting example of advertising's absorption of Freudian libido. In it, he advocates advertising take seriously Freud's insight that "an acquisitive complex already existing at the Unconscious level." This libido's flexibility allows advertisers to tap into "primitive impulse[s]" to sell modern products, overcoming "cultural check[s]" on consumption." Frederick Pierce, "The New Psychology in Advertising and Selling" in *Our Unconscious Mind and How To Use It* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1922), 283.

more compatible with a commercial economy than was Calvinism, which armed the self against the seductions of secular culture and alerted it to the dangers of spiritual decline and weakness."[60] Ann Douglas points out that it was largely *women*'s desires, and, I would add, women's reconceptualization as desiring beings (in contrast to her prior coding as sexually passionless), that fueled consumer culture and the concomitant reshaping of American Protestantism.[61] Douglas' study attributes "the vitiation of Calvinist theology" to "a group of proto-feminist white middle-class women" who found "compensatory power" in their emerging status as the economy's primary consumers.[62] As advertising as an institution congealed at the end of the century, "women would operate as the subconscious of capitalist culture" which advertisers, "as ready as Freud" to explore the mechanisms of women's desire and erotic unconscious, "must tap."[63] The Protestant church, struggling with declining numbers and trying to cater to the shifting norms of its largely female laity, made itself amenable to women's nascent role as consumer and pleasure-seeker. This materially changed the intimate roles socially sanctioned by middle-class white women, not least the role of single widows, the subject of many Jewett and Wilkins Freeman stories.[64]

High Strung or Home Spun

Foregrounding spinster regionalism's initial reception in terms of a politics of anachronistic puritan celibacy shows how the genre, while minute, was not naive, engaging with many of the same

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[60] Leach, *Land of Desire*, 195.

[61] On the earlier cultural construction of New England white women as asexual, see Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (1978): 219–236.

[62] Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, xi.

[63] Douglas, 67.

[64] Douglas notes that colonial New England afforded widows a uniquely "powerful force in her community," the widow constituting a special order in the Protestant Church. Many widows never remarried, in part because they "had greater options for full and busy single lives" than their male counterparts, or their nineteenth-century offspring, "conventionally viewed as pitiful charity cases" or as socially redundant. Douglas, 51.

concerns around national development, consumption, and degeneracy as did naturalism. This is not to say that spinster regionalism was simply an early form of naturalism, its spinsters continuous with naturalism's sensual, if often neurotic, New Women. Walter Benn Michaels sees the lust undergirding naturalist spendthrifts like Trina McTeague, Sister Carrie, or the narrator of Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper" as part of the genre's "radical acceptance of a logic of consumption."[65] That is, even as some naturalists (e.g. Gilman) critiqued mass consumerism, their fictions are structured by endless cycles of desire and consumption, often embracing consumer power as a kind of agency.[66] Some critics read the New England nun in similar terms. For Monika Elbert, Louisa mirrors the "insatiable woman consumer," her investment in ordinary domestic routines signaling a "displacemen[t] of desire" from proper, allosexual outlets onto "useless knick-knacks."[67] "One reason not to have let Freeman into the ranks of Naturalist writers," she writes, is that critics have tended to "ignore or deny the sexual impulses of her characters," primarily because "fetishism was not the female's province or prerogative."[68]

For Jennifer Fleissner, Louisa Ellis represents the late nineteenth-century homemaker, encountering a new regime of scientific housekeeping, promoted in no small part by Gilman, and an associated range of consumer domestic goods, that signaled "an extension of proto-Taylorist principles of industrial organization to private life."[69] The nun dedicates her life to keeping her home

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[65] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 17.

[66] In a compelling reading of Gilman's aspiration to revitalize women's (re)productive power, Michaels argues that she nonetheless embraces the power of consumption as a kind of (re)productive power in and of itself. As we have seen in her comment on Wilkins Freeman's fiction above, her feminism is marked by what Michaels calls "a kind of agrarian dread." He elaborates,"the city…makes production bearable because it makes production of consumption possible…Without consumption, no production; without the market, no power." Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 17.

[67] Monika M. Elbert, "The Displacement of Desire: Consumerism and Fetishism in Mary Wilkins Freeman's Fiction," *Legacy* 19, no. 2 (2002): 192.

[68] Elbert, "The Displacement of Desire," 199.

[69] Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10.

in order, a task that is all-consuming because the project of rational organization can never quite be completed: "every attempt at a more perfect order leads inexorably to order's failure (and thus to a repetition of the attempt)."[70] Fleissner's version of the nun is obsessive compulsive, like the insatiable consumer, driven by endless desire, albeit a desire never quite satisfied, for the "desire for an absolute triumph over nature's chaos—the housekeeper's, and Gilman's, obsessional ideal"—was always just out of reach.[71] Read as neurotic, "what might otherwise seem two very different fin-de-siècle feminine types"—the spinster who is "driven by repression and compulsion," and the libidinal "*ingenue*, unable to resist her impulses and desires"—come to "merge into one another," representing an "emergent modern femininity" grappling with nascent Taylorist disciplinary regimes.[72]

Compelling as these interpretations are in drawing out the continuity between spinster regionalism and naturalism, positing an identity between the New England nun and modern female consumer fails to appreciate their distinct social tenses and appetitive economies, the former a backward figure of underconsumption, the latter a futural figure of (over)consumption. To this end, Gilman herself considered Wilkins Freeman's characters to embody backward domesticity, *cut off from* "the healthy movement of social progress" of scientific housekeeping.[73] The women of Wilkins Freeman's stories are constantly engaged in domestic industry, quilting, dressmaking, and subsistence gardening. Their households are not run rationally, at least not by Gilman's standards; rather, they represent an obsolete household economy rooted in what Ann Douglas calls the "Age of Homespun," a mode of handicraft domesticity superseded by the rise of commercial industry and the rationalization of the middle-class woman, which "by the time of the Civil War…was common

[70] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 10.

[71] Fleissner, 122.

[72] Fleissner, 25–6.

[73] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home, Its Work and Influence* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), 217.

only in certain undeveloped parts of New England and in the western settlements."[74] In the "Age of Homespun," buying and selling for the household was rare, but when it occurred, it operated through barter, rather than through a modern money economy.[75] Douglas contrasts this "more or less self-sufficient" Northeast household, which was largely closed in its circulation of goods and expenditures, with a commercialized version of late nineteenth-century femininity oriented to consumption.[76] In the span of a single lifetime, Douglas writes, "domesticity itself [was] altered beyond recognition," the status of the "matron of the house" shifting "from producer to consumer."[77]

Wilkins Freeman emphasizes this stubborn domestic self-sufficiency in stories like "A Gala Dress," "A Kitchen Colonel," "Louisa," "Amanda and Love," and "A New England Nun," all stories collected together in Wilkins Freeman's *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (1891). In each story, the protagonists make do with an austere kind of self-subsistence, rather than purchasing goods of external, industrial manufacture. Wilkins Freeman emphasizes this point in her opening description of Louisa Ellis' domestic routines:

> [Louisa Ellis] had been peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window all afternoon. Now she quilted her needle carefully into her work, which she folded precisely… Then she went into the garden with a little blue crockery bowl, to pick some currants for her tea. After the currants were picked she sat on the back door-step and stemmed them, collecting the stems carefully in her apron, and afterwards throwing them into the hen-coop. She looked sharply at the grass beside the step to see if any had fallen there. Louisa was slow and still in her movements; it took her a long time to prepare her tea.[78]

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[74] Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*, 51.

[75] This surfaces within the stories themselves. Jewett's Mrs. Todd, for example, trades her herbal remedies for goods rather than currency, while Sally, the protagonist of Wilkins Freeman's "A Humble Romance," leaves her station as a domestic servant to marry a tin peddler, an early nineteenth-century occupation that involved going door to door bartering tin products for other goods, which he later sold for money in urban centers.

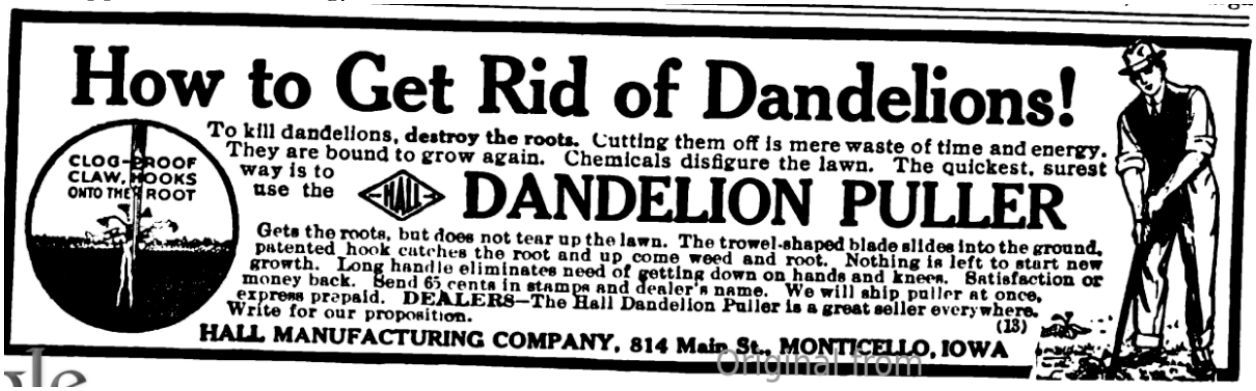
[76] Douglas, 51.

[77] Douglas, 49–50.

[78] Wilkins Freeman, *New England Nun*, 1–2.

Similarly, the loveless spinster Amanda of "Amanda and Love" is constantly at work on "[homey]" handicraft ("quilts and braided rugs and rag carpets"), the sale of which supports her and her sister, Love, who's romantic desires constantly interrupt her output of crochet and finery.[79] The matriarch of "A Kitchen Colonel," meanwhile, sends her husband out every day to painstakingly pick dandelions, a staple of their diet. Concurrently, *Country Life in America*, in which Wilkins Freeman's writing appeared, ran ads for scientifically formulated pesticides and dandelion pullers, embodying the conjunction between industrial manufacture and consumer homemaking (Figure 2.1). Across stories, homes operate through largely closed economies (the stems from the currants feed the chickens that supply the food) supported by extreme thrift and energy "concentrated into…conserving."[80]

Figure 2.1: Advertisement for an industrially manufactured dandelion uprooter promising to save "waste[s] of time and energy."[81]



This process of conservation is slow, laborious, and counterproductive, which, for an efficiency-minded reformer like Gilman, was backward and wasteful, anti-feminist insofar as it was self-imprisoning. Other readers and critics likewise contrasted spinster's narrow domestic-cum-libidinal economy with the New Woman. In an 1899 review of Wilkins Freeman's stories, critic

[79] Wilkins Freeman, 288.

[80] Wilkins Freeman, 203.

[81] *Country Life in America* (1 July 1912): 59.

Mary E. Wardwell bemoans the centrality of outmoded femininity to her fiction: "Patience and endurance, which in the struggling days of the colonies two centuries ago were noble qualities, reappear again and again in forlorn old maids and long-suffering wives."[82] She bemoans Wilkins Freeman's failure to even acknowledge the New Woman, who was replacing this older, stilted, celibate femininity:

> We have sometimes been inclined to deplore her [the New Woman's] entrance on the scene, but after a course of these depressing village experiences no one can doubt that her mission is heaven-born. To the remotest nook of farthest Vermont and New Hampshire she will penetrate with her clubs and her fashion-books and her scientific housekeeping. There will be no more old maids in many-times turned gowns, living alone with a cat and a poor little memory of some faithless swain…[It would be] most interesting if Miss Wilkins would take us back amongst some of her plain-song people after they have been stirred by the broad and vivifying influences of the time.[83]

What is disturbing about Wilkins Freeman's nuns to contemporary feminist writers like Gilman and Wardwell is the nun's apparently willful imprisonment within domestic space at a moment when the New Woman, like the protagonist of the "Yellow Wallpaper," was clamoring to get out of her patriarchally imposed confinement.

Like in the British context, the New Woman could represent an energized, because erotically de-repressed, version of femininity. Sexual reform feminist Alice Bunker Stockham, for example, conjures the consequences of women's suppressed desires in *The Lover's World: A Wheel of Life* (1903):

> To-day a brilliant young lady is consigned to the tender mercies of a hospital for the insane, who for four years had carried deep down in her heart a passion for a young man whose acquaintance and association had simply been the manifestation of friendship. To-morrow a sweet, sad-eyed woman will lose the hectic flush on her cheek and her friends will listen to the earth falling on her coffin, her heart stilled by unexpressed emotion.[84]

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[82] Quoted in Reichardt, "Mary Wilkins Freeman," 81.

[83] Quoted in Reichardt, 82.

[84] Alice B. Stockham, *The Lover's World: A Wheel of Life* (Chicago: Stockham, 1903), 37.

In contrast to the repressed celibate woman, Stockham writes, "the new girl that is to be the new woman" will not follow tradition that says she must "make a pretense of indifference, no matter how ardent her affection," instead "dar[ing] honestly to express the love that is uppermost."[85] Stockham believes this is inevitable in the "evolution of woman," because—anticipating Freud—"love is automatic and by its very nature a perpetual motor."[86]

That readers contrasted, rather than identified, the New England nun with the New Woman likely owes to the fact that this contrast was a literal feature of how Wilkins Freeman and Jewett's stories appeared in publications like *Harper's Bazar*, vehicles of burgeoning female consumer power. *Harper's* recognized the consumer value of the so-called New Women, who was educated, libidinally autonomous, often with an independent income, and leading an active life requiring a variety of accessories. This women's magazine of "Fashion, Pleasure, and Instruction" hailed the New Woman as a version of femininity given agency through her role as a consumer.[87] There was a political edge to this stance, given that the New Woman was often caricatured as frumpy by conservative commentators. *Harper's* journalist Chrstine Turhune Herrick makes this point explicitly in a sponsored 1895 article, "The New Woman's Outing Dress" (which, unannounced, turns out to be

[85] Stockham, *Lover's World*, 39.

[86] Stockham, 39.

[87] This is not to say that every person who would have identified with or been identified as a New Woman was invested in consumerism. Certainly Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx were not, at least not uncritically. As Stroup argues, the "New Woman" functioned in the periodical press as "an aggregate term for all the various choices women were making outside of the historical place society provided for them," i.e. the mid-century Victorian feminine ideals of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity." In the United States especially, this included women embracing their power as independent consumers. Rachel Stroup, "American Womanhood and the New Woman: A Rhetorical Consideration of the Development and Circulation of Female Stereotypes, 1890-1920," *Young Scholars in Writing* 16 (2019): 28. On the New Woman's association in American literary culture with impulsive desire, consumerism, and faddishness, see Fleissner, "A Mania for the Moment: Fadmongering and Feminism in Henry James" and "The New Woman and the Old Man: Sentimentality and 'Drift' in Dreiser and Wharton," in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*.

an advertisement for "Fibre Chamois," a brand of interlining catering to the New Woman's active lifestyle):

> Her fondness for out-door sports has not robbed her of her taste for pretty frocks. She sees no reason why she should be a frump because she loves the open, and she shows her sound good sense in nothing more than in the way in which she makes her *chic* gowns serviceable as well as stunning. When she goes sailing she puts a serviceable interlining in the skirt of her smart yachting frock, because she does not wish to be a limp horror the rest of the trip if a big wave should happen to break at close quarters.[88]

Its advertising and fashion articles addressed themselves to this new, freer, more active and independent mold of white middle-class femininity. In a later *Harper's* article, Edward Stanford Martin would go so far as to metaphorize the New Woman's social reformism as a *refashioning* of, a "letting out" the "tucks" in, conventions and institutions; the New Woman's preference for looser garments (e.g. bloomers) stands in for her desire for freer social and intimate conventions.[89]

The New England nun stories stand out from their New Womanish surroundings in several ways. First, iconographically, the sketches of plain spinsters adorning these stories cut stark figures against the images of fashionable Gibson Girls which make up the covers and most of the in-text graphics (Figure 2.2). Figure 2.3 shows that these spinsters were rendered austere, confined (the darkness of their hovel often underscored by an illuminated window), and disciplined/disciplinary ("Suddenly He Found Himself Being Ignominiously Spanked"). The inclusion of spinning wheels in magazine illustrations (e.g. "Warm For This Time of Year") evoke the homespun etymology of the term "spinster." Second, the nun's characteristic asceticism sat in tension with the magazine's commercial ethos. Wilkins Freeman's, "A Gala Dress," for example, concerns two spinster sisters

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[88] Christine Terhune Herrick, "The New Woman's Outing Dress," *Harper's Bazar* (August 31, 1895): 711.

[89] He continues, "These new-fashioned girls that are just about to be—can our old-fashioned world be altered sufficiently to suit them? Can the venerable institution of marriage have enough tucks let out in it to be a loose enough garment for their audacious requirements?" Edward S. Martin, "The Unchanging Girl," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (1 December 1913): 82.

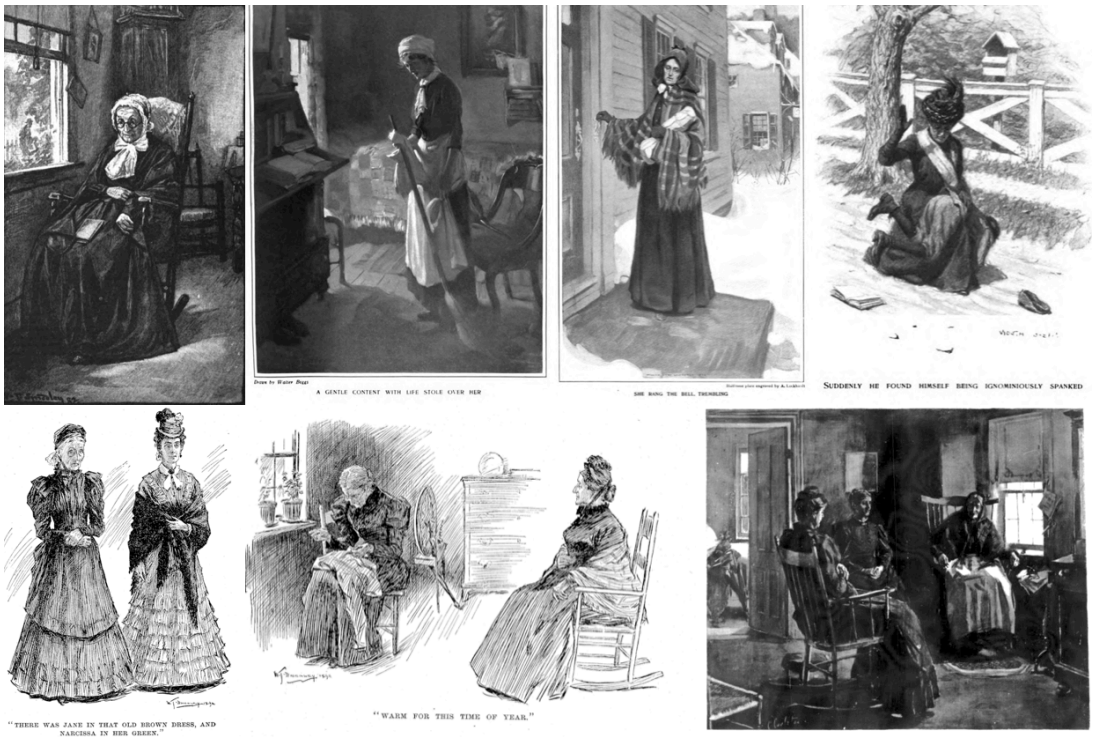
who take turns appearing in public so as to hide the fact they only have one fine, albeit old-fashioned, dress between them, a fact they disguise by appending a different homespun frill to the dress each time one wears it out. Immediately preceding this story is a reproduction of a fantasy painting by F. S. Church of a college-educated New Woman in fine regalia surrounded by tigers, which, along with the cover image of an artist's model draped in a sensuous gown and images of the season's fashions (Figure 2.4), present a version of feminine vigor predicated on fashionable consumption. Similarly, the Wilkins Freeman story about a "very plain" celibate schoolteacher who leads a plotless life until she is stricken with paralysis and dies is preceded with an advertisement for a women's bicycle (Figure 2.5), an accessory strongly associated with the New Woman.[90] The effect of these juxtapositions is a contrast between underconsumption and consumption, but more generally, between the Nun's paralysis and the New Woman's mobility.[91]

[90] Mary Wilkins Freeman, "The School-Teacher: A Miniature Story," *Harper's Bazar* 28, no. 14 (6 April 1895): 262.

[91] A similar phenomenon occurs with Jewett's stories. Her story "Sister Peacham's Turn" (1902) about a widowed woman attempting to uplift her also widowed sister who is "dreadfully set," "expecting to be always done for," "tied up from neuralgia," and made lonely by her "inclin[ation] by nature toward the economies and excuses of life," is bound together in an issue of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* with an article on "Ancient Peoples of the Petrified Forest" and a poem titled "The Changeless People." This set of texts, which highlights nun's evolutionary paralysis, contrasts with articles at the beginning of the issue by Spencerian philosopher John Fiske and economist Carl Snyder on the creative lifeforces that run Darwinian evolution and capitalist growth respectively. Sarah Orne Jewett, "Sister Peachum's Turn," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 105 (1 June 1902): 902–906.

Figures 2.2 a–b: The Gibson Girl as New Woman.[92]

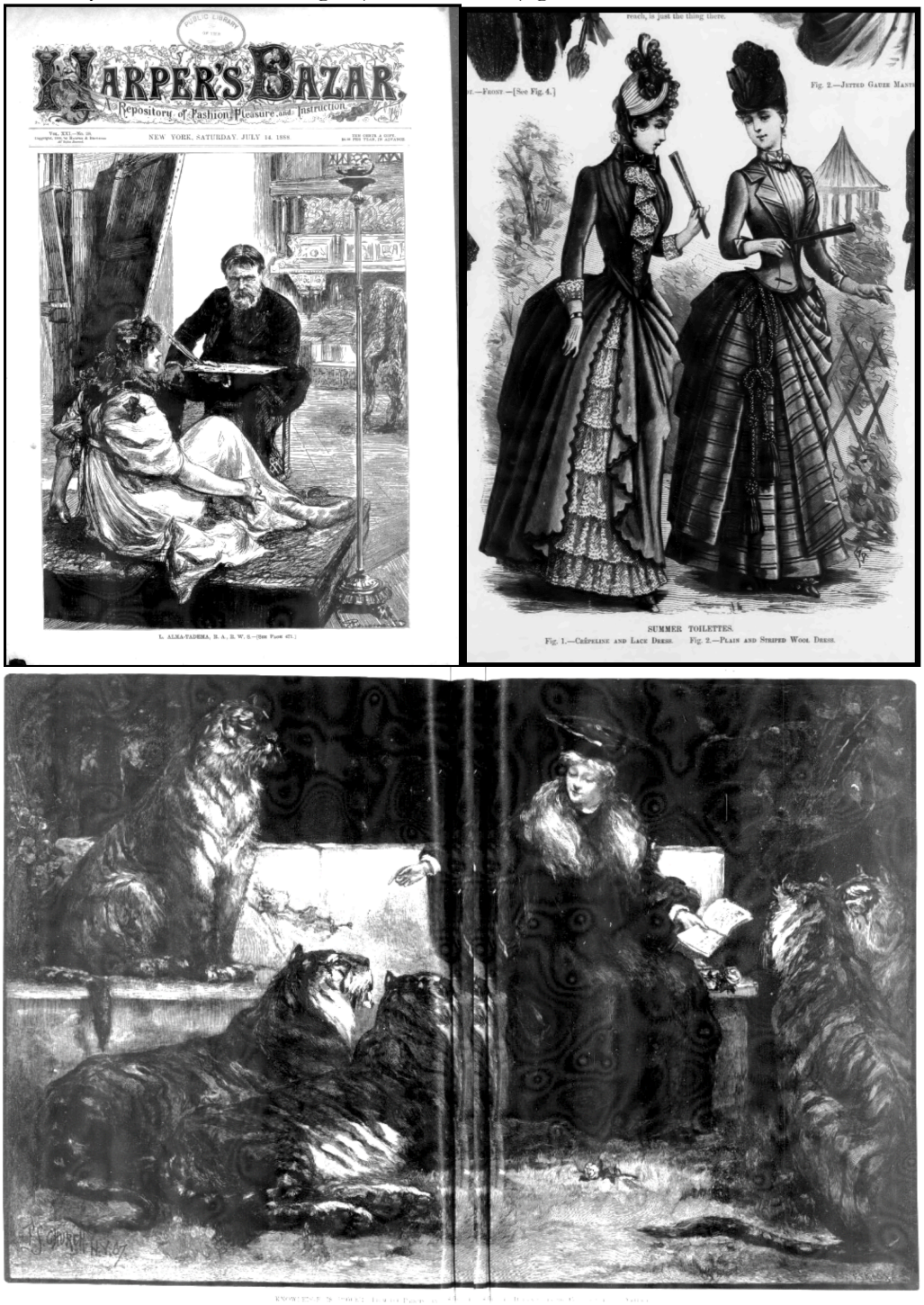
Figures 2.3 a-g: Illustrated spinsters accompanying the stories of Jewett and Wilkins Freeman in periodicals.[93]



[92] "The Gibson Girl as the 'New Woman,'" *Library of Congress*, accessed June 6, 2023, https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/the-gibson-girl-as-the-new-woman.html.

[93] Details from Sarah Orne Jewett, "Waiting," *Our Continent* 1 (Aprile 26, 1882): 172; Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "Criss-Cross," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 129 (August 1, 1914): 366; Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Reign of the Doll," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 108 (December 1, 1903): 291; Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Cock of the Walk," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 124 (December 1, 1911): 73; Mary E. Wilkins, "Waiting," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (December 1, 1896): 309; Sarah Orne Jewett, "New-Year Guests," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 29 (January 11, 1896): 29.

Figures 2.4 a–c: The New Women context surrounding Wilkins Freeman's "A Gala Dress," about two spinsters only able to afford a single (unfashionable) gown between them.[94]



[94] *Harper's Bazar* 21, no. 28 (14 July 1888): cover, 465, 468–9.

Figure 2.5: *Harper's* advertising targeting the New Woman bicyclist, opening the issue featuring Wilkins Freeman's "The School-Teacher: A Miniature Story."[95]

[95] *Harper's Bazar* 28, no. 14 (6 April 1895): n.p.

Figure 2.6: Julius L. Stewart's "Full Speed" framing Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" in Harper's Bazar.[96]

In fact, this is a point suggested by the art accompanying "The New England Nun"'s original publication in *Harper's Bazar*, Julius L. Stewart's 1886 painting, "Full Speed" (Figure 2.6). The image shows a fashionable, urbane woman steering a steam-yacht, which at once evokes the modern New Woman charting her own course forward at "full speed," as well as Cather's image of the touristic cosmopolites taking a river cruise into rural New England. That Stewart, whom the accompanying

[96] *Harper's Bazar* 28, no. 14 (7 May 1887): 332—3.

Harper's caption insists is "a modern," was invested in "speed" places him within an early modernist tradition fascinated by drives.[97] The accompanying caption, which refers to this as a "seductive picture," underscores that the drive here is not merely literal, but also erotic.[98] The focus on women's drive contrasts with Louisa Ellis and the description of energetic "subsidence" that opens "The New England Nun": "There seemed to be over everything a gentle stir arising for the mere sake of subsidence," a diminution of intensity, which also brings to mind the nun's focus on economic "subsistence" with which we have just been dealing.[99]

The contrasts that framed spinster regionalism allow us to think more definitely about the relationship between the New England nun's closed domestic and erotic economies. Instead of reading Louisa Ellis' celibate self-confinement as obsessive compulsiveness, I see what Scott Herring, in a study on hoarding discourse in the twentieth-century United States, calls "material deviance," a kind of "social deviance attach[ing] not only to interpersonal behaviors but also to material ones."[100] The New England nun's disconcerting celibacy is inextricable from her contented self-confinement to a world of cumbersome domestic chores and small pleasures. The little pleasures Louisa takes in making tea, stitching, and distilling floral essences from her garden is enough for her, so she is never wracked with desire, never driven to take what Lauren Berlant calls the "leap of faith to seek the end of a world on behalf of a fantasy."[101] Louisa's constancy, her lack of desire for outside others and things, is alarming in part because her relationship to material goods does nothing to contribute to consumption or a broader economy. I want to suggest that, like

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[97] "Full Speed," *Harper's Bazar* 20, no. 19 (7 May 1887): 333.

[98] "Full Speed," 333.

[99] Wilkins Freeman, *New England Nun*, 1.

[100] Scott Herring, *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 7.

[101] Lauren Berlant, "A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages." *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 684.

Herring's twentieth-century hoarders, the New England nun was a "freakish spectacle of underconsumption—the material indecency of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman terms *failed consumers* who disrupt standard modes of purchase, ownership, and removal" of goods.[102] Although the nun and the hoarder are in some ways antithetical (the hoarder, Herring admits, more obviously signifies overconsumption and hyper-accumulation), both share an impulse to conserve that cuts against the plasticity and expansiveness of desire required by the era's democratization of desire.

Putting this in formal Freudian terms, *Harper's* contrasts return us to Laplanche's contrast (discussed in the Introduction, figure i.i) between a drive-based, libidinal energetic economy and a driveless, homeostatic energetic economy. The former is limit-transgressing, the latter, limit-conserving. The New England nun pointedly lacks the former's enlarged kind of desiring that is fantasmatic, object fungible, and self-amplifying, instead remaining hemmed in by limits. Importantly for this chapter, Laplanche, as well as Freud, call this economy of desire "atavistic," a feature of animal survival.[103] This chimes with critics' racial mapping of celibacy onto 'primitive' (non-white) sexuality, which is rigid in its objects and oriented to release of energy rather than its excitation. It aims at a conservation of energy rather than its expenditure. Rather than interpret Louisa's painstaking domesticity as an erotophobic defense against the disorder of desire, I instead read the psychodynamics of the story in terms of a perverse (to modern audiences) orientation to energetic "subsidence" and the "simple, mild pleasure" of discharge.[104] Throughout "A New England Nun," Wilkins Freeman emphasizes "stillness" (what Laplanche calls homeostasis) as Louisa's primary orientation, down to the "little still…she used to occupy herself pleasantly…with distilling the sweet and aromatic essences from roses and peppermint and spearmint"—a still that

[102] Herring, *Hoarders*, 14–5.

[103] Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual* , 11.

[104] Wilkins Freeman, *New England Nun*, 1, 9.

she knows she will have to surrender upon taking up marital life, but which is also metaphoric of the very regionalism, which distills the small lives of fading figures, in which it appears.[105]

Wilkins Freeman explicitly contrasts these two types of erotic economies within her stories (e.g. Louisa Nun/Lily Dyer, Amanda/Love). Take, for example, the differing economies of aged spinster Sylvia Crane and young ingenue Rose Berry in the 1894 novel *Pembroke*. Sylvia Crane, like Louisa Ellis, is one of the many characters in the New England regionalist oeuvre who has ended up a spinster through an extremely long deferral of marriage. She carries on a rudderless, decades-long courtship that goes nowhere.[106] In that time, "she had come, in the singleness of her heart, to regard herself in the light of a species of coin to be expended wholly for the happiness and interest of one man."[107] Sylvia's erotic economy lacks two features of drive sexuality: its tendency toward energetic escalation (she is instead marked by an "innocent conservatism") and object flexibility.[108] The "species of coin" that is Sylvia's affections is not one belonging to a modern money economy. It has value in relationship to only one object, a non-interchangeability (of both currency and good) that creates the conditions for her spinsterhood. Rose, the novel's young ingenue, provides a foil to Sylvia. Her name suggests her ever-blooming libido. Even walking, for her, is almost orgasmic: "She panted softly between red swelling lips as she walked; pulses beat in her crimson cheeks. Her slender figure yielded to the wind as to a lover."[109] Her desires are oriented to fantasy and affect rather than the particularity of its object(s): "Rose, in the heart of New England, bred after the precepts of

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[105] Wilkins Freeman, 9.

[106] Their courtship only reaches consummation when, in the novel's sentimental ending, her suitor sees her carried off to the poor-house, from which he saves her through marriage, a gesture that, while sentimental, is still rooted in material practicality rather than any escalation of desire or need of the other.

[107] Mary Wilkins Freeman, *Pembroke* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1894), 101.

[108] Wilkins Freeman, 22.

[109] Wilkins Freeman, 79.

orthodoxy, was a pagan, and she worshipped Love himself. Barney was simply the statue that represented the divinity; another might have done as well had the sculpture been as fine."[110] The love object (Barney) is interchangeable here ("another might have done as well"), insofar as he is merely an occasion through which to encounter the excitement of romantic desire. Her libidinal economy works like a money economy, in which money (desire) can purchase equally well any range of objects, its point often being the fantasies and feelings attached to the object rather than the object itself.

Libidinal Anchorites

This distinction between drive and drivelessness allows us to revisit the vexed politics of regionalism. Sandra Zagarell's interpretation of the contrast between "Full Speed" and "A New England Nun" is typical of regionalist criticism that, since the 1990s, has pushed back on its feminist and queer reclamation:

> Its pairing with "Full Speed" may have cast "A New England Nun" as the medium of a kind of tourism that allowed readers to participate vicariously in the life of a rural New England woman, with Louisa's old-fashionedness providing temporary respite from the "fashion, pleasure, and instruction" to which the *Bazar*'s banner proclaimed its devotion. Perhaps, on the other hand, readers in 1887 saw Louisa more negatively, as the embodiment of provincial privations from which they were happily exempt.[111]

Work by Amy Kaplan and Richard Brodhead especially has constructed regionalism as a mode of literary tourism, presenting a pastoral plane onto which urban readers could project their desires:

> Regionalism performs a kind of literary tourism in a period that saw the tourist abroad and at home as a growing middle-class phenomenon…Regionalists share with tourists and anthropologists the perspective of the modern urban outsider who projects onto the native a pristine authentic space immune to historical changes

[110] Wilkins Freeman, 132.

[111] Sandra Zagarell, Introduction to *A New England Nun, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), xxiii.

> shaping their own lives. If historical novels invent pasts, regionalists invent places as allegories of desire generated in urban centers.[112]

Brodhead is more blunt: "Regionalism's heyday was in the years of rapid corporate-capitalist industrial development in America, with its reinsertion of agrarian and artisanal orders into a new web of national market relations."[113]

These readings align the regionalist narrator with the urban reader, and construct regionalist fiction as perfectly symmetrical with urban readerly desire, appealing to the commercial imperialism of the Gilded Age elite, who "made other *ways of life* the objects of their admiration and desire, objects which they then felt free to annex."[114] Taking Jewett's fiction as representative, Brodhead argues regionalism turns locality into a fungible good ("Dunnet Landing is here offered as a place interchangeable with other places and possessable through print").[115] This argument requires a series of aesthetic claims about spinster regionalism I want to challenge. The first is that regionalist texts are invested in transparency, presenting locality in such a way that it "offers itself to visitors remarkably freely."[116] The second is that spinster regionalism's daintiness implies pastoral nostalgia: "Jewett's Maine becomes a place healed of the alienations that prevail in the world of social mobility and mass-produced commodities, and a place to which cityfolk can resort to find health."[117] Finally, in addition to embodying urban therapeutic culture, Brodhead argues that spinster regionalism was wholly syncretic with its commercial periodical contexts, forming a "mutually supportive par[t] of a

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[112] Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire," in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 252.

[113] Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 120.

[114] Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 133.

[115] Brodhead, 148.

[116] Brodhead, 147.

[117] Brodhead, 148.

concerted textual program."[118] Like their commercial surrounds, Brodhead argues that spinster regionalism arouses the consumer's acquisitive drive: "Regionalism can be guessed to have ministered especially effectively to the imagination of acquisition…play[ing] into a drive to appropriate experience vicariously."[119]

What I propose in this final section is that spinster regionalism's narrow, highly delimited form and style islanded these stories from their seductive commercial surrounds, producing a dynamic in which the stories, like their subjects, shut themselves away from readerly desires, rather than forming a "mutually supportive" union with them. I have highlighted the politics of celibacy surrounding these stories to underscore their function not merely as pastoral enticements of urban desire, their construction of places that have been far from "healed" of modern alienation. If they lack the "alienations that prevail in the world of social mobility," they are preoccupied instead with the estrangements of isolated and libidinally *im*mobile anchorites, features of rural New England which made the stories ugly and, to a reader like Hartt, not yet ready for tourism. This observation ekes out a space to think more complexly about regionalism's deployment of figures of underconsumption, paired with an aesthetic of reticence, withdrawal, and narrowness, rather than, per Brodhead, imputing onto these texts an aesthetic of self-availing transparency.

Early reviewers related the style of spinster regionalism to its chaste subjects. A reviewer of *A New Enland Nun* (1891) "confess[es] to a feeling of reluctance in discussing personal matters relating to the writers of these tales": the style of writing evidences "a retirement of the person behind the work" as if behind a bit of "blotting paper," which makes this reviewer cautious "not [to] disturb the modest quiet which we feel sure enshrines the writer."[120] The power of these stories, this

[118] Brodhead, 131.

[119] Brodhead, 134.

[120] Macdonnell, "Mary E. Wilkins," 102.

reviewer continues, is not "that deep undercurrent of passionate feeling born in the memories of oppression and struggle," but a "reserve power might say more than it does."[121] This reserve takes the form of turning away from readerly desire: "There is about these…little volumes a certain touch of a fine and delicate soul which *turns curiosity away, a little-shame faced*… [Wilkins Freeman] rare[ly] touche[s] the ghastly or horrible."[122] The reviewer likens the writing to Jean François Millet's painting, Wilkins Freeman rendering "the surroundings in her stories with much care and much felicity, and she knows how wisely to omit," depicting her subjects with "vague detail" and "oblique stroke."[123] Her art is one of omission, veiling her subjects, rather than naturalistically (recalling Norris) *prying, peeping, peering* through their habits.[124] To these early readers, the style is not neurotic or proto-modernist, but shy, even prudish, in the manner of an older domestic realism.

There is an important formal element to the reviewer's comments on Wilkins Freeman's style, one which foregrounds spinster regionalism's almost exclusive association with the short story. Her stories, with Jewett's, were considered high water marks of the American short story, a form whose development is inextricable from regionalism (beginning with Washington Irving, Harriet Beacher Stowe, and Bret Harte). Stylistically, regionalism's narrow subjects and methods, its traffic in small sketches and incidents, were seen as perfect vehicles for the short story's limited narrative economy. Jewett, but Wilkins Freeman especially, wrote very short stories, sometimes even "miniature" stories

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[121] Macdonnell, "Mary E. Wilkins," 103.

[122] Macdonnell, 102, emphasis added.

[123] Macdonnell, 103, emphasis added.

[124] This was a common reaction to her writing in the 1890s. An 1897 reviewer concurred, writing that "the fundamental New Englandism of Miss Wilkins transpires in her style, especially in the fineness of prudery that mark that region… She will say…'limbs,' when she refers most unambiguously to 'legs.' The words 'figure,' 'development,' and 'shoulders,' are the final limits of physical description." Chelifer, "New England of Miss Wilkins," 318. Writing in 1919, Frederick Pierce likewise distinguishes the "genial and humorous oddities" rendered by Wilkins Freeman from the "neurotic horrors" of New England rendered in psychological terms by Edith Wharton, Amy Lowell, and others. Frederick E. Pierce, "Nervous New England," *The North American Review* 210, no. 764 (July 1919): 81.

taking up less than a single column of a single periodical page (e.g. Wilkins Freeman's 1895 "The School-Teacher: A Miniature Story"). An unsigned 1891 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "New England and the Short Story," exactly makes this point:

> There are two periods in the life of a country when the short story is peculiarly adapted to display the characteristics of the people: the first is when the country is virgin soil for the novelist; the second is when the soil, in agricultural phrase, is worn out. At the present time, the South, and more particularly the Southwest, illustrates the former of the two periods. New England the latter… There is a strong inclination under [the latter] conditions, to use a small canvas and take great pains with minute details.[125]

Virginity and impotence, according to this reviewer, prove ironically fertile ground for the short story because they afford "taking great pains with minute details" rather than the bigger (more developed) plots of the urban novel. The short story here is compatible with celibacy because both involve tightly circumscribed economies. The critic singles out Wilkins Freeman's *New England Nun and Other Stories* as exemplary of this mode of the short story. Her style is marked by exceptionally "short, economical sentences."[126] The "compression of these stories," the reviewer continues,

> is remarkable, and almost unique in our literature, and it is gained…by holding steadily before the mind the central, vital idea, to the exclusion of all by-thoughts, however interesting they may be. Hence it happens frequently that the reader, though left satisfied on the main issue, is piqued by the refusal of the storyteller to meet his natural curiosity on other points.[127]

Whereas critics who take Wilkins Freeman's work as naturalism see the stories, like naturalism more generally, "proliferating more and more details, with the result that it remains stuck at the level of *description*," this was far from how contemporary reviewers, or myself, understand them.[128] Instead, they are legible in terms of an economy that turns away readerly desire, asking the reader to be

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[125] "New England in the Short Story," *Atlantic Monthly* 67 (1 January 1891): 845.

[126] "New England in the Short Story," 847.

[127] "New England in the Short Story," 847.

[128] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 10.

satisfied with minimal plots and characters whose dark interior lives, should they have them, remain undisclosed.

This is not the kind of seductive amplification of desire that marked what Leach calls the "commercial aesthetic of desire and longing" beginning in the 1880s, a commercial aesthetic alongside which Wilkins Freeman's stories appeared.[129] Early advertisers understood themselves to be stimulating a perpetual sense of *want* in the consumer-to-be. Fantasy served this process, opening vistas of desire beyond the limits of the consumer's life. As Katherine Fisher, an early advertising theorist, wrote in 1899, "Without imagination, no wants. Without wants, no demand to have them supplied."[130] What early critics describe happening in Wilkins Freeman's texts reverses this dynamic: although readerly desires might extend beyond the pale of the narrative, her stories nonetheless provide narrow satisfactions that "turn away" these curiosities (in contrast to the kind of obliquity that lathers them up, e.g. James' *Turn of the Screw* [1898]). These narrow satisfactions, like Louisa's, discharge desire, rather than generating surplus desire that finds it outlet in tourism or, more simply, a demand for larger narratives penetrating into hidden depths.

Jewett and Wilkins Freeman's texts stage, within them, what I am suggesting is a broader dynamic: aesthetic recessiveness turning away from readerly pleasure-cruisers. We can see this play out in Jewett's proto-short story cycle *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), which is populated by "queer, strayaway folks" who "hive away in their own houses with some strange notion or other."[131] These characters are often what one Wilkins Freeman character calls "love-cracked." Like a cold glass that has cracked under too much heat, these women (and sometimes men) lose the capacity for romantic or erotic passions after their first, often tragic, passionate affair. Like Sylvia Crane or

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[129] Leach, *Land of Desire*, 37.

[130] Quoted in Leach, 37.

[131] Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Ontario: Broadview Press, [1896] 2010), 89.

Louisa Ellis, their erotic desires are finite, their capacity for desiring limited. One such "love-cracked" person is Mrs. Todd, the narrator's long-widowed guide to the coastal Maine region of Dunnet Landing. Although reserved when it comes to autobiography, she discloses to the text's narrator that her heart had "gone out o' [her] keepin'" early in life with a brief, impossible love match.[132] That one love burned through her store of desire. She admits relief that her husband, who she married after the first affair, died so soon into their marriage, before "he ever knew what he'd had to know if we'd lived long together"—namely, that she merely "liked" her husband, and that "there's more women likes to be loved than there is of those that loves."[133]

The young female narrator, an outsider summering in Dunnet Landing, is largely sympathetic with these "nun or hermit person[s]," but traces of an urban biopolitical discourse continually surface in her narration.[134] Confronted with Mrs. Todd and her set, the narrator wonders at the "waste of human ability in this world," which strikes her as like "the thousand seeds that die" in nature rather than germinating.[135] Taking up the therapeutic language of modern reform projects, she considers the ways this "reserve force of society," individuals "grown sluggish" and "held…captive" by "a narrow set of circumstances," might be re-potentiated, if only they were transplanted to a more nourishing social world.[136] Although it is easy to conflate Jewett with her narrator and take these comments at face value, the narrator more nearly represents an acquisitive New Woman (come to write about this remote locale) challengingly encountering anachronistic

[132] Jewett, *County of the Pointed Firs*, 77.

[133] Jewett, 77.

[134] Jewett, 90.

[135] Jewett, 89, 119, 122.

[136] Jewett, 122, 123.

femininity.[137] The text stages a complicated undermining of her therapeutic longings. Much of this happens around the figure of "Poor Joanna," a "plain anchorite" and relative of Mrs. Todd's who made a "voluntary hermitage" for herself on the remote, almost inaccessible, Shell-heap Island, after being jilted by her fiancé.[138] The "anchor" in "anchorite" emphasizes the entwinement of Joanna's spatial and libidinal immobility. After her fiancé left her for another woman, Joanna "free[s]" herself from the bondage of deep attachment by "retir[ing] from the world for good."[139] Her island is a "dreadful small space to make a world of," Mrs. Todd says, but it is a world that is nonetheless self-sufficient in its detachment, and Joanna lives out her days in almost total isolation.[140] Although Joanna died many years prior, the narrator feels a strong urge to visit Shell-heap Island.

This visit forces the narrator into brief recognition that reclusion is not merely wasted human potential capable of being routed back into productive sociality, nor does Poor Joanna merely represent an antiquated kind of femininity crushed under a "narrow set of circumstances." Mrs. Todd's friend raises just this possibility: "I expect nowadays, if such a thing happened, she'd have gone out West…or up to Massachusetts and had a change, an' come home good as new. The world's bigger an' freer than it used to be."[141] Mrs. Todd rejects the notion that modernity's freedom of movement might therapeutically induce a revitalization of desire, making Joanna "good as new," a point the narrator later comprehends. Visiting Shell-heap Island, the narrator fleetingly realizes that

[137] Most literally, the narrator finds herself unable to write at Mrs. Todd's, where she has rented rooms, because the latter continually interrupts her workflow.

[138] Jewett, 102, 93.

[139] Jewett, 90.

[140] For instance, Mrs. Todd tells the narrator that Joanna turned the rushes from a swamp on the island in "beautiful mats for the floor and a thick cushion for the long bunk. She'd showed a good deal of invention." Jewett, 90, 96.

[141] Jewett, 99.

Joanna's renunciatory asociality not only cannot be therapized away, but that it constitutes an essential limit of the self:

> In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the uncompanioned hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong.[142]

Inverting the terms of race suicide, wherein puritan atomism threatens extinction, the narrator turns remoteness into the basis for an extended lineage of estranged intimacy between "our fellows of the cell": "The recluses are a sad kindred," she concludes, "but they are never commonplace…the loneliness of sorrow will forever keep alive their sad succession."[143] These sad kindred constitute a race of the wayward and untouched, bound, paradoxically, by shared isolation, a mutuality that nonetheless fails to alleviate the loneliness. Although the narrator travels to Joanna's hermitage to better understand her, she instead finds herself islanded, recognizing in herself the anchorite's boundedness that made Joanna seem so eccentric. This is a kind of "understanding" that is yet impersonal and discontinuous, that comprehends the intractable distances in even the closest intimacies, and puts off trying to close the gap.[144]

This is, however, a fleeting revelation, which soon gives way to the projective, appropriative self. The narrator's ruminations are interrupted by the trespass of "gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat," which the narrator imagines "Joanna must have heard…and must have welcomed…in spite of hopelessness."[145] The narrator, who discloses on the novel's first page that she first visited Dunnet Landing "two or three summers before in the course of a yachting cruise"

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[142] Jewett, 103.

[143] Jewett, 101.

[144] Heather Love beautifully reads this scene as a model for queer historiography more broadly: "As we try to befriend these figures from the past, we would do well to remember the infinite distances contained within even the closest friendships." Love, *Feeling Backward*, 98.

[145] Jewett, 103.

and found the spot "attaching," reimagines Joanna similarly as attaching.[146] The anchorite's challenging libidinal immobility is swept away by the pleasure-cruisers' acquisitive desire. Jewett's narrative thus absorbs the dialectical tension that in *Harper's* exists between story and its surrounds (e.g. "A New England Nun" and "Full Speed").

Yet, even as the text stages this dynamic, wherein the pleasure-cruisers' touristic gaze reinscribes the recluse into the coast's scenic pleasures and a touristic libidinal economy, *Country* finally reverses this sanguine view in its final section, "The Backward View." In this section, relating the narrator's departure from Dunnet Landing, the charming and "warm-hearted" community she has come to love recedes into a "distant figure," "mateless" and "self-possessed."[147] When she encounters a fisherman whom she has earlier befriended, she "wave[s] [her] hand a trie[s] to call to him," but his only response is a "solemn nod."[148] The coast quickly dissolves into inhuman geological time, losing its idiosyncratic feel, becoming "indistinguishable from the other towns that looked as if they were crumbled on the furzy-green stoniness of the shore."[149] Finally, "the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight."[150] Dunnet Landing itself turns into an anchorite like Joanna: "mateless," "self-possessed," "solemn," it withdraws the gaze of the onlooker looking to stay connected emotionally with what is receding from view. In the text's concluding ironic twist, the narrator is overcome with a sense of disaffiliation as she speeds back to cosmopolitan life. This is not merely a point about urban alienation. It is an anti-sentimental move, rejecting sentimentality's affective boundary crossing.

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[146] Jewett, 1.

[147] Jewett, 140.

[148] Jewett, 140.

[149] Jewett, 140.

[150] Jewett, 141.

Although insisting on intimacy's closure, this gesture does not entirely abandon relationality. Rather, the narrator finds herself, again, one of Joanna's sad kindred, in a psychic place remote and islanded, a final inversion of the pleasure-cruiser's incursion upon Joanna's hermitage. This is no comfort of the souvenir, a charge often directed at regionalist sentimentality. Instead, the text concludes with an image of region, of regionalism, characterized by investments that are intractably anchored in time and place, resisting extraction or translocation.

I want to suggest that libidinal immobility and its emphasis on conserving limits is a defining, but underappreciated, logic of Jewett and Wilkins Freeman's spinster regionalism.[151] Rather than read the periodical scene of pleasure-cruisers hovering above "A New England Nun" as that text's subordination to the urban reader's touristic gaze, I argue that this dynamic resembles the one that concludes Jewett's *Pointed Firs*, the text turning away deeper readerly desires which a naturalist or romance revivalist would have amplified.[152] This may have been why some critics complained of these texts' "New Englandism," "swaddling" their subjects and locales "in crape," avoiding "the fever and the thirst of avarice." We need not take spinster regionalism's extreme quaintness as merely a nostalgic throwback to earlier domestic realism, however. I suggest it also challenged its proto-modernist context oriented to consumption and connection. Spinster regionalism's smallness (of plot, of feeling) exposes and frustrates the magnitude of desire readers bring to bear upon them.

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[151] Underappreciated, that is, by critics who eroticize the social distances that inhere within spinster regionalism, or who posit radical empathy at the heart of regionalism, wherein the work forges "an affective connection between reader" and subject, constructing "identif[ication] with rather than distance" between the two. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 107. But for an argument on the relationship between Jewett's regionalism and ascetic philosophy, see Coby Dowdell, "Withdrawing from the Nation: Regionalist Literature as Ascetic Practice in Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Legacy* 21, no. 2 (2004): 210–228.

[152] It is important to remember that American naturalism rose to dominance as part of a larger romance revival. "Zola has been dubbed a Realist, but he is, on the contrary, the very head of the Romanticists," Norris declared. Both naturalism and the romance revival traffic in expanded erotic desiring. Lears writes of the boom in chivalric romances that replaced the popularity of domestic realism in commercial magazines, "the appeal was erotic in the strict etymological sense. That is, the emotional extremism of the Middle Ages *embodied boundless, unfulfilled desire* rather than sexuality per se." Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 161, emphasis added.

The anchorite's characteristic turning away, which, we have seen, forms a tension with acquisitive narrator in *Pointed Firs* and with the New Woman surrounds in *Harper's*, eventually marked out 1890s regionalism as both "passé" and disturbing to the naturalism that superseded it in popularity and critical esteem at the start of the twentieth century. As Donna Campbell shows in *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1895–1915,* naturalism was regionalism's "logical hei[r]," insofar as it emerged in reaction to the latter's emphasis on "negative self-denial."[153] Although American naturalism also took up pathologies of consumption, especially the New Woman's tendency to spendthrift, its discovery of "boundless, unfulfilled desire" at the heart of modern femininity was in many ways wish-fulfilling to a consumer culture for which the New England nun's finite and thrifty desires were damning.[154] Even as both archetypes could verge on pathology, it was the nun's narrow and depleted economy of desire that took on a backward social tense, incompatible with a logic of consumption and illegible in a century of compulsory erotics.

[153] Donna Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1895-1915* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), 25.

[154] Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 161.

Chapter 3

Singles Going Steady
The Short Story Collection's Celibate Affordances

Neutered Narratives, Limp Form, Celibate Collections

The short story collection is easily overlooked. Its parts are routinely excised (e.g. Henry James' celebrated "The Altar of the Dead" and "The Beast in the Jungle") without commentary on their original embeddedness within an arranged collection. The collection rarely registers within either general literary history, which privileges the novel, or short story criticism, which privileges the more highly integrated short story cycle. Ingram's touchstone *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (1971) defines the cycle as "a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit."[1] Ingram subordinates the collection to the cycle given its problematic disequilibrium. Its stories seem to turn inward from the whole, tending toward disarticulation rather than incorporation. The resulting heterogeneity makes any superordinate progression or "structurally unif[ying]...single aesthetic pattern" difficult to perceive, cycle-like collections (e.g. *The Dubliners*) notwithstanding.[2]

J. Gerald Kennedy argues that Ingram and others' "insistence on unity…has produced a restrictive and conservative theory of form."[3] Collections dismissed or neglected as insufficiently unified often abide by their own logic of arrangement, even if that logic remains relatively diaphanous and unconsolidated, the claims made by each story on the next ambient and indirect. Taking this cleft structure as a distinct aesthetic feature rather than a failing, this chapter returns to

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[1] Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*: *Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 15.

[2] Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles,* 47.

[3] J. Gerald Kennedy, "Towards a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 11 (1988): 11.

the emergence of the modern short story collection at the *fin-de-siècle*. Developing alongside this rise of modern sexuality, the collection's assemblage of loosely related heterogeneous elements, often failing to add up to more than a partial or opaque collective identity, appealed to writers shrinking from sexuality's social and intimate primacy. Its structural looseness and focus on lateral relations between unmerged stories gave form to recessed, non-cathective, and lower-intensity kinds of attachment.

This chapter makes what Henry James would call a "companion-study" of George Moore and James' short story collections.[4] Moore and James' collections were important transitions from older compendia, miscellanea, and anthologies—the norm of short story collecting until the 1880s—which gave little concern to the interrelationship of stories, often ordering them alphabetically or chronologically and rarely featuring original stories.[5] Moore's collections are often considered the start of the modern Irish short story tradition.[6] Frank O'Connor, for instance, writes that George Moore's collections, *The Untilled Field* especially, "made the Irish short story a fact."[7] His yoking together of the short story's subdued form and the themes of lonely disillusionment directly

[4] Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition*, eds. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1276.

[5] Kennedy notes that "economics rather than aesthetics…determined the production of many nineteenth-century collections: Balzac, Hawthorne, and Turgenev wrote tales in piecemeal fashion for the periodicals before gathering them into [collected] volumes… The ordeal of Poe seems emblematic: when publishers rejected a collection of his early magazine writings…he churned out a novel instead and only after years of struggle brought forth his first volume of stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*." Until the late nineteenth century, Kennedy concludes, such story ensembles were "shaped more by the exigencies of publication than by authorial design." Kennedy, "Towards a Poetics," 10. Interesting in themselves, they are distinct from the short story collection.

[6] For an account of Moore as a relay between older compendia of Irish folktale and lore and the 20th century single-authored, artistically arranged short story cycle, see Debbie Brouckmans, "Bridging Tradition and Modernity, George Moore's Short Story Cycle *The Untilled Field*," in *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends*, eds. Elke D'Hoker and Stephanie Eggermont (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 85-104.

[7] Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1963), 206.

influenced O'Connor's own collections, as well as Joyce's *Dubliners* and Liam O'Flaherty's *Spring Sowing*.[8]

As for James, Wendell V. Harris credits James with "usher[ing] in" a "remarkable efflorescence" of realist short stories, which diverged from the highly plotted and exotic romances of Stevenson and Kipling.[9] The Prefaces to Volumes XI–XVIII of his New York Edition, which collect his short stories, placing "like with like," are important early contributions to short story theory.[10] Critics like Richard Gage, Richard Hocks, W. R. Martin, and Warren U. Ober have noted that James, in abandoning the compendium (e.g. 1893's *The Real Thing, and Other Tales*) for the more carefully arranged collection (beginning with 1895's *Terminations*), became "a pioneer" of the modern short story collection.[11] Making use of arrangement to activate resonances across diegetic boundaries, James produces an "incipient poetics of the short story sequence" which later 20th century writers would tighten and intensify.[12]

James and Moore's turn to the collection was motivated by what they saw as its unique affordance for portraying celibate sociality. This motivation was in part autobiographical. Both authors were lifelong bachelors who cultivated rich, arboreal networks of friends, to which they ministered through epistolary correspondence, memoir, biography, tender book reviews, and salons. Though enriching, the lack of a major romantic arc or saturating sexual adventure also meant isolation, estrangement, and, especially later in life, a sense of anachronism within an epoch that saw

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[8] O'Connor, *Lonely Voice*, 206.

[9] Wendell V. Harris, "English Short Fiction in the 19th Century," *Studies in Short Fiction* 6, no. 1 (1968): 58.

[10] James, *French Writers*, 1250.

[11] W. R. Martin and Warren U. Ober, "Introduction" in *The Finer Grain: A Facsimile Reproduction* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1986), vii.

[12] Richard A. Hocks, "Henry James's Incipient Poetics of the Short Story Sequence: *The Finer Grain* (1910)" in *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

"the increasing eroticization of all dyadic relations."[13] Across his life, James identified with the loneliness of celibacy, referring to himself in his thirties as "a lonely celibate" and, later, "hopelessly celibate even though sexagenarian."[14] Although a young Moore curated an image of himself as a Lothario, as he aged into lifelong bachelorhood, both his public persona and literary output became inextricable from celibacy. Over half of his prose narratives concern celibacy.[15] This investment in celibacy as a thematic issue seeped into its persona and reception. A 1922 *New-York Tribune* profile titled "An Irish Celibate" repeats the claim Susan Mitchell makes in *George Moore* (1916) (perhaps the first monograph on Moore) that, for all Moore's Zola-esque tendencies, he "has never even been kissed." The reviewer continues that the strength of Moore's fiction is not his sensuality, but his understanding of celibate affection: he "knows nothing about love or passion, but a great deal about affection."[16]

With the rise of sexual modernity, however, these non-erotic affections were, at best, apt to feel devalued in an era that made sexuality the keynote of intimacy. Studies of friendship designate this period as the "end of friendship," in which the Victorian era's investment in intense (especially homosocial) friendship became sexually legible. Sedgwick argues forcefully in a chapter on James' "Beast in the Jungle" that male friendships, and bachelorhood in particular, became legible as a cover for illicit homosexuality, a shift that both liquidated celibacy of its own distinct relational content and subjected it to a new level of stigma and paranoia.[17] Short fiction served as a unique

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[13] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 37.

[14] Henry James, *The Complete* Letters, 37; Henry James, *Letters,* vol. 4, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 307.

[15] Adrian Frazier notes that Moore dealt with celibacy in fourteen of his twenty-six prose narrative works. Adrian Frazier, "Albert Nobbs and Company: Introduction to an Unpublished Reprint of *Celibate Lives*," in *George Moore: Dublin, Paris, Hollywood*, eds. Conor Montague and Adrian Frazier (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), 188.

[16] "Auctorial Vignettes: I: An Irish Celibate," *New-York Tribune*, 10 December 1922.

[17] Eve Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic," in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 182-212.

refuge within which James and Moore explored celibacy's volatility as a social category and intimate practice. Moore's novels, when they do address celibacy, follow a developmental arc wherein his protagonists undergo a sexual awakening, shedding the repression that had alienated them from their erotic impulses. James' novels, meanwhile, have become queer theoretical touchstones for the complex play of erotic desire that animates them.[18] Their short story collections, in contrast, distinctively take up celibate plots that do not give way to sexual awakening or eroticism's animating pulsations. Several of James' most famous stories, e.g. "The Figure in the Carpet," "The Altar of the Dead," "The Beast in the Jungle," are predicated on the odd romantic and erotic "abstention[s]" and "sterilising habit[s]" of their subjects.[19] Moore's major collections—*Celibates* (1895), *In Single Strictness* (UK: 1922, America: 1923), and *Celibate Lives* (1927)—collate profiles of a diverse cast of celibates spanning the working (Albert Nobbs, Sarah Gwynn), middle (Wilfred Ownes, Priscilla and Emily Lofft), aristocratic (John Norton, Hugh Monfert, Agnes Lahens), and bohemian classes (Henrietta Marr).

These stories never resolve into a common identity or etiology of celibacy. What these subjects share is a dysphoria with the erotic mandates that define their fictional worlds, failing to enter into the romantic plots socially expected of them, and which would be demanded of them in the romance plots and erotic dramas of the *fin-de-siècle* decadent novel. In these works, celibacy names not only a rapidly superannuated position, socially sanctioned in the earlier nineteenth century but increasingly understood as a form of pathological repression and cover for latent homosexuality. More radically, it names a kind of intimacy predicated on distance and withdrawal—

[18] See, for instance, Bersani's argument in *Future for Astyanax*, which posits that James' novels are so accommodating of his character's polymorphous desires that he risks vacating the dangerous and destructuring force of desire altogether, turning it purely constructive. Bersani, *Future for Astyanax*, 126. For an excellent recent work on Jamesian queerness, see Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style.*

[19] James, *French Writers*, 1251.

from identity, desire, and, ultimately, futurity. Celibacy, however, is not the same as monadic non-relationality or anti-sociality. Rather than trying to explode (aesthetic and social) form, their celibate collections are forged from collective isolation. In this way, Moore and James anticipate O'Connor's argument in *The Lonely Voice* that what differentiates the novel from the short story is "ideology": "The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilized society," featuring clear protagonists "with whom the reader can identify himself,…but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community," concerned with what he calls "submerged population groups."[20] Within Moore and James' stories, celibacy constitutes both a social stance becoming rapidly submerged within emerging logics of sexual identity, as well as an affective style withdrawing from the stronger, libidinal bonds of identity and desire.

James' Prefaces to his New York Edition, often read in the context of the theory of the novel, are also a trove of theory on the short story. James suggests the relationship between celibacy and the short story is not merely thematic or ideological, but formal, insofar as both are unbeholden to libidinous drives. Whereas he characterizes even his shorter *novellas* (e.g. *What Maisie Knew* [1897], *The Turn of the Screw* [1898]) in terms of explosively perverse appetites—"flourishing…at the cost of many conventions and proprieties, even decencies…small sterilities drop[ing] from it"—the short story is marked by de-libidinalization, its "expansive, explosive principle[,] appetites and treacheries" necessarily "kept down" by "economic mastery" in a process he called foreshortening.[21] If the novel-size story is associated with "explosive" narrative arousal, "spread[ing] beyond any provision its small germ might…make for it," James continually invokes limpness in relationship to the short story.[22] He refers to the "limping…silver-shod, sober-paced, short-stepping, but oh so hugely

[20] O'Connor, *Lonely Voice*, 20-1.

[21] James, *French Writers*, 1159, 1163, 1278.

[22] James, 1278, 1156.

nosing, so tenderly and yearningly and ruefully sniffing, grey mule of the 'few thousand words;" the "old limp pocket of the minor exhibition;" and the "limp curiosity…never emerging from the limp state" which often preoccupies his short stories.[23] Limpness's explicitly phallic reference ("limp curiosity…never emerging from the limp state") evokes an aversion to arousal antithetical to the thrust of the novel or novella, a meaning enhanced by the image of a mule, sterile by nature, limping not galloping.

This relationship James posits between shortness and drivelessness is curious: shortness seems associated with speed, brevity, and concentration. This, indeed, is what Poe, and later O. Henry, saw as the value of the short story. What James sees in shortness, however, is the potential to detach from the novel's obligation to produce constant plot movement. Wendell Harris credits James with influencing a new spate of "realist" short stories, which tended to avoid "both the romantic peaks that even the French naturalists occasionally allowed themselves, and the spectacular depths of unalleviated suffering."[24] The form's capacity to forgo the usual movements of plot became one of the defining features by which it became differentiated from the novel at the end turn of the twentieth century. Partly, the short story's formal divergence from the novel was triggered by shifts in the novel. For much of the nineteenth century, the short story was syncretic with the novel, a condensed novel or a preparation for the novel.[25] Amandpal Garcha shows that even the early to mid-nineteenth-century sketch, largely devoid of plot, was "one origin" of the Victorian novel. The sketch's commitment to synchronic analysis and narrative stillness was

[23] James, 1156, 1268, 1265, 1235.

[24] Harris, "English Short Fiction," 63.

[25] Harris argues that most British short stories prior to 1880 exhibit what strikes the modern reader as a clumsy mixture of discursive commentary and overwrought plotting owing to attempts to cram novels into a tight space. Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* served as an influential model for this kind of novelistic short story writing. Poe celebrates the short story's capacity to more perfectly achieve the "unity of effect" aspired to by the novelist, but which remained unachievable given the intrusion of "worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal" necessitated by its length. Harris, "English Short Fiction," 30–35, 48, 47.

absorbed into the Victorian realist novel, a basis for its hallmark "description and essayistic analysis."[26] Toward the end of the nineteenth century the novel underwent compression with the collapse of the three-decker novel. As the novel embraced what contemporaries called the "Gospel of Intensity," shedding the sketch's stillness, the short story turned back to the sketch.

James' image of the limp story draws from a critical discourse that likened the form to a "neutered" novel in its relative stillness. In an early satire of short story form, Richard Marsh, author of late-Victorian thriller novels, complains, "The men in the stories appear, to the unjaundiced eye, to be always neuter… Love does not appear to be a popular element in the short story."[27] Without a virile protagonist to drive plot along, the whole form succumbs to a sense of pointlessness, resembling a "mosaic, which shall be perfect in its separate parts. They ought to mean something…But no man living can say what."[28] Art critic and author Frederick Wedmore, in another early (1899) article on the short story, writes,

> We may ask ourselves, in regard to story-writing, whether the people singled out to practice it are those, chiefly, to whose personal history Romance has been denied: so that the greatest qualification even for the production of a lady's love-tale, is—that the lady shall never have experienced a love-affair.[29]

Wedmore's own short story collection, *Renunciations* (1893), deals with "the renunciation, voluntary or necessitated…of love's most obvious privileges."[30] Both suggest the short story, in its embrace of slightness, is a castrated form, ill-suited to intense emotion. Conversely, proponents of the short story found in its aromantic tendencies freedom from romantic arcs and magnetizing erotic objects

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[26] Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel*, 4.

[27] Richard Marsh, "The Short Story," *Home Chimes* 12, no. 67 (1891): 24–5.

[28] Marsh, "Short Story," 23–4.

[29] Frederick Wedmore, "The Short Story," in *On Books and Arts* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), 1.

[30] Frederick Wedmore, *Renunciations* (London: Elkin Matthews & John Lane, 1893), n.p.

saturating the novel. Brander Matthews writes in the first critical monograph on the form, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1901), "While the Novel cannot get on easily without love, the Short-story can… The Short-story, being brief, does not need a love-interest to hold its parts together."[31]

This discussion of neutered narrative and limp form sits in productive tension with contemporary approaches to narrative which privilege the novel. Summarizing decades of work on narrative dynamics, Elizabeth Hanson writes, "Construed as central either to the production or the consumption of narrative, desire supplies not only narrative's shape but its meaning and its purpose."[32] From Barthes to Brooks to Girard to Lauretis, Hanson writes, reader and text are bound together in a common libidinal economy. Desire is the motor of narrative as much as it is the motor of reading.[33] These theories model narrative drive on Freudian sexual drive. Freudian drive is appealing because it suits the novel's need for plot expansion, characterized "not by a systematic tendency toward discharge" (which would prematurely end narrative), "but a specific tendency towards the increase of tension and the pursuit of excitation."[34] Because this tendency toward escalating intensity is "extremely mobile as to its aim and object," narratives imbued with drive twist and turn instead of dissipating under their own inertia.[35] At the level of character system, sexual drive manifests in competition between characters more and less fit to maintain narrative animation. Because characters in novels are "crowded together into a single story," Alex Woloch argues, they

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[31] Matthews, *Philosophy of the Short Story*, 21.

[32] Hanson, "Asexual Narrative Structure," 672.

[33] Brooks, for example, writes, "Narratives both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification… [Desire] is initiatory of narrative, motivates and energizes its reading, and animates the combinatory play of sense-making" foundational to plot. He further elaborates on the mechanics of desire's plot-production: "If narrative desire keeps moving us forward, it is because narrative metonymy can never quite speak its name… Narrative is hence condemned to *saying* other than what it *would mean*, spinning out its movement toward a meaning that would be the end of its movement." Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 37, 48, 56.

[34] Leplanche, *Freud and the Sexual*, 142.

[35] Leplanche, 142.

"all compete for attention within the narrative web" in a series of conflicts that move narrative forward.[36] Characters unfit to compete (because they lack sufficient desire or fail to solicit desire) are inevitably "flattened," "drowned out," "overshadowed or absorbed" by primary characters.[37] Narrative ends only when desire has been stably bound (e.g. the marriage plot) or intensifies to the point of shatter (in narratives that elude closure, approach 'formlessness,' or see their protagonists self-destruct).

Narrative desire may work well as a model for the dynamics of novelistic plots, but Moore and James' attachment to the celibate collection points to alternative relations enabled by the story.[38] Although the short story can intensify narrative drive (this is Poe's theory), it also has the capacity to adopt a looser (or limper) relationship to it. Following the lead of Moore and James, the short story enabled fiction to traffic, like celibacy, in what Anne-Lise François calls *recessivity*, "a complacency toward desire that neither moves toward seizing it nor exerts itself to deny it," at a moment when reticence seemed to be rapidly disappearing from fiction.[39] "Reticence" is what W. D. Howells saw as the hallmark of Moore and James' collections, reviewing Moore's *Celibates* (1895) alongside James' *Terminations* (1895).[40] As both collection titles suggest, the stories withdraw from each other, as well as the reader. Rather than swiftly crescendoing into climax, like the novel or highly plotted story,

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[36] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 32, 31.

[37] Woloch, *One vs. the Many*, 20, 38, 25.

[38] For a reading of extended stasis in *The Sacred Fount* (1901) as an instance of asexual (desireless) narrative structure, see Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure."

[39] Ann-Lise Francois, "Late Exercises," 39. In "Reticence in Literature" (a reply to Waugh's of the same title), Crackenthorpe notes the speed with which the prudish "Mrs. Grundy is becoming mythological" is "exceedingly comforting: and yet, perhaps, it is not a matter for absolute congratulation," given that merely treating sexuality frankly has become the new measure of art. Hubert Crackenthorpe, "Reticence in Literature," *The Yellow Book* 2 (July 1894): 263.

[40] W.D. Howells, "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly* 39 (1895): 701.

they are "slight," quickly running out of narrative steam: "for the most part [they] end vaguely, diffusing themselves and ceasing upon the sense without insistence upon a definite intention."[41] Howells' word "diffusing" is key to the logic of their collections. Individual stories neither end with stably bound closure, nor a shattering of the story itself. Rather, they diffuse, producing faint lateral relations *between* discrete stories that scholars now call transfictionality. Transfictionality refers to the relationship between discrete storyworlds. Its emphasis is not on "direct causal relations and plot impact," as in a novel; instead it "invite[s] readers to perceive many other forms of connection," especially those that are "indirect, mediated, and tenuous," spanning distance and separation.[42] These reticent connections emerge through the lateral diffusion of language and narrative patterns across stories that remain remote to one another.

Moore makes this invitation literal in *The Untilled Field.* An inaugural work of the Irish Literary Revival, *Untilled Field* takes up many of the same biopolitical concerns over celibacy we encountered around the odd woman in Chapter 1—declining marriage and fertility rates combined with high rates of emigration, resulting in depopulation and decreased national productivity—but rooted in an Irish Catholic context. Across the work, reformer figures present Irish celibacy as a kind of death drive, drawing on the biopolitical language of extinction we saw operating within the Odd Woman novels in Chapter 1. "In Ireland the clergy were apt to forget this simple fact—that celibates do not continue the race," argues Ned, a budding social reformer whose story closes out the collection.[43] With other reformers in other stories (most comically a priest who petitions the Catholic church to suspend the celibacy mandate for Irish clergy), Ned argues that a countervailing erotic awakening is necessary to revitalize Ireland: "Some human passion and desire…must be gotten into this

[41]Howells, "Life and Letters," 701.

[42] Long Le-Khac, *Giving Form to an Asian & Latinx America* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), 9.

[43] George Moore, *The Untilled Field* (New York: Boni and Liveright, [1903] 1923), 255.

landscape almost empty of humankind," he declares in a speech, envisioning a nation stitched together by erotic feeling.[44]

Moore ends the collection by neutralizing this Freudian tension between life (eros) and death (celibacy) instincts, inviting readers to see the exquisite form both of Ireland's "special genius" for celibacy and, more literally, the collection that renders it.[45] Ned is forced to reconceptualize celibacy from failed cohesiveness into an alternative mode of sociality in its own right when his marriage dissolves (ironically, because of his increasingly fervent attacks on the Catholic church's cultural imposition of celibacy).[46] Moore, via Ned, quotes Nietzsche 's star friendship (here rendered "stellar friendship") to articulate a mode of affection without passion or intensity as its horizon, estranged affection that ambiently extends across subjects divided by unbridgeable structural, historical, and epistemic rifts:

> We were friends, and we have become strangers one to the other. Ah, yes; but it is so, and we do not wish to hide our strangerhood, or to dissemble as if we were ashamed of it… The law that is over us decreed that we must become strangers one to the other; and for this we must reverence each other the more, and for this the memory of our past friendship becomes more sacred. Perhaps there is a vast invisible curve and orbit, and our different destinations and ways are parcel of it, infinitesimal segments… But our life is too short and our sight too feeble for us to be friends, except in the sense of this sublime possibility.[47]

Stellar friendship names intimacy predicated on separation and divestment. As Heather Love elegantly puts it, star friendship admits "the infinite distances contained within even the closest

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[44] Moore, *Untilled Field*, 188.

[45] "Every race…has its own special genius. The Germans have or have had music; the French and Italians have or have had painting and sculpture; the English have or have had poetry; the Irish had, and alas! They still have their special genius—celibacy! There is as little free love in Ireland as there is free thought. Men have ceased to care for women, and women have ceased to care for men. Nothing thrives in Ireland but the celibate, the priest, the nun, and the ox," declares Ned. Moore, 257.

[46] Ned's marriage had embodied his vision for Ireland, insofar as his and his wife Ellen's "passionate nature[s] overc[a]me" their religious and ideological differences (Ellen is a devout Catholic), binding them together in a "sensual knot." Moore, 231.

[47] Moore, 231, 259.

friendships"—distance that Ned once thought could be closed by the "sensual knot" of eroticism.[48] In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida brings out the queerness of star friendship as kinship that eschews conjugality. He writes that star friends do not

> give in to proximity or identification, to the fusion or the permutation of you and me. But, rather…place, maintain or keep an infinite distance within 'good friendship.' The very thing that love—that which is thus named, 'love between the sexes', egotism itself, jealousy which tends only towards possession…—is incapable of doing. Is this to say that friendship, rightly named, will carry itself beyond Eros?[49]

Moore answers in the affirmative: star friendship is what survives after eroticism fades and separatism re-emerges. Yet he invites readers to revise failures to connect as a queer kind of affiliation. This is a kind of queer kinship that acknowledges potential formal and abstract historical contiguity ("perhaps" we are segments in a "vast invisible curve"), without demanding the force of this relation overtake the intervening (psychic, spatial, material, historical) distance ("our life is too short and our sight too feeble for us to be friends").

If Ned, like Moore himself in writing *Untilled Field*, had hoped to revive a coherent Irish national and ethnic culture, what confronts him is a "queer country" of "queer people" not amenable to what Christopher Nealon describes as "the triumphant, progressive narrative of achieving ethnic coherence."[50] Moore's focus on the queerness of Ireland's unassimilable diffuseness is what differentiates it thematically and structurally from its predecessors, as well as the more tightly

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[48] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 98; Moore, *Untilled Field*, 231.

[49] Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2020), 65.

[50] Moore, *Untilled Field*, 202; Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 23. Moore originally wrote the first six stories of *The Untilled Field* in English for translation into Irish, an attempt to contribute to the Gaelic Revival despite having not mastered Irish himself. The stories were published in a volume titled *An t-Úr-Ghort* (1902) which Moore hoped would "furnis[h] the young Irish of the future with models" for a modern Gaelic fiction. Publication of this volume was a failure, so he published the work in its original English. Moore, *In Single Strictness*, ix.

integrated cycle of the twentieth century that Moore "prefigures."[51] Brouckmans traces Moore's collection back to what Sandra Zagarell has called the "narrative of community." Episodic in nature, most narratives of community are short fiction ensembles (e.g. Mitford's *Our Village* [1835], Barlow's *Irish Idyll's* [1892]). Unlike Moore's collection, however, these volumes resemble episodic novels or cycles. These narratives focus on the "ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity," the community's coherence structurally binding up the narrative's scattered episodes.[52]

The power of proximity emphasized in nineteenth-century narratives of community never manifests in Moore's text; instead, he uses proximity to highlight social distance in spite of similitude. For instance, the collection's opening story ends with a James emigrating to America; the second story begins with a James returning to Ireland from America. Yet these are entirely different Jameses from different locales embedded in different character systems, even as they follow analogous narrative arcs. A partial relation diffuses across these two discrete stories, even as the second story's unfolding dismantles what at first appears to be continuity. As another example, an aborted marriage between a Peter and Kate that comprises a narrative arc partway through the collection seems at first to be a return to the marriage of a Peter and Catherine anticipated at the end of the opening story. Again, we see provisional identity and a directly interlocking narrative give way to faint, indirect relatedness. Moore here exploits transfictionality's capacity to impose new strategies of reading other than those required of a continuous, self-expanding narrative, the discontinuity and

[51] Brouckmans, "Bridging Tradition," 98.

[52] Sandra Zagarell, "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," *Signs* 13, no. 3 (1988): 499.

ambiguous relationship between similar stories requiring readerly recursion, revision, and reorientation in order remained tuned into these distal relations.[53]

Across twentieth-century cycles, too, "a pattern emerges: to claim that the genre is analogous to national and regional identities…The model of standing alone but being more meaningful together, enacted in the genre, offers a compelling analogy to the pluralism of many geopolitical bodies."[54] In this vein, Long Le-Khac's recent study on the Asian-American and Latinx short story cycle emphasizes transfictional forms' capacity to embody proximity between formally disconnected groups, and a concomitant potentiation of worldbuilding through solidarity. This communitarian ethos requires anchoring transfictional bonds that are strong enough to support solidarity, e.g. bounded locality, overlapping character network, and/or shared identity. Tellingly, Le-Khac excludes the collection from transfictional form, given its lack of close storyworld elements: "transfictional works are linked by closer and more numerous kinds of storyworld elements than story collections…where each story implies its own world."[55]

However, the relatively transient transfictional links that encode stellar friendship collapse Le-Khac's distinction between shared and separate storyworlds, rendering storyworlds that are similar and contiguous, yet separated by infinite distance. As if to emphasize the unique affordance of a non-cyclical form, Moore revised his collection to remove its original bookending frame tales ("In the Clay" and "The Way Back"), replacing "The Way Back" with Ned's turn to stellar

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[53] As Kennedy notes, "In a novel, each successive chapter modifies our sense of a continuous narrative; in a collection, however, succeeding stories…necessitat[e] reorientation…The successive unfolding of discrete texts effects an ongoing revision of what we imagine the volume itself to be 'about'." Kennedy, "Towards a Poetics," 14, 16.

[54] Jennifer J. Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 8.

[55] Le-Khac, *Giving Form*, 10. Joyce's *Dubliners*, which amplifies Moore's theme of estrangement, is also a tighter transfictional work, bound to a single locale, as well as a progressive narrative framework that moves systematically across childhood, adolescence, adulthood and public life, in contrast to the looser, mesh-like plotting in *The Untilled Field*. Likewise, *Winesburg, Ohio*, another 'archetypal' short story cycle, tightly binds its plot to a single locale and narratively consolidates around a linking protagonist, George Willard. *Winesburg*'s characters invest their own thwarted desires onto George, creating a libidinally bound character network, in contrast to Moore's celibate network.

friendship. Moore's celibate collection, in the end, renders not pluralism, but plural singularity that comprises an intransigently "queer" collectivity—queer, insofar as its components remain, in O'Connor's words, "by [their] very nature remote from the community."[56]

The Doctrine of Intensity

If Moore's *The Untilled Field* resists the impulse to narrate the coalescence of ethnic and national identity, his *Celibates* collections join James' in contesting the coalescence of *sexual* identity and its underlying logic of compulsory erotics. Both Moore and James were acutely aware of the diminishing social affordances of celibate intimacy. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* reads the proliferation of bachelor fiction at the turn of the twentieth century in terms of "male homosexual panic" newly wracking male homosociality as it became increasingly legible as homoeroticism with the emergence of the homo/heterosexual binary. Homosexual panic was "acted out as sometimes agonized sexual anesthesia" in late nineteenth-century fiction, James' especially, an interpretation that leads her to understand male celibacy as "repressive" and "self-ignorant" of unspeakably illicit desire.[57] Sedgwick accurately pinpoints the pressure emerging sexual norms placed both on celibacy and once-celibate modes of sociality, transforming celibacy into a closet that James and Moore alike were tuned into. Celibacy *was* a highly volatile category at the end of the nineteenth century. However, as Kahan argues, Sedgwick's general equation of "sexual anesthesia" with repressed homoeroticism vacates celibacy and the celibate plot as "an elegant formation in and of itself," reifying the emergent over the residual meaning of celibacy.[58]

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[56] O'Connor, *Lonely Voice*, 21.

[57] Sedgwick, "Beast in the Closet," 188, 193.

[58] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 5.

Sedgwick reminds us that a "consistent, ideologically full thematic discourse of male homosexuality became entirely visible, in developments that were publicly dramatized in…the Wilde trials."[59] Although James was no admirer of Wilde's decadence, he wrote to Edmund Gosse of the atrocity of the sexual spectacle surrounding the Wilde trials:

> Yes, too, it has been, it is, hideously, atrociously dramatic & really interesting—so far as one can say that of a thing of which the interest is qualified by such a sickening horribility. It is the squalid gratuitousness of it all—of the mere exposure—that blurs the spectacle. But the *fall*—from nearly 20 years of a really unique kind of 'brilliant' conspicuity… to that sordid prison cell & this gulf of obscenity over which the ghoulish public hangs & gloats—it is beyond any utterance of irony or any pang of compassion! He was never in the smallest degree interesting to me—but this hideous human history has made him so—in a manner…[60]

What disturbs James here is not the content of Wilde's erotic life on trial. Rather, it is the hypocritically "squalid" pleasure of the "ghoulish public" that spoils James's interest in the affair with "a sickening horribility." The hypocrisy that sickens James is the public's moral outrage at illicit desire which is itself charged by narrative seduction and a readerly drive toward "exposure," a readerly orientation captured in the word "gloating," which is to say, spectating "with intense or passionate satisfaction (usually implying a lustful, avaricious or malignant pleasure)."[61]

This libidinal reading was fueled by titillating reporting on the Wilde case in tabloids like *Illustrated Police News*. James complains in a letter to Howells that the influence of this journalistic style of writing, which he likens to the exotic seduction of a *Bayadère*, has "extinguished" the anglophone "faculty of attention":[62]

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[59] Sedgwick, "Beast in the Closet," 201.

[60] Quoted in Michél Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 208.

[61] Oxford English Dictionary Online (March 2023) s.v. "Gloating v."

[62] Bayadère is the European term for the devadasis, Indian women who served as courtesans, temple workers, and dance artists. James here evokes their implication, as dancers and courtesans, "in a larger world of servitude focused on the fulfillment of male desire." This would have been a salient reference: under British colonial rule, "their lifestyles were

> The *faculty of attention* has utterly vanished from the general anglosaxon mind, extinguished at its source by the big blatant *Bayadère* of Journalism, of the newspaper & the *picture* (above all) magazine; who keeps screaming "Look at *me*, *I* am the thing, & I only, the thing that will keep you in relation with me *all the time* without your having to attend *one minute* of the time.[63]

Narrative seduction takes the form of a lurid appeal to the senses ("*Bayadère*," "screaming") that engages automatic, riveted, and overwhelming attention ("*I* am the thing…that will keep you in relation…*all the time*"), precluding more panoramic and effortful modes of being "in relation" to the text. Although critics like Mark McGurl might reasonably read this complaint in the context of James' endeavor to elevate the art novel above the status of mass culture, I want to point out that James' critique of libidinalized literary culture extends beyond mass culture to sophisticated French fiction and the 'new' anglophone novel emerging at the *fin-de-siècle*.[64] James' *Notes on Novelists With Some Other Notes* (1914) especially tracks the novel's restructuring around libido, and its concomitant investment in ramping up readerly intensity, from Balzac's celibate realism (James calls him "Benedictine of the actual") to the decadent novel obsessed with "the erotic and plastic" to the exclusion of all else.[65] In "The New Novel," James laments that the novel has become "starved of referability and association"—has dispensed with high realism's project of giving legible form to grand historical and social forces—in favor of "saturat[ed]" prose "intoxicated with the mixed liquors of suggestion" and "overflooded" with "ungovernable verbiage."[66]

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criminalized on the basis of their non-conjugal sexuality, which was understood as prostitution." Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South Indian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

[63] Quoted in Fried, *What Was Literary Impressionism?*, vii.

[64] See Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[65] James, *French Writers*, 93, 910.

[66] Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, eds. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1985), 153, 143, 152, 156.

The essays in *Notes* hold up Zola's influence as especially corrosive to realism insofar as Zola "leave[s] out the life of the soul, practically, and confine[s] himself to the life of the instincts, of the more immediate passions," restructuring reality around erotic passion:

> Reality is the object of M. Zola's efforts…In a time when literary taste has turned…to the vulgar and the insipid, it is of high importance that realism should not be compromised. Nothing tends more to compromise it than to represent it as necessarily allied to the impure… The real has not a single shade more affinity with an unclean vessel than with a clean one.[67]

In "The Present Literary Situation in France," James complains that literature after Zola tends to reduce passion to the "sole sexual" and character to a game of "erotic drama":

> It may fairly be said that the French *parti-pris*…tends to pervert and minimize the idea of 'passion.' Passion still abides with us, though its wings have undoubtedly been clipped... But it lives a great variety of life, burns with other flames and throbs with other obsessions than the sole sexual. In some of these connections it absolutely *becomes* character; whereas character, on the contrary, encounters in the sexual the particular air, the special erotic fog, that most muffles and dampens it. Closely observed, indeed, the erotic drama gives us, for all the prodigious bustle involved, almost never a striking illustration of it. 'Passion' crowds it out; but passion is strangely brief, while character, like art itself, as we know, is long.[68]

James' complaint that long-term and long-distance connections in the novel have been sacrificed to a "special erotic fog" anticipates Lukács' criticism of the novel's proto-modernist transformations at the *fin-de-siècle*. Lukács depicts this period's sexual awakening as the novel's abandonment of rendering large social and historical processes: "As real historical relations are less and less understood, wild, sensual, indeed bestial features come to occupy the foreground."[69] Whereas Balzac's 'classic' realism strains to "encompass more complex and indirect relationships," decadence "transform[ed] the novel into a kaleidoscopic chaos" and history into "exotic anecdotes"

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[67] James, *French Writers*, 129, 868.

[68] James, *Essays on Literature*, 121.

[69] Georg Luckás, *The Historical Novel* (London, Merlin Press [1937] 1962), 182.

oriented to immediately perceivable relationships.[70] Peter Brooks more appreciatively argues that naturalism intensified the novel's libidinal drives to non-sovereign speeds; it is with Zola and his acolytes, he writes, that narrative drives "accelerate to unimagined speeds…beyond human control."[71] This inaugurates what Enda Duffy has called *adrenaline aesthetics*, which delivered to readers the experiences of velocity, intensity, pleasure, and disorientation, a tradition that—significantly for the celibate texts under discussion—"refuses distance," superseding a Kantian aesthetic tradition of dispassionate reflection.[72] In sum, this corpus of criticism traces the transformation of literary aesthetics from a site of distanced, highly formalized, and reflective observation to a stimulant of autonomous drives and affective intensity. Jameson calls these transformations "the doctrine of intensity," an "aesthetic ideology" which privileges unconscious and hypermobile drives over formally and linguistically specifiable phenomena.[73]

The doctrine of intensity manifested in the English novel with the demise of the triple-decker Victorian novel between 1885–1895 and the concomitant supplantation of the realism of Eliot, Trollope, and James with naturalism, which William Frierson in 1928 called the "English controversy over realism in fiction."[74] Over these ten years, the languorous, multi-plot three-decker novel went extinct and the grip of censorious circulating libraries on publishable content loosened. These structural changes resulted in shorter, intenser fiction, alongside a rapid critical and market embrace of naturalist, symbolist, and decadent literature. Critics of the day warily observed this shift,

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[70] Georg Luckás, "Narrate or Describe?" in *Writer and Critic, and other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), 128; Luckás, *Historical Novel*, 182.

[71] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 76.

[72] Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, pleasure, Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 9.

[73] Jameson, *Antinomies*, 76.

[74] William Frierson, "The English Controversy Over Realism in Fiction, 1885–1895," *PMLA* 43, no. 2 (1928): 533–550.

complaining of reticence's disappearance from literature under the influence of the burgeoning "gospel of intensity" that celebrates unfettered "erotic imagination."[75]

We have seen that James, who thrived in the moribund long novel, was deeply attuned to (and critical of) literary libidinalization. Thus far, I have emphasized James and Moore's similarity. Here we must confront a stark difference between James and Moore, given that a young Moore, taken with Zola's naturalism, was one of the prime actors in ending the long, prudish Victorian novel. With good reason, Joyce called Moore "killer of the three-volume novel."[76] Frierson credits Moore's polemic *Literature at Nurse* (1885) with coalescing opposition to the three-volume novel and circulating library system that imposed the triple-decker form. For Moore in 1885, the multi-volume realist novel had become a "pulseless, nonvertebrate, jelly-fish sort of thing," bloated because deprived of sensual passion.[77] The English novel's degeneracy, for Moore, was a direct result of the circulating libraries' censorship of sexual passion. Far from James' contention that the novel was being sacrificed to "that special erotic fog," Moore argues that "English literature is sacrificed on the altar of Hymen" and advocates for a new realism that grapples with England's "nervous, passionate life."[78] Although Moore respected James, he considered his lengthy, anti-naturalistic realism part of the jellyfish bloat, issuing a plea as late as 1928 to "release mankind from its too great admiration of…the Eunuch [James]," whose characters remain "on a bowing acquaintance" with the reader, recessed from the sexual passions proper to the 'new' realist novel.[79]

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[75] See, for example, Harry Quilter, "The Gospel of Intensity," *The Contemporary Review* 67 (1895): 761.

[76] Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce: New and Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 247.

[77] George Moore, *Literature at Nurse: or, Circulating Morals: A Polemic on Victorian Censorship* (Sussex: Harvester Press, [1885] 1976), 28.

[78] Moore, *Literature at Nurse*, 21, 22.

[79] George Moore, *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (London: W. Heinemann, 1928), xvii; George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (New York: Bretano's, 1920), 191.

That Moore should turn so steadily to fiction about celibacy after 1894's *Esther Waters* is perhaps surprising given his vociferous attack against the prudish Victorian novel. Less surprising is that his *novels* about celibacy position it as a narrative obstacle to be overcome. *Evelyn Innes* (1898), *Sister Theresa* (1901), and *The Lake* (1905) center on characters who take up religious celibacy to escape the tumult of their erotic passions, but who in the end must come to terms with the intractability of their desires. Moore thought of these novels as Wagnerian, because he instrumentalized celibate plots to stage the Wagnerian theme of "the sovereign power of man's instinctive responses."[80] As Wagner wrote in his program notes to *Tristan and Isolde*'s Prelude,

> There is henceforth no end to the yearning, longing, rapture, and misery of love: world, power, fame, honor, chivalry, loyalty, and friendship, scattered like an insubstantial dream; one thing alone left living: longing, longing unquenchable, desire forever renewing itself, craving and languishing.[81]

All attachments become insubstantial before eros unbound. In his Wagnerian novels, Moore innovated his own textual 'endless melody' of desire, a stream-of-consciousness flow of prose that influenced Joyce's stream of consciousness. As Richard Cave explains, Moore's Wagnerian novels yoke together the crescendo of erotic drive and the enrichment of the literary sensorium.[82] Critics have often pointed to Moore's Wagnerian novels as important transitional works between realism and literary modernism. They are easily read as part of the larger modernist project of intensity, one major aim of which, Susan Buck-Morss argues, was "*undo*[*ing*] the alienation of the corporeal

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[80] Richard Cave, *A Study of the Novels of George Moore* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1978), 190.

[81] Richard Wagner, *Prelude and Transfiguration from* Tristan and Isolde, ed. Robert Bailey (New York: Norton, 1985), 47.

[82] *The Lake*, generally regarded to be Moore's best-accomplished Wagnerian novel, follows a Catholic priest as he comes to terms with his repressed erotic desire for a member of the laity. Cave writes that "perception of the colour, sound and continuous movement of the woods and the lake by day and night becomes more subtle and detailed and [the priest's] insight into his own psyche the more exact" as the novel progresses. Cave, *Study of the Novels*, 190.

sensorium… *restor*[*ing*] *the instinctual power of the human bodily senses*" so as to overcome the "castrated…sense-dead" subject of aesthetics dominant since Kant.[83]

The stories of Moore's collections, however, present celibate plots that diffuse rather than surrender their celibate plots to narrative drive. The celibates of Moore's short fiction are out of step with the emerging modernist sensorium of his novels. For these celibates, "world, power, fame, honor, chivalry, loyalty, and friendship" are not liquidated by erotic longing. They remain prosaically of the world and its institutions. Contemporary reviewers rated these stories blanched of Wagnerian chromaticism monotone. As the *New York Times* review of *Celibate Lives* put it, "[The collection] keeps to a monotone…A life in which sex is denied, or suppressed or underdeveloped is like a palette with two or three tones, a musical instrument with two or three notes."[84] Yet Moore does not present them derisively as "studies of inadequate living," like the *Times* reviewer does. Instead, they historicize eroticism's emerging compulsoriness and celibacy's concomitant revision into an alienated or repressed mode of embodiment.

Two stories from *Celibate Lives* explicitly portray celibacy as out of sync with modernist aesthetic regimes. "Wilfred Holmes" is about a composer who excels in the melody-heavy *bel canto* style of opera, but is doomed to failure because his ear is too "slow" to perceive the rich harmonics that have come to dominate modern music after Wagner. "Modern music is in the harmony," he acknowledges, "the air rises out of the accompaniment," yet his romantic singleness is so deeply embodied that he is unable to perceive accompaniment or "hear simultaneously the different parts of a fugue."[85] Holmes' sensual anaesthesia is explicitly rooted in sexual anaesthesia: Holmes' brother

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[83] Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 5, 8, emphasis in original.

[84] H.L. Duffus, "In 'Celibate Lives' a Study of Inadequate Living," *New York Times*, 2 October 1927.

[85] Moore, *Celibate Lives*, 5.

remarks, "A man who is indifferent to women is indifferent to all things."[86] In Holmes' case, he is rendered insensate to the roiling Schopenhauerian harmonics of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

Then there is "Henrietta Marr" (and an 1895 version, "Mildred Lawson"), whose incapacity to feel sexual desire prevents her from succeeding as a painter in an age of impressionism. Her story is set at the genesis of impressionism at Barbizon, a bohemian environment where her celibacy is deemed "not normal" and symptomatic of "falsehood" to her "base sensual nature."[87] This cuts her off from the impressionist school: her paintings remain "*lust*reless;" she is unable to achieve the "transposition of tone" and movement required for impressionistic effects, floundering as a precise "copycat" of line and form.[88] This is inextricably tied up with the fact that, for her, "there is no sex in art," that art gives her a place to "pu[t] off her sex."[89] Intimately, she wants companionship: "I like him to like me, but I don't think I should like him if he made love to me," she tells her friends; but "kisses don't thrill me."[90] Feeling like she should feel desire, however, she offers "gentle platoni[c]…flirtations" in hopes that "a man one of these days…will inspire passion in me."[91] If she were a heroine of one of Moore's celibacy novels, like *Evelyn Innes* (1898) or *Sister Theresa* (1901), the outcome would be the triumph of eros over alienation. In her short story, however, libidinal lack "cut[s her] off from a good deal in life" and she kills herself—appropriately, by overdosing on an anesthetic.[92]

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[86] Moore, 2.

[87] Moore, 195.

[88] Moore, 144, 140, 185, emphasis added.

[89] Moore, 168.

[90] George Moore, *Celibates* (New York: Brentano's, [1895] 1926), 41, 42; Moore, *Celibate Lives*, 170.

[91] Moore, *Celibate Lives*,164, 170.

[92] Moore, 210.

Jameson writes that "impressionism and post-impressionism in painting, the Wagnerian revolution in music—these are only the most obvious analogies to the new affective styles" emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, styles which resulted in a "radical transformation of the experience of the body" in Western culture.[93] Under this transformation, "the isolated body begins to know more global waves of generalized sensation" that suggests there is "some more authentic experience that preceded the baleful spell of nomination" and conscious cognition; language and character become "vehicles for affect."[94] The bodily comportments of Moore's celibates instead gesture to anachronistic aesthetic values of delicate precision and strict formal delineation associated with neoclassicism, for Marr/Lawson, and, for Holmes, the *bel canto* operas of Bellini and Donizetti. These are not so much studies in "inadequate living," but studies of subjects belonging to earlier aesthetic regimes inadequate to the developing doctrine of intensity.

Given Moore's decadent tendencies, we might expect him to pathologize his celibates' apparent numbness as symptoms of degeneration. Buck-Morss articulates a version of this modernist ideology, which naturalizes erotic instinct as authentic and pathologizes aneroticism as alienation. She writes that sensuality "maintain[s] an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication" which breeds "the loneliness and sensual impoverishment of modern existence."[95] Moore's point, in contrast, is that celibate embodiment is superannuated, and that its anachronism points to the senses' rapid revision within sexual modernity, portraying sensuality itself as a function of acculturation. Moore's collections insist that what looks like impoverishment from the vantage of one aesthetic regime may not be impoverishment at all from another.

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[93] Jameson, *Antinomies*, 42.

[94] Jameson, 28, 30, 35.

[95] Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 6, 26.

Thus, in spite of their different roles within literary history, Moore and James' simultaneous turn to the collection in 1895 saw what Howells describes as "a notable approach of one talent to the other in method and even in manner."[96] One common thread was their mutual admiration of European forebears of transfictional form who provided reprieve from the gospel of intensity. Both, for instance, drew inspiration from Ivan Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1852, trans. 1895).[97] Looming even larger was Balzac's *The Human Comedy*. Moore admired Balzac's celibate realism, declaring, "To write a novel without a love-interest is a feat that only the very strongest may attempt, and this feat Balzac accomplishes whenever he chooses, as a matter of course."[98] James, meanwhile, turns to Balzac's celibate realism as a corrective to *fin-de-siècle* French literature now defined by "erotic drama."[99] He celebrates Balzac's "system of cellular confinement"—his cloistered dedication to writing, but also the cleft partitions of his sprawling *Human Comedy*—which strike James as "positively that of a Benedictine monk."[100] Whereas Zola "simplif[ies]" reality around desire, Balzac's celibate realism labors to show "*all* the connections of every part of his matter and the full total of the parts."[101] If "love" has become the "most representable thing in the human scene," James declares no author since Balzac has "felt he could afford to subordinate or almost even to neglect it to anything like the tune in which we see it put and kept in its place through the parts of

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[96] Howells, "Life and Letters," 701. James intended to abandon novel writing in the 1890s, declaring "*The Tragic Muse* is to be my last long novel. For the rest of my life I hope to do lots of short things with irresponsible spaces in between." Quoted in Olding, "The English Short Story," 22–3.

[97] Moore writes that Turgenev belonged to the "thought school" of writing, deprecating the new decadent school of Rossetti and Zola. Moore recounts Turgenev sardonically inquiring after Zola's sensuality to Moore: "*Je me demande qu'est-ce que cela peut me faire si elle sue au milieu du dos ou sous les bras?* [I wonder what it matters to me if she sweats in the middle of her back or under her arms?]" Turgenev instead traffics in slightness and precision, striving "to reproduce each line and lineament" of his subjects, rather than infuse them with sensuality. George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (London: T. Wener Laurie, 1913), 45, 48.

[98] Moore, *Impression and Opinions*, 40.

[99] James, *French Writers*, 121.

[100] James, 127–8.

[101] James, 129, 107.

the *Comédie Humaine* that most count."[102] This is not to say that Balzac's fictions are free of erotic desire; instead, they remain "wayside passions…at no time gathered into so large and so thick an illustrative bunch" as in Zola.[103] That is, although erotic passions emerge transiently, they quickly diffuse in the face of other relations and forces (a technique we will see at work in Moore's story "Hugh Monfert"). The range of orientations Balzac's plotlines have to erotic desire is perhaps one reason James sees in *The Human Comedy* a "still lingering earlier world, the world in which places and people still had their queerness."[104]

James' allusion to the "queerness" of a "still lingering earlier world" in Balzac's celibate fiction echoes Moore's reference in *The Untilled Field* to a "queer country" of celibates unassimilable into sexual modernity and thus cohesive ethnonationalism. In both, celibacy is queer insofar as it constitutes an increasingly anachronistic mode of attachment in the wake of the doctrine of intensity. Despite these similarities, Moore treated celibacy's queerness with much more ambivalence than James. Moore's works render celibacy a condition of alienation and divergence ("our different destinations and ways are parcel of it"), even as he insists that this alienation might be a queer site of "sublime possibility" at a celestial (and aesthetic) level. One gets the sense that Moore, self-styling as a womanizer, yearns for his own novelistic narrative of erotic awakening even as he finds himself aging into a celibate plot. James, conversely, mourns the loss of a superseded moment in which celibate sociality was relatively normalized. Where Moore sees celibacy as alienation from modernity, James tends to see delicate, diaphanous attachments made fragile within an intimate ecology increasingly structured by erotic bonds—attachments all the more in need of literary cultivation. This subtle but important difference manifests in different uses of transfictional dynamics. We

[102] James, 144.

[103] James, 130.

[104] James, 102.

previewed above Moore's transfictional emphasis on divergence, which lures the reader into reading for a continuous narrative, only to force a revision of this assimilative impulse as each storyworld's "different destinatio[n]" unfolds with the narrative. In contrast, we have seen that James arranged his stories "like with like." His transfictional resonances play up the likeness between distant parts, activating diaphanous relations between discrete storyworlds without bringing these worlds together directly (which would mean intensifying the organization logic of likeness into one of sameness).

Many of James' short stories are studies in the fragility of celibate plots, which are easily dispersed by desire "spreading and contagiously acting."[105] "The Figure in the Carpet," for example, features a protagonist who is estranged at once from his best friend and favorite novelist upon learning they share some illicit erotic knowledge from which he, celibate, is constitutively excluded. The sudden intrusion of an erotic plot from which he is excluded "damage[s his] liking" of both friend and novelist.[106] More to the point, James' "The Story in It," positioned immediately before "The Beast in the Jungle" in *The Better Sort* (1903), hinges on a disagreement between characters about what types of "relations" are substantive enough to sustain the novel. On one side of the debate are Col. Voyt and Mrs. Dyott, engaged in an illicit affair, who argue that the novel absolutely depends on sexual liaisons:

> The adventure's a relation; the relation's an adventure. The romance, the novel, the drama are the picture of one… The subject the novelist treats is the rise, the formation, the development, the climax, and for the most part the decline, of one. And what is the honest lady doing on that side of the town?... She doesn't so much as *form* a relation… That's exactly what the bored reader complains of.[107]

[105] James, *French Writers*, 1163.

[106] Henry James, *Complete Stories: 1892-1898* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 537.

[107] Henry James, *The Better Sort* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1903] 1918), 181–2.

For this reason, Voyt and Dyott champion European decadence, specifically Gabriele D'Annunzio's, for only these stories "get hold…of the real thing" between sexes.[108] The English novel's relative prudishness inevitably result in bored readers. Sounding like Marsh and young Moore in their critiques of unsexed narrative, Voyt argues intimacy not predicated on erotic pursuit constitutes "a situation undeveloped" and "a subject lost": "If a relation stops, where's the story? If it doesn't stop, where's the innocence?"[109] Voyt's narratological theory ventriloquizes the gospel of intensity, wherein the proper telos of both story and intimacy is escalation. Properly developed narrative and intimate relations, then, cannot be innocent, necessarily embodying erotic drive.

On the other side of the debate is widow Maude Blessingborne, excluded from Voyt and Dyott's secret affair. She complains, "we get always the same passion" and the "same couple" in decadent novels.[110] She yearns for a broader range of fictive relationships and relationships *to* fiction than the erotic, in contrast to the "poverty of the life" and "the awful bounders, of both sexes," exhibited in European decadence.[111] Blessingborne articulates in miniature an argument James makes in his essay on D'Annunzio in *Notes on Novelists*. Here, James writes that D'Annunzio was a key figure in developing "a new form altogether of perceptive and expressive energy…concentrated almost wholly on the life of the senses…The only ideas he urges upon us are the erotic and plastic."[112] D'Annunzio's view "is all of a world in which relations of any other order [besides the erotic] mainly fail to offer themselves in any attractive form."[113] The story ends with Voyt and Dyott enforcing this relational physics on the world of "The Story In It." They mock Blessingborne's "shy

[108] James, *Better Sort*, 176.

[109] James, 182.

[110] James, 179.

[111] James, 178.

[112] James, *French Writers*, 909, 910.

[113] James, 913.

romance" and her aspiration to write fiction about a "decent woman" like herself, whose "small, scared, starved, subjective satisfaction…would do her no harm and nobody else any good."[114] Her minimalist satisfactions make her a woman without a plot ("she doesn't so much as *form* a relation").[115] In contrast, Voyt and Dyott vaunt their affair as "a thing to make the fortune of any author up to the mark."[116] Voyt's principle of aesthetic intensity gets the last word: "Who but a duffer would see the shadow of a 'story' in" Blessingborne's shy recessivity?[117]

James does. As the collection's title, *The Better Sort*, suggests, its stories probe whether subjects can be "'good' and interesting."[118] Stories like "The Beldonald Holbein" and "Flickerbridge" are about "maiden lad[ies]" who find themselves subjects of portraits and short stories, despite (or because of) their "refinements of oddity" and "roundabout, retarded suggestions and perceptions."[119] Nearly all the short stories take as their subject intimacies that, in Voyt's terms, "stop short" and remain cleft. This is reproduced at the level of the collection's form, wherein each story remains cleft from the next. If *The Better Sort* thinks about this cleftness in terms of celibacy, it does not, however, accept Dyott's claim that celibates do not "so much as *form* a relation." Although James's characters may not form intense romantic or erotic bonds, they do forge weaker relationships of *liking* with others, mirrored at the formal level by the arrangement of stories according to a logic of likeness. Although celibate relationships prove to be fragile and easily overwritten across a story's unfolding (e.g. Voyt's final word over Blessingborne), they flourish in the extradiegetic spaces between.

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[114] James, *Better Sort*, 188.

[115] James, 188.

[116] James, 188.

[117] James, 188.

[118] James, 179.

[119] James, 152.

Take, for example, the sequence of stories that follow "The Story In It." Voyt's question opens onto James' "The Beast In the Jungle," which is about a complex friendship forged through the mutual "abstention" and "sterilising habit" of John Marcher and May Bartram.[120] "Beast," with its anticlimactic revelation that its protagonist "had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened," is James' most notorious neutered narrative, leaving readers to puzzle over its lack of manifest erotic content.[121] In the context of *The Better Sort*, however, "Beast" comes to Blessingborne's aid like an extradiegetic friend to dispel aesthetic injunctions to erotic intensity. This is a transfictional relationship between narrative parts that works obliquely to the drive logic insisted on by Voyt, affirming the value of stories and relationships that remain cleft rather than escalated.

Thus far, I have argued that Moore and James were sensitive to the shrinking social and aesthetic margin within which celibate sociality could flourish. Both, I suggest, turned to the loose interrelationship of narrative parts unique to the collection to think through relationships that do strive for intensity and plots that do not develop in accordance with narrative drive. James creates long-range narrative patterns that move lambently across discrete storyworlds. Moore exploits the revisable nature of the short story collection to short-circuit the coalescence of identity or intensely affective bonds. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore in greater depth how Moore's emphasis on revision and James's emphasis on cleft relations contest the superannuation of celibate modes of relating that occurred with the emergence of sexual modernity.

[120] James, *French Writers*, 1251.

[121] James, *Better Sort*, 243.

George Moore: Revising Celibate History

Like Balzac before him, Moore was an obsessive reviser.[122] Late in life, he declared, "If you wish to estimate the true value of an author's art, study his revisions."[123] Moore's Celibates collections are arguably his most extensive project of revision, spurred on, significantly, by his chronic dissatisfaction with these stories (in part because their narrative dissatisfaction, I have been suggesting, is precisely their interest). His use of the short story collection was, in some ways, an outgrowth from this tendency to revise.[124] Each volume in the series is a revision of 1895's *Celibacies*, although by the final 1927 *Celibate Lives*, none of the original stories remain, having been radically revised and renamed so as to constitute distinct stories, albeit in palimpsestic relation to the original (e.g. "Mildred Lawson"'s transformation into "Henrietta Marr," or "John Norton"'s revision into "Hugh Monfert"). In the context of Moore's *novels*, Grubgeld writes that revision is a process of developmental suppression and supersession: "Whether from book to book, from revisions to revision, or from one section of a work to another, each later manifestation of the self subsumes an earlier self-inscribed in a now-supplanted text."[125] In contrast, Moore's revisions to his celibacy collections, each volume with its own distinct title and arrangement of original and revised stories, function more like a horizontal expansion of the collection than an effacement of prior versions.

The result is that the collections resist congealing into a single celibate identity or etiology. The form suited celibacy's contemporary volatility, its nascent pathological meanings as closeted

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[122] For a recent book-length account of Moore's revisions through the lens of linguistic pragmatism, see Siobhan Chapman, *The Pragmatics of Revision: George Moore's Acts of Rewriting* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[123] Quoted in Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann "George Moore and Literary Censorship: The Textual and Sexual History of 'John Norton' and 'Hugh Monfert.'" *English Literature in Transition* 50, no. 4 (2007): 371.

[124] The short story collection is a highly revisable form. Recall that J. Gerald Kennedy links the "poetics" of the collection to the "ongoing revision" it demanded of the reader, interrupting her "assimilative instinct." Kennedy, "Toward a Poetics," 16.

[125] Elizabeth Grubgeld, *George Moore and the Autogenous Self: The Autobiography and Fiction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 20.

homosexual or sexually frigid butting up against its previous sanctioning. Across the Celibate collections, Moore constructs a version of celibacy that is, first and foremost, uncommitted, including uncommitted to sexual history. The collections present a mixed bag of celibacy not easily assimilable into the emergent theory of celibacy as self-alienated repression. For Holmes, Marr, and Lawson, celibacy is a congenital incapacity to feel erotic attraction. For others, it is a reaction to the violence of sexuality they witness in their social milieux (e.g. "John Norton," "Agnes Lahens"). For still others, it is a feature of working-class embodiment and solidarity that prioritizes other kinds of obligation and kinship over the erotic (e.g. "Albert Nobbs," "Sarah Gwynn"). Through revisions to stories and the arrangement of stories, Moore experimented with the different fates of celibacy. This uncommitted aesthetic practice resonated with the non-committalness of celibacy itself, its detachment from modern sexual identities. Moore's proto-trans character Albert Nobbs is called a "perhapser," unlike the "invert," not deeply identifying with any gender identity nor any libidinal position. The collection's revisability allowed Moore to explore a version of celibacy whose uncommittedness refracted the very revisability of naturalized sexual norms and sexual identities.

"Hugh Monfert" and its revisions exemplify how Moore took to rewriting to articulate different fates of his celibacy plots, and of celibacy itself. "Monfert" derives from an early, failed novel by Moore, *A Mere Accident* (1887), which Moore substantially compressed into the short story "John Norton," appearing in *Celibates* (1895). John Norton is the only heir to an Irish estate his mother has worked hard to make financially sound. Although he faces pressure from his mother to produce an heir, he detests heterosexuality, disavows sexual drive ("He is not the sort of man who allows himself to be driven," "If I have had temptations I have conquered them"), and adopts a "diffuse" ascetic orientation to the world ("People don't interest me…I am merely an onlooker, the world is my monastery," "His sense of reality…was, as it were, diffused over the world and

mankind."[126] However, his mother's young companion, Kitty, awakens a flickering sexual attraction in him precisely because she embodies his sexless ideal: "He hardly perceived any sex in her; she was sexless as a work of art, as the women of the first Italian painters, as some Greek statues."[127] Like Norton, Kitty is averse to sexual passion, which makes him, perversely, attracted to her as a material embodiment of his sexless ideal. Although this erotic plot threatens to develop out of the celibacy plot, the story's end affirms Norton and Kitty's celibate commitments: a vagrant rapes Kitty, affirming Norton's horror at heterosexuality, which, to him, always contains an element of violence. The story concludes on Norton's realization, "My God! Then the difference between us [Norton and the vagrant] is only one of degree, and the vilest humanity claims kinship of instinct with me!"[128] He takes up celibacy again to eschew the violence intrinsic to male sexuality.

"Hugh Monfert" (published in the 1922 British release of *In Single Strictness*, and in revised form in the 1923 American release) revises "John Norton" to reframe celibacy as a mask for repressed homosexuality.[129] The narrative arc follows the modernization of Monfert's relationship to celibacy. Like Norton, Monfert feels dysphoric in relation to the modern injunction to be (hetero)sexual. He shrinks into the ideal of Medieval chastity,

> pray[ing] God might put the world back and that I might live again as a knight, riding in the lists, and of all, practising chastity. Chastity has always been the centre of my thoughts…and I feel that if I were to lose it, by some mischance, I should not be able to bear with my life. On those nights I was Sir Galahad and Sir Galahad was I, and a something more than an earthly chastity was our quest together.[130]

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[126] Moore, *Celibates,* 264, 272, 275, 281, 299.

[127] Moore, 323.

[128] Moore, 368.

[129] This new title responds to the emergent logic of celibacy, emphasizing celibacy's solitude-inducing restraint.

[130] George Moore, *In Single Strictness* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 112.

Monfert explicitly draws his ideal of chastity from Walter Pater, through whom he formulates a version of celibacy that is sublimative rather than repressive, one that is non-sensual yet tinged with an abstract eroticism:

> [Walter Pater] has shown that the genius of the cloister did not consist in the renunciation but in the transference of love from earth to heaven, getting thereby an exaltation greater than the senses could procure…set[ting] up an absent object of adoration for a present one.[131]

In rendering his celibacy as chastity, Monfert inscribes his sexual practices within a moment before sexological theory, compulsory sexuality, or sexual identity. As Arnold Davidson notes, medieval and Renaissance categories of "chastity and virginity are moral categories denoting a relationship between the will and the flesh; they are not categories of sexuality."[132] That is, chastity was not theorized in relationship to autonomous "sexual instinct, psychobiologically embedded in one's personality" and "independent of volition."[133] Not only does Moore evoke the residual (pre-sexual, pre-erotic) terms that operate in "John Norton," he renders this mode of celibacy *as* residual (medieval, as opposed to modern), a distinction that had sharpened in the years between 1895 and 1922. Heather Love writes that Pater adopted a politics of refusal in the face of sexual modernity. His response to the formation of a public homosexual identity was to cast himself into historical exile as the very schema of his attachments was effaced (for Pater, a private, non-identitarian homoerotic subculture). Love enjoins queer critics to read Pater's repulsion from homosexual identity not as a form of closeting, but rather as an "epistemology of the vestibule." For Love, the vestibule stands for that "liminal, semipublic space" on the threshold of rigid, often pathologizing, sexual categories. Pater, recoiling from the harsh light of official homosexuality, inhabits a moment

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[131] Moore, *In Single Strictness* [1923], 109

[132] Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 53.

[133] Davidson, *Emergence of Sexuality*, 140.

vestibular to modern sexuality, one which is lonely, but also replete with "beautiful deferral and, one assumes…the emergence of alternative forms of sociability."[134] Monfert follows Pater's retreat to a vestibular moment just before celibacy's subordination to the closet, when celibacy operated as a sanctioned model for intimacy unto itself.

As the 1922 revision progresses, celibacy shifts from a position in its own right, to a vestibular space skirting around unavowable homoeroticism, to a sheer cover for Monfert's homosexuality. Here, it departs from 1895's "Norton." Kitty is no longer the primary temptation. Instead, Moore introduces Percy, training to be a priest but also a talented artist, with whom Monfert comes to co-inhabit the celibate vestibule: in addition to his training as a priest, Percy views art as an endeavor requiring chastity; it, too, is "a religion, and it, too, raise[s] men's thoughts from the earth, that is to say, from material interests and desires, from the merely natural cravings of the flesh."[135] The banner of "platonic love" creates a space for their homosocial companionship without raising the specter of homoeroticism.

Moore presents their relationship in ambiguously erotic terms. After a doctor informs Hugh that Percy is destined to die young, Hugh experiences what will be the climax of his desire for Percy as they bathe in the ocean together:

> [Percy was] so beautiful in his slimness that Hugh bethought himself of some early Italian sculpture imbued with the Greek spirit, or a late Greek figure retaining some of the old Greek tradition, like the youth known as Narcissus, advancing towards a pool of water to admire his beauty in it.[136]

This moment smacks of homoeroticism. However, the text complicates what could settle into a neat avowal of same-sex desire. This moment is couched in simile—desire remains a mediated effect of

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[134] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 64.

[135] Moore, *In Single Strictness* [1923], 79.

[136] Moore, 127.

resemblance and likeness rather than a cathection onto Percy himself. Like Kitty, Percy's attraction is as a living artifact of self-contained non-alloeroticism: a sculptural Narcissus. Further, the text diffuses this intense sensuality. It disappears in the subsequent sentence, which turns to the practical considerations of the fisherman conveying Percy and Hugh:

> And the bathing over, the nets were let down; the sails filled and the boat moved through the still water, making for the headland, it being the intention of the boatman to fish round the western shore, bringing the boat up the Sound, not raising the nets till they reached their harbourage on the eastern side.[137]

The descriptiveness of this sentence is almost a generic retreat to earlier nineteenth-century regionalism, a stylistic pivot away from the very spark of homoerotic desire. The text leaves ambiguous whether this erotic diffusion indicates that Monfert's eroticism is merely flickering (like Norton's) or repressed.

The 1922 U.K. version and its 1923 U.S. revision grant divergent fates to Monfert's chastity. In the 1922 version, Monfert embraces a life of celibacy after confronting his attachment to Percy's legibility within homosexual terms. After Percy goes away to school, Monfert believes himself attracted to Percy's sister, Beatrice, whom he marries. However, he is unable to consummate the marriage, resulting in a total revision of his sexuality: "I was attracted to Beatrice not for herself but for her likeness to her brother…I mistook the nature of my affection. I was deceived; it was not until I took Beatrice in my arms that I knew I could never love a woman."[138] In the scene of confession, Monfert is ushered out of the vestibule: spoiled are the indeterminacies of intimacy afforded by Paterian celibacy, in which likeness/liking, friendship, and eros intermingle without resolving into one affect or identity. Still, in the original 1922 version of the story, Monfert re-commits to celibacy, deciding to "put aside the sexual life for ever" to avoid acting on his

[137] Moore, 127.

[138] Moore, *In Single Strictness* [1922], 184.

homosexuality. He continues to insist he is "free" of "animal instincts" and turns back to the Paterian/Augustinian pre-sexual paradigm of monkish sociality.[139] His refusal to identify with eroticism leaves him reconciling with and caring for his ailing mother, serving the Catholic church, conducting medieval research, but also living with a chronic pang of alienation from the sexed-up world.[140]

In the end of the 1923 version, however, Moore replaces this celibate ending with a plunge into Freudian sexuality. Monfert dreams he travels to Algeria, where he sees himself with a younger Arab man who whispers to him, "*Amnez moi à Paris, je serai votre domestique et je vois aimerai bien* [Take me to Paris, I will become your domestic servant and I will love you well]."[141] This is accompanied by a break in realist narration into a hallucinatory, Wagnerian stream-of-consciousness. Llewellyn and Heilman read "Monfert"'s arc of revisions as Moore's progressive "outing" of Monfert, such that re-drafting becomes a means of de-repression. They argue, "While [Moore's] valorisation of the redrafting process could be seen as evidence of Moore's concern primarily with style, this essay suggests that, for Moore, rewriting or reworking an earlier version of a text constituted an attempt to reconcile his artistic vision with a form of self-imposed, though often unacknowledged, literary censorship."[142] What interests me in Moore's 1923 revision to "Monfert," however, is that it maintains an ambivalence about Monfert's final embrace of what we might read as the truth of his desire. He treats celibacy's final liquidation before a narrative of sexual truth as an ambivalent historical achievement. The homosexual life Monfert is liberated to join is a politically unsavory one, rooted in orientalist paternalism, an element of modernist queer life that sexual histories have tended

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[139] Moore, 196.

[140] "A life of restraint, even of pain, were better than the animal instincts *from which God had certainly freed him*, for his own good purposes, that he might resist temptation, thereby saving his soul from hell." Moore, 196.

[141] Moore, *In Single Strictness* [1923], 195.

[142] Llewellyn and Heilmman, "George Moore," 371.

to neglect because of its reproduction of colonial racial exploitation.[143] The effect of these revisions leaves readers with the unsettlingly open question of which ending is happier or more just: the 1895/1922 versions, in which Monfert disavows desire's violence for lonely celibacy, or the 1923 version of homosexual imperialism.

The collection structure keeps the meanings of stories unsettled. Sequential effects contribute to this: "Monfert" is abutted by "Holmes" and "Marr," which, we have seen, think about sexuality as an aesthetic-historical contingency, undercutting the temptation to read the 1923 "Monfert" as a truer or uncensored revision of the prior versions.[144] This destabilization is also emphasized in the next and final edition, 1927's *Celibate Lives*. Moore replaces Monfert's story altogether with "Albert Nobbs." "Nobbs" is a story told by a present-day (1920s) narrator to a friend. Nobbs, whom the narrator met as a child, was born a woman but lived as a man in order to make an independent living, a fact revealed only upon her recent death.

Were "Nobbs" set in the narrator's present, Nobbs' "mannishness" would be legible as sexual inversion, what Krafft-Ebing described as a "masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom."[145] As a story set in the pre-sexological past, however, Moore conspicuously does not depict Nobbs's transvestitism as a matter of sexual instinct. Nobbs seems to pre-date sex and sexuality as strong psychic orientations. Her psychology is drawn more from Balzac than Krafft-Ebing or Freud, playing out Balzac's quip in "The Vicar of Tours" that "Celibates replace sentiments by habits."[146]

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[143] Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 33.

[144] Although this is how Llewellyn and Heilman read Moore's revisions to "Monfert."

[145] Quoted in Jonathan Flatley, *Like Andy Warhol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 26. Nobbs might look like Stephen Gordon of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), nearly contemporaneous with *Celibate Lives*, who interprets herself through Krafft-Ebing's definition of an invert in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

[146] Moore considered this story "The Vicar of Tours," originally titled "The Celibates," "the finest example of Balzac's realistic method" and the "most perfect short story ever written," and was especially fond of this line. Moore, *Impressions and Opinions*, 33.

Her relationship to sex and erotic desire is non-committal. She describes herself as a "perhapser" (perhaps a man, perhaps a woman), this overtly performative-situational relationship to gender making her an "outcast from both sexes."[147] Unlike the invert, it is not that she identifies as in the wrong body so much as embodiment is a matter of habit rather than deep commitment: "She had been about so long as a man that she only remembered occasionally that she was a woman."[148] She is also a "perhapser" in that she is sexually hesitant. Romance, for her, "is not a sexual adventure," but represents a "community of interests," incongruous with marriage's sexualization at the beginning of the twentieth century.[149] It is Nobbs' inadequate demonstration of erotic ardor (for Nobbs it is a more of a business partnership) that causes her love interest to reject her. "Nobbs" remains uncommitted to erotic embodiment, nor deeply identified with her sex or gender.

Structurally, "Nobbs" is a narratological "perhapser," undoing "Monfert"'s 1923 outing. Such revisions prevent a unifocal story of sexual history from forming in which the later collections rewrite the 1895 celibate archetypes in the thoroughly modern sexual discourse of the twenties. Owing to the collection' structural openness and modularity (not bound to a finite plot or structured by a coherent identity logic), it is a form capable of absorbing substantial revision, even total replacement of parts, without constituting a radical shattering of the original project, or else imposing a developmental schema onto such revisions. The collection's looseness leaves room for additions, or, in Moore's case, editions.[150] Moore uses this always-becoming nature of the collection to resist the crystallization of sexual identity. Vestigial parts resurface, exposing the *hap*, and

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[147] Moore, *Celibate Lives* [1927], 80.

[148] Moore, 70.

[149] Moore, 101. For a reading of marital sex manuals which related connectedness in sex (in the form of simultaneous orgasm) to marital health, see Jagose, "About Time: Simultaneous Orgasm and Sexual Normalcy" in *Orgasmology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

[150] Whereas in the novel, additions most often take the form of a prequel or a sequel, as additions to *plot*.

therefore revisability, of categories, even as they are undergoing reification. This aesthetic tactic is in keeping with Moore's investment in stellar friendship, wedging open the "different destinations" of each celibate story, preventing the crowded vestibule from narrowing into a closet.

Henry James: Interested Reading, Cleft Intimacy

I have been arguing that the collectivity of the short story collection is one of congregation without conjugation. George Moore develops the form not just to render celibate intimacy, which avoids interpersonal conjointness, but also celibate history, in a way that resists subsuming it into sexuality. In keeping with this celibate recessiveness, Moore's stories remain stand-offish from the reader, appealing neither for readerly identification nor desire; instead, they confront readers with recalcitrant monochromaticity and unsatisfying instability. In contrast, James' stories are preoccupied precisely with the appetite for intensity and exposure that readers bring to the text. In the hypocritical masses lusting after Wilde's exposure, James sees a mass readership conditioned by the tabloids and "intoxicat[ing]" novels read in a state of lust. He depicts the doctrine of intensity as a form of narrative seduction, seduction that conjures a "special erotic fog" around readers, substituting sustained attention with consummatory appetites

James' complaint is not over a loss of aesthetic 'difficulty.' He is responding to a shifting affective relationship between reader and text. Duffy writes that the new aesthetic emphasis on intensity constituted

> a new grammar of culture which overrides the imperatives of Western models of representation and aesthetic reception in modernity at least since Kant: a protocol which subsumes aesthetics under rationality by adhering to a model of critical distance and rational contemplation. Refusing this, adrenaline aesthetics works to delineate a pleasure that is effected first on the body and its sensorium.[151]

[151] Duffy, *Speed Handbook*, 9.

To better understand the affective contours of this new grammar of reading, and why James likens it to exotic dance, a brief detour to Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* is in order for it is a text that embraces and elegantly describes the libidinal reading against which James chafes. Barthes describes the text's form as like "our erotic body:" reader and text are bound together in an economy of pursuit and escalating desire. Barthes likens this dynamic to a strip-tease (inverting the valence of James' invocation of the *Bayadère*), depicting reading as a titillating scene of cruising "impelled" by our "avidity" for meaning:

> Our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or to skip certain passages (anticipated as "boring") in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote… we boldly skip (no one is watching) descriptions, explanations, analysis, conversations; doing so, we resemble a spectator in a nightclub who climbs onto the stage and speeds up the dancer's striptease.[152]

For James, however, the consolidation of text into erotic body strips away the text's celibate affordances, and, as a conditioning aesthetic regime, the reader's capacity to attach to what came to seem like neutered, monochromatic narratives ("anticipated as 'boring"'). Intensity "refuses distance," whereas James held "interest," an appeal to Kantian aesthetic distance, as the ideal basis of aesthetic reception. Interest appears across James' critical writing as what Sianne Ngai describes as his "*minimal* standard of aesthetic worth."[153] One reason James holds fast to Kant's unfashionable idea of aesthetic "interest" is that interest registers attraction that is less binding and less shattering than is cathexis. Ngai writes that "the feeling that underpins [interest] seems to lie somewhere between an object-oriented desire and an object-indifferent affect," something like, in Husserl's account, a "mere 'tending' toward an object of perception."[154] Its weakness lends it an "affective as

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[152] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 10–11.

[153] Ngai quotes James' famous assertion in "The Art of Fiction" that "the only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel…is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of." Sianne Ngai, "Merely Interesting," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008): 790.

[154] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 129.

well as conceptual indefiniteness" that someone oriented to literary intensity, like "The Story In It"'s Col. Voyt, would probably deem "a situation undeveloped" and a relation unformed. In short, interest's affective recessiveness (as a mere 'tending,' rather than drive, towards) lends itself to fostering the "limp" celibate attachments that so interest James in the plots of his short stories.

James' writing on both mass and "high" literature expresses a concern that this process of dilated, somewhat aloof reading was vanishing. Silvan Tomkins, writing in the 1960s, argues that interest had become "that affect which has been most seriously neglected" in the twentieth century, having been subsumed into "the specifically sexual pleasure which it accompanies."[155] In other words, interest, once conceptually distinct from libidinal drive, became a mere "derivative of the drives."[156] This is an aesthetic loss insofar as, Ngai says, "interest has the capacity for duration and is fundamentally recursive, returning us to the object for another look." Interest supports the kind of recursive reading demanded by the collection, which requires (a) stretching attention across discrete, horizontally arranged parts punctuated by deflations of climax and many moments of starting all over again with a new story, while (b) recursively updating our impression of prior stories in light of distant, extradiegetic resonances (in contrast to attention that feeds on the linear build-ups and discharges of novelistic plot).

In theme and form, James' *The Better Sort* contests interest's libidinalization. Barthes notes that the author "cannot choose to write *what will not be read.* And yet, it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives."[157] This may be true, but an author can trap desires in false climaxes and grammatical deferrals which demand slowing down,

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[155] Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Eve Sedgwick and Irving E. Alexander (Durham: Duke University Press), 75.

[156] Silvan, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 76.

[157] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 11.

stepping back, re-reading long, prosaic sections skimmed over, and revising interpretation. *The Better Sort* is composed of stories that solicit readerly desire for explanatory climaxes, only to disappoint these desires by limiting the story's action, turning climax into anti-climax, and retreating into stylistic vagueness. Fittingly, *The Better Sort* is populated with would-be aesthetic subjects (of portraits, short stories) who shrink from what James calls the "costs" of "the process of reproduction" in art—costs that mainly amount to their destructive ravishment by a gloating public (their "hurrying and the nudging and the pressing and the staring," their "great gregarious density" and "gregariou[s] feroci[ty]").[158]

It is no accident that "Beast In the Jungle," a story original to *The Better Sort*, is one of the touchstones in the literature and epistemology of the closet. As a story, it lathers up the reader's expectation of a climactic revelation of its protagonist's secret, only to deny that his secret has any content at all: "The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance…he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened."[159] This odd mixture of intensity and deflation has inspired disappointment and depression in generations of queer readers for whom the story reads like a parable of the closet's loneliness. Readers like Sedgwick interpret what I have read as a strategic deflation of desire as an inability to avow the underlying truth of desire. What "The Story In It" and "The Birthplace," critically neglected context for the story, suggest is that this readerly disappointment in the story's refusal to manifest erotic content is precisely the point. It is a strip tease that leaves critics unsettlingly at arm's length from what they desire most in the story: eroticism.

[158] James, *Better Sort*, 153, 44, 272, 274.

[159] James, 243.

Any modern reading of "Beast" must grapple with Sedgwick's "The Beast in the Closet." Sedgwick here reads the climactic revelation that the content of Marcher's secret *is* its lack of content actually reveals a deeper, closeted homosexual content, Marcher's "basilisk fascination with and terror of homosexual possibility."[160] Here is Sedgwick's brief synopsis of the story:

> The story is of a man [John Marcher] and a woman [May Bartram] who have a decades-long intimacy… The woman desires the man but the man fails to desire the woman. In fact…[Marcher] simply fails to desire at all… [Marcher] does not even know that desire is absent from his life, nor that May Bartram desires him, until after she has died from his obtuseness.[161]

Curiously, Sedgwick takes the story's climax at face value, with its assertion that May indeed has sexually or romantically desired Marcher, although this revelation comes through an extended passage of free indirect discourse the narrator calls a "hallucination."[162] The climax appears irresistible because of the eruption of erotic intensity that accompanies it. Sedgwick notes that the climax presents a "gorg[ing]" of the "epistemological *askesis*" (James' restricted focalization of Marcher) that marks the rest of the story, constituting a collapse of author, narrator, and protagonist:

> For this single, this conclusive, this formally privileged moment in the story…James and Marcher are presented as coming together, Marcher's revelation underwritten by James's rhetorical authority…The two men, author/narrator and hero, are reunited at last in the confident, shared, masculine knowledge of what she Really Wanted and what she Really Needed. And what she Really Wanted and Really Needed show, of course, an uncanny closeness to what Marcher Really (should have) Wanted and Needed Himself.[163]

Even if distasteful, the climax appeals to libidinal reading within which intensity and value are yoked.

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[160] Sedgwick, "Beast in the Closet," 206.

[161] Sedgwick, 195.

[162] James, *Better Sort,* 244.

[163] Sedgwick, "Beast in the Closet," 200.

Dissatisfied with the compulsory heterosexuality evoked by the climax, but plumbing for still further latent desire, Sedgwick argues that the relationship between John and May *should have* amplified itself along the lines of liberated erotic desire:

> What May Bartram would have liked for Marcher, the narrative she wished to nurture for him, would have been a progress from a vexed and gaping self-ignorance around his homosexual possibilities to a self-knowledge of them that would have freed him to find and enjoy a sexuality of whatever sort emerged.[164]

May's desires tragically go unmet, "the trajectory of the story" instead charting the "imprisonment of May Bartram in John Marcher's closet."[165] Enforcing her own kind of normative eroticism, Sedgwick flattens May and Marcher's relationship, emptying their diaphanous friendship into a bleak tale of the closet's casualties. As Kaja Silverman notes, "Within Sedgwick's reading…the figure of Bartram is a structural excrescence…she has herself no place within Marcher's—or James's—libidinal economy."[166] Sedgwick's sexual hermeneutic risks complicity in what is most tragic and incisive about the story's ending: the ease with which the texture of friendship is emptied out when it fails to constitute the "real form" of sexuality. In actuality, it is precisely Marcher's realization, after May's death, that their friendship constituted "no connection that anyone appeared obliged to recognize," that incites Marcher's belated but overwhelming desire to have loved May.[167]

Read in the context of *The Better Sort*, however, is it possible that, like Maud Blessingborne before her, what May *wants* is precisely a relationship distant enough to preserve her privacy, independence, and recessive orientation to desire? What Sedgwick's reading neglects is the way

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[164] Sedgwick, 207.

[165] Sedgwick, 207.

[166] Kaja Silverman, "Too Early/Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 21, no. 2/3 (1988): 163.

[167] James, *Better Sort*, 234. In this case, it is Marcher's recognition of a stranger's "raw glare" of "grief" over a dead lover that triggers his climactic revelation. The vivid perceptibility of the stranger's lost passion inspires in Marcher a sense that he should likewise dedicated his life to *acting on* passion rather than languorously co-reading with May. James, 242.

May's talk actively *suspends* the spring of Marcher's "beast." Her shifting temporal reference to the spring of the "beast" (is it coming? has it come? is it an event at all?) is artfully infelicitous, keeping open the event of the beast's spring, and thus dilating their companionate watching for it. May speaks "inscrutably," "vaguely," "equivocal[ly]," with an "oddly ironic" air, as if across "some mystic line that she had secretly drawn around her."[168] Although Sedgwick's reading subordinates May to Marcher, the relationship-extending opacity of May's talk exploits what the text, and she herself, avow as her epistemic privilege over him.[169]

Sedgwick's climax-fixation, I suggest, risks emptying out the texture of Marcher and May's singular intimacy by fixing Marcher's climactic *projection* of desire onto May as the truth of May's desire. In contrast, acknowledging the importance of recessiveness to the friendship allows us to recognize and value May as more than an excrescence—indeed, as the central agent maintaining the distance that sustains their friendship as friendship. The actual, fine-grained texture of May and Marcher's relationship is predicated on such cleftness. Each refuses to penetrate "the secret of [the other's] own life."[170] They "circle about" each other at "a distance that alternately narrowed and widened." It proceeds "with the odd, irregular rhythm of their intensities and avoidances;" they "exchange ideas about…and then [see] the ideas washed away by cool intervals, washed like figures traced in sea-sand."[171] What, then, is the nature of their relationship? Bracketing the climax, neither express a strong desire *for* the other ("I want him/her"), nor an identification *with* the other ("I see

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[168] James, 210, 215, 222, 212–3.

[169] May has the broader vision: "It was only May Bartram who had, and she achieved, by an art indescribable, the feat of at once… meeting [Marcher's] eyes from in front and mingling her own vision, as from over the shoulder, with their peep through the apertures." May knowingly asserts her epistemic privilege over Marcher throughout the text, e.g. "You take your 'feelings' for granted. You were to suffer your fate. That was not necessarily to know it" If May wanted marriage, or sex, for that matter, it is not hard to imagine her seduction of Marcher, malleable as he is to her interpretation of his life; "she only kept him waiting, however" James, 207, 232, 226.

[170] James, 215.

[171] James, 221.

myself in him/her"). Their relationship more resembles one of those enduringly difficult (enduring because difficult) friendships that is neither so intense and transient as an erotic encounter, nor as totalizing as a romantic relationship, yet nonetheless frequently sustains life at the margins of intimate norms. Such friendships must delicately navigate sustained, partial, and asymmetrical estrangement. These friendships remain sticky scenes not merely because they enable new intensities of self-disclosure and entwinement, but because they occupy the middle-distance of intimacy, involving unpredictable combinations of proximity and distance, vulnerability and offishness.

The basis of their attachment is explicitly one of interested, not libidinal, reading. Marcher is constantly worried about the asymmetrical power dynamics of the relationship, given that he is always the subject of this reading. His anxiety turns on the value of interest as a relatively cheap reward in contrast to romance. Marcher wonders aloud to May "if it's quite fair. Fair I mean to have so involved and—since one may say it—interested you," concerned that May's interest "isn't being particularly repaid."[172] Marcher's anxiety is essentially that interest's "payment" is conditional upon its intensification into the "real form" of romance:

> all this naturally was a sign of how much he took the intercourse itself for granted… It simply existed; had sprung into being with her first penetrating question to him in the autumn light there at Weatherend. The real form it should have taken on the basis that stood out large was the form of their marrying.[173]

Marital telos, Marcher's reciprocation of what he and many readers have read as May's yearnful desire, is the absent "real form" that puts ethical pressure on their conversation, suggested by the equivocation between "intercourse"'s older sense of frequent and habitual contact in conversation and action" and the growing sexual meaning acquired in the nineteenth and early twentieth

[172] James, 209.

[173] James, 204.

centuries.[174] May, however, refuses Marcher's anxiety that without libidinal satisfaction, their relationship is unsatisfying or more exploitative than any other. She replies, "Ah what else does one ever want to be [but interested]? If I've been 'watching' with you, as we long ago agreed I was to do, watching's always in itself an absorption."[175]

The interested reading that worries Marcher and that appeals to May operates in explicit juxtaposition with libidinal reading. Marcher is first introduced standing apart from a mass of visiters to Weatherend "gloating" at art, their mode of aesthetic observation taking the appetitive quality of the "ghoulish public" gloating over Wilde.[176] James heightens the repulsiveness of this mode of aesthesis, likening it to "the movements of a dog sniffing a cupboard," impelled by the "dream of acquisition."[177] The crowd "mingle[s] their sounds of ecstasy" in copulative proximity with their desired objects.[178] James, from the start, presents the reader with a model of the infatuated 'bad reader.' For all his problems reading, Marcher remains decidedly separate from this crowd, which is how he notices May, an attendant who almost blends into the wallpaper. As the narrator traces Marcher's movement from the crowd's sexual heat to May, he is further decoupled from the romantic: he and May share neither an "[original] passage of a romantic… kind," nor an "imbecile 'offer'" of sex: they lack an erotic drama to sustain their reacquaintance.[179] What ends up joining them in "intimate community" is a relationship of interested reading.[180]

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[174] Oxford English Dictionary Online (March 2023), s.v. "Intercourse, n."

[175] James, *Better Sort*, 209.

[176] James, 190.

[177] James, 190.

[178] James, 189.

[179] James, 195.

[180] James, 210.

Although May's oblique talk is often taken for the concealment of desire, I understand it as part of a larger friendship ethic that keeps open the scene of interested reading. Sedgwick observes that until the climax, James sustains an epistemological "askesis," "a particular humility of point of view as being *limited* to Marcher's," permitting the reader "to *know* that we have learned very little…of Bartram."[181] What I am suggesting is that May's talk, an "art indescribable," participates in authoring this *askesis*. Part of the effort of star friendship, Derrida writes, is preserving the affective and epistemological space between friends, which he calls "asceticism, *kenosis*, knowledge of how to evacuate words to gain breathing space for friendship."[182] May employs many of the same grammatical tricks as James does in his later style to diffuse meaning to just this end.

In particular, May employs cleft sentence structures to create circumambulating statements that structure May and Marcher's circumambulating relationship.[183] Cleft constructions create grammatical distance between the subject and the object of a sentence. Clefted, the simple, direct sentence "May watched Marcher" becomes "What May watched was Marcher." Clefting turns a single grammatical clause into two, dividing subject and object between clauses. Observe the cleft in the following pivotal exchange between May and Marcher:

> In her own look, however, was doubt. "You see what?
> [Marcher:] "Why, what you mean—what you've always meant."
> She again shook her head. "*What I mean isn't what I've always meant.* It's different."[184]

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[181] Sedgwick, "Beast in the Closet," 199.

[182] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 53.

[183] Here are a few of May's more Jamesian constructions: "What I see is, as I make it out, that you've achieved something almost unprecedented in the way of getting used to danger;" "It has not been a question for me. If you've had your woman, I've had…my man;" "It *would* be the worst…I mean the thing that I've never said;" "It would if it *should* happen…What we're speaking of, remember, is only my idea;" "Ah, your not being aware of it…your not being aware of it is the strangeness *in* the strangeness. It's the wonder *of* the wonder." James, *Better Sort*, 212, 214, 224, 224, 230. For an extensive discussion of deixis and cleft sentences in James' late style, see Seymour Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 53–71.

[184] James, *Better Sort*, 225, emphasis added.

May's cleft reply distances subject ("I") from object ("what I've always meant") compared to the more efficient construction, "I don't mean what I always meant." This makes the relationship between agents hinge in their near symmetry ("What I mean" | "What I've always meant") on broken identity. The sentence also evokes the deflation of disclosure withheld. Clefting typically emphasizes the object, but in this case, the object is a deictic pronoun ("what" in "what I've always meant"), which refers back to a virtual (because never previously articulated) statement. The combined effect, at the level of the sentence, is to create suspension, then deflate its resolution by formally resolving the sentence without disclosure. The initial "what" points, recursively, to another pronominal "what" that goes nowhere, rather than generating meaning or plot. The effect is not a repression of meaning, but its diffusion. Her syntax *mimics* and *prolongs* Marcher and May's cleft intimacy, a mutual interest that hinges on the affective and epistemic gap between them.

May's cleft constructions at the level of character the story's overarching concern with diffusing meaning transfictionally across separate stories rather than bringing out latent diegetic meaning in the form of climax. "Beast" opens with a distinctive cleft construction:

> What determined the speech that startled him in the course of their encounter scarcely matters, being probably but some words spoken by himself quite without intention—spoken as they lingered and slowly moved together after their renewal of acquaintance.[185]

This sentence could, of course, be written more efficiently without clefting, as "Some words probably spoken quite without intention determined the speech that startled him…" Clefting, here, generates ambiguity about who does what by refusing to clearly specify the relationship between subject and object, which in turn obscures the story's "original motive."[186] Strangely, the opening word of the story is an empty term, "What." A deictic, it immediately gestures to some moment

[185] James, 189.

[186] James, 189.

outside the frame of the story. At the same time, it has a second function as an expletive, pointing forward to the displaced subject of the sentence, "some words." This both loosens the referential relationship between parts of speech *and* forces the reader to attune to the context which exists outside the enclosure of both sentence and story (e.g. the prior story, "The Story In It").

Why does James open the story with a word that suspends rather than discloses meaning? The larger point I am working toward is that cleftness circumvents libidinal reading, reorienting the reader from reading for escalating intensity and disclosure to transfictional relays that move laterally across narrative limits. James' stories flatten out the structure of the mystery, a genre quintessentially about drive (to copulate, to kill, to know). Frederick Jameson observes that stories that open with a pronoun typically inaugurate a mystery that will resolve:

> This peculiar beginning seems to betoken a nothingness, a void, before the opening of the text itself. A pronominal beginning] most often announces a thriller of some kind, and the unidentified pronoun stands in for the unidentified serial killer of the novel in question.[187]

The mystery or thriller novel eventually sutures back up the cleft, revealing the direct relationship between subject and object, in that we learn who did what. The only disclosure made by James' cleft, however, is that the hunt for disclosure "scarcely matters."[188] Unlike a thriller, James keeps the cleft open, peppering the prose with superfluous clues, cleft sentences, and vague pronouns that distance the reader, like Marcher, further and further from the supposed object of the story, to the point of numbness. May is essential to this effect, for "she was by no means satisfied with such a trifle as the climax to so special a suspense."[189] Where May's clefting gestures to the cleft structure of her relationship to John, James' points to the cleft structure of the collection.

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[187] Jameson, *Antinomies*, 165.

[188] James, *Better Sort*, 189.

[189] James, 205.

When James does finally spring a belated climax upon the reader, it is neither so "conclusive" nor unironically "formally privileged" as Sedgwick suggests. Sedgwick rightly notes that this moment is stylistically distinct in that it closes the syntactic and epistemic distance, "supplying Answers in the form of symmetrical supplementaries."[190] Sentences become active, direct, and unequivocal. All the same, a reader paying attention to the action unfolding beneath this quickening of pulse will notice that the Beast never actually springs. Here are story's concluding sentences:

> He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb.[191]

Marcher turns toward May's tomb and the story ends before the Beast springs.

This turning away parallels the reader's turning to the page of the next story, "The Birthplace," a parallel activated by Marcher's reference to May's grave as "an open page."[192] Like the story's opening, its ending displaces any "settled" meaning into extradiegetic space. The lure of closure and closeting, in the final moment, opens back up into the cleft between stories. The story toward which Marcher turns, "The Birthplace" (which immediately follows "Beast" in both *The Better Sort* and Vol. XVII of The New York Edition) offers a transfictional likeness of "Beast," and cautions against transforming May and Marcher's detachment into repressed or closeted desire. What answers does "The Birthplace" hold for us? Morris Gedge, the protagonist of "The Birthplace," is the live-in caretaker and tour guide at Shakespeare's house museum. Gedge feels stifled beneath the "gluttony of the public," their demand for "engaging intensity" in conjuring up

[190] Sedgwick, "Beast in the Closet," 200.

[191] James, *Better Sort*, 244.

[192] James, 242.

Shakespeare's aura.[193] His duty to cater to their libidinal desires eclipse his "interes[t]…in what, I think, is *the* interesting thing…The fact of the abysmally little that, in proportion, we know" about Shakespeare.[194] His interest, that is, resides in the unbridgeable historical gap between himself and his object (Shakespeare). His detached interest, however, becomes an obstacle to his professional obligations. "Detached as he was interested," he engages his audience with "pleasant irony," "light perspective, and yet not cheap, detachment," which nonetheless disappoints an audience that desires to be swept up in Shakespeare's aura.[195] When he is almost fired for his "critical sense," he tries to inspire his audience with critical distance by giving them what the way, but to excess: "There would be more than one fashion of giving away the show, and wasn't *this* perhaps a question of giving it away by excess? He could dish them by too much romance as well as by too little."[196]

Significantly, the Beast that never springs in "Beast" *does* spring in "The Birthplace." "It's too *beastly* easy, you know," Gedge tells two visitors who catch onto his strategy of "giving away the show."[197] These two visitors are "*beastly* curious" in his over the top performance, affirming that his display "renew[s] so…the interest" of the house, a compliment he takes as "only too *beastly* kind."[198] Gedge's employer, who militates against Gedge's irony, is, in contrast, a "beast-tamer."[199] Beastliness comes to refer to Gedge's performance of ironic intensity, which he hopes will both superficially satisfy while also thwarting the avidity of his gluttonous public. Might this inform our reading of James' beastly climax in "The Beast In the Jungle," suggesting that it, too, gives away the

[193] James, 286, 277.

[194] James, 279.

[195] James, 279, 277, 281.

[196] James, 290, 297.

[197] James, 302, emphasis added.

[198] James, 303, 301, emphases added.

[199] James, 308.

show by dishing up romance in excess? At the very least, this transfictional resonance injects irony into the climax's lure to read for exposure, diffusing the effects of its stylistic "engorgement." It allows us to think about how this over-the-top intensity disqualifies the delicate texture of Marcher and May's friendship built on cleftness. In this light, "Beast" looks like an allegory about friendship's end, rather than a tragedy about a life alienated from its sexual truth until too late.

Within *The Better Sort*, long-range transfictional diffusions counter narrative drive. In the wake of seduction, they invite the reader into a drifting relationship of detached, panoramic reading. The single story, as a unit that drives toward climax, ultimately gestures out to the cleft structure of collection.[200] With the advent of sexuality, there was less and less room to luxuriate in the cleft space between them. James' ambient transfictionality ekes out a space apart from libidinal logics that tether the subject and her narrative arcs to sexual object choice, pursuit, and consummation. The transmigration of a phrase, echo, or likeness re-opens our judgment, asking us to return to the prosaic expanses we may have rushed over in pursuit of climax.

Formal Insignificance

The tension *The Better Sort* stages between drive and transfictional diffusion returns us to this chapter's opening observation about the collection's formal forgettability. The grammar of James's collection wedges open the distance between subject and object in a relationship of mutual shrinking away. Moore's collections fail to manifest the robust national, ethnic, and sexual cohesion, leaving instead loose, provisional relations that Moore calls "star friendship" and "perhapsing." In pointing

[200] Here we see a key difference between James' practice of the short story and Poe's. Olding, commenting on this difference, notices that the boundaries of James' stories remain permeable, versus Poe's emphasis on climactic consummation: "In Poe's stories, there is no possibility of experience for the characters beyond the limited horizon of their individual tales. The stories end completed and self-sufficient. James's stories suggest lives and moral realities, shades of meaning and feeling *beyond the final full stop*." Olding, "English Short Story," 43, emphasis added.

out the collection's oft-neglected significance, I do not mean to chastise critics for overlooking it. Rather, I find the collection interesting to the extent that it might be considered a recessive form insofar as its interconnections withdraw to the threshold of perception. The collection demands a particular kind of attention that is dilated, recursive, and panoramic rather than drive-oriented, in the absence of which these connections retreat into formal insignificance, mere background. The collection is therefore uniquely poised to explore the complex co-production of narrative significance and insignificance.

Moore and James' collections imbue this formal propinquity with a social allegorical function, exploring which relationships attain "real form" and which fall into insignificance. I have argued that Moore and James associate transfictionality, those delicate connections that inhabit the negative space between stories, with the celibate sociality that inhabits the negative space of desire. Affirming the collection for its formal recessiveness chimes with a broader theoretical turn to friendship as a bond uniquely capable of inhabiting disruption, negativity, and withdrawal. This is what Derrida designates with the phrase "politics of friendship." Whereas tighter, eroticized bonds like identity, love, and sexual desire are fueled by a drive to radical mutuality (and at their most extreme, release from the ego), "'good friendship,'" writes Derrida, "demands…the interruption of all fusion or confusion between you and me."[201] Friendship is a fundamentally compromised social form, in spite of its association with platonism. It must revise itself around constraint to admit from the outset the delimitation of self and other, and so endures deflation, stagnation, and divestment, where libidinal bonds tend to shatter. "Star friendship" only takes this feature of friendship to its utmost limit, an almost abstract, historical relationality totally withdrawn from sensual life. This kind of friendship plot is by its distanced and revisable nature difficult to story in relation to the love plot,

[201] Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 62.

especially in a historical moment of intimacy's sexualization. Moore and James' collections suggest one approach to rendering such low-frequency relationality, taking up the collection's formal recessivity to give shape to the recessiveness of celibate intimacy.

Conclusion: Three Fairy Tales of Recessive Form

"Freed from obedience to the sex drive in the full flowering of their virility"

Across this dissertation, I have highlighted various recessive forms late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers took up to render recessive sociality. In Chapter 1, I highlighted the ungainly odd woman novel, which adopted the extinction-bound three-volume novel to narrate the odd woman's extinction-bound asexuality. Loathed by late nineteenth-century writers for its superfluous plotting, anticlimaxes, and narrative deflations its length demanded, the triple-decker perversely suited the odd woman's superfluous plotlines. Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) and Brooke's *A Superfluous Women* (1894) were among the final novels to be published in triple-decker form. Brooke's text especially is concerned with "falling form" through the lens of eugenics, a term whose referent could just as well apply to the three-volume novel. Chapter 2 turned to the spinster's starring role in *fin-de-siècle* American regionalism. Spinster regionalism is characterized, I argued, by narrow and immobile (non)libidinal economies. This is a feature not only of subject ("acrid virginity"), but also of style and form, insofar as the former eludes psychological depth and the latter enforces a strict economy of language and plot.[1] Pushing this affinity between celibacy and short forms further, Chapter 3 examined the inextricability of celibacy and the formal development of the short story collection, a loose fictional collectivity that its early practitioners, from George Egerton to George Moore and Henry James, associated with the relational negativity of celibate sociality.

In short, each chapter notices texts leveraging form to think through sexual indifference, and vice versa. My emphasis on the relationship between short form and aneroticism indicates the turn-of-the-century's renaissance of the short story deserves more critical interest than it is typically

[1] As early reviewers wrote, these stories "kno[w] how wisely to omit" and "tur[n] curiosity away, a little shame-faced." Macdonnell, "Mary E. Wilkins," 102.

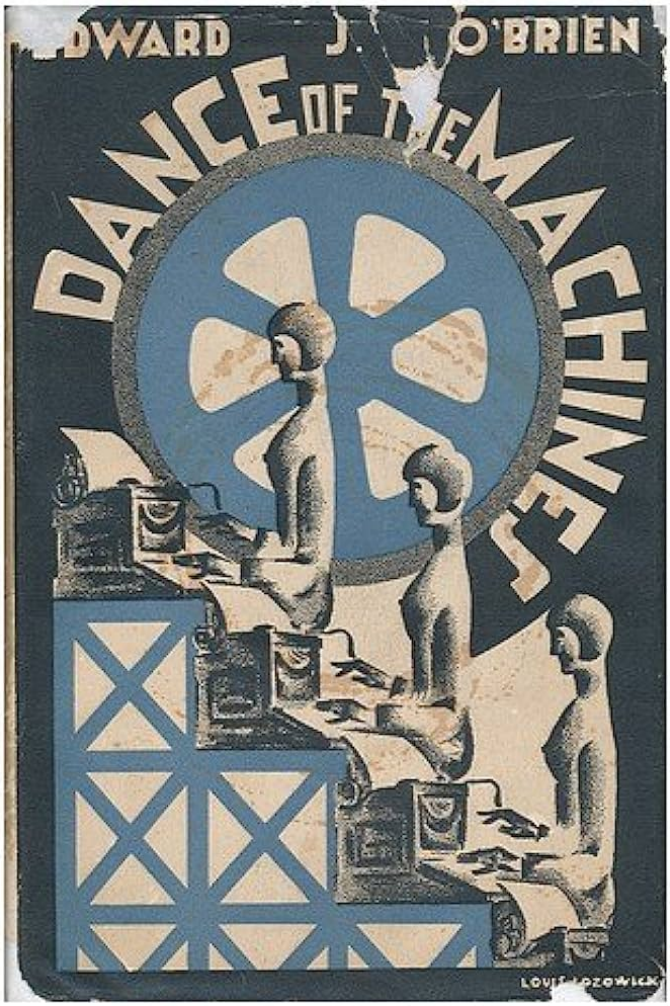
afforded. Walter Benjamin delivers one of the most famous early twentieth-century pronouncements on the period's short story in "The Storyteller" (1936). Bemoaning the disappearance of our "most reliable of all our capacities," the "art of storytelling," Benjamin declares the short story is part of a broader turn to quickly produced goods. Citing Paul Valéry's complaint that "Today no one cultivates what cannot be created quickly," Benjamin writes,

> Indeed, we have even managed to abbreviate stories. We have witnessed the development of the 'short story,' which was withdrawn from the oral tradition and no longer allows for that slow accumulation of thin, translucent layers which offers the most fitting image of the process in which the perfect story is revealed through the stratification of numerous retellings.[2]

For Benjamin, the modern short story is, on the one hand, symptomatic of a general commodification of narrative that abbreviates artisanal storytelling (characterized by slow, aimless elaboration) into an easily consumed form. This echoes other paradigmatic critiques of the short story early in the twentieth century, such as Edward J. O'Brien's *The Dance of the Machines: The American Short Story and the Industrial Age* (1929), which saw a writer like O. Henry as the nadir of literary aesthetics' mechanization. The incredible cover to O'Brien's work by Precisionist lithographer Louis Lozowick illustrates what O'Brien and Benjamin both saw as the link between the short story's economy and modularity with the modern assembly line (Figure 4.1).

[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2019), 57–8.

Figure 4.1: Cover art by Louis Lozowick depicting short story manufacture as an assembly line, for Edward J. O'Brien's *The Dance of the Machines* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1929).



On the other hand, the short story *collection* was often composed of slowly accumulated and multiply revised stories, "thin, translucent layers" accreted together, the hallmark of a kind of storytelling Benjamin worries has been lost to industrialization. Johann Peter Hebel, Nikolai Leskov, and Oskar Maria Graf wrote sketches and short stories that appeared in collections, religious calendars, and chronicles. Benjamin takes up these writers as exemplary storytellers for their recessive fictions: they "increas[e] [their] distance" from the modern reader by adopting archaic narrative forms like the chronicle, which embody oral storytelling's "unhurried accretion" and

refusal to "accurately link together specific events" into a common narrative arc.[3] Whereas the novel "is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, or *one* battle," storytelling takes shape across "*multiple* scattered events," each individual part "tied," yet not incorporated, "into the next."[4] Benjamin's admiration of these nineteenth- and twentieth-century short story writers allows us to see the celibate collection as more sophisticated than merely the "abbreviation" of novelistic narrative. There writers illuminate for Benjamin the fact that "historical secular forces of productivity…have gradually eliminated the storyteller from the realm of living speech and at the same time have made a new beauty visible in what has disappeared."[5] They bear this "new beauty visible in what has disappeared."

What first intrigued me about Benjamin's 'The Storyteller" is that he points to legibly queer moments in Leskov's fiction as evidence of Leskov's allegiance to pre-modern storytelling. In one striking moment, he writes that Leskov's protagonists bear:

> maternal traits that are occasionally raised to a mythical level (which certainly endangers the story's purity.) The main character of his story "Kotic and Platonida" is an emblematic figure in this regard. The peasant [Kotin] Prisonski is bisexual. His mother raised him as a girl for twelve years. His feminine side matures at the same time as his masculine side, and his bisexuality 'becomes a symbol of the Man-God.'[6]

These figures' sexual completeness (in a sex binary system) risks becoming impure insofar as they offer a compensatory romance through an "inauthentically mythical" vision of plenitude.[7] Nonetheless, Benjamin is interested in the way "these maternal masculine figures" that

> commandeer Leskov's storytelling skills again and again are freed from obedience to the sex drive in the full flowering of their virility. For all that, they do not actually embody an ascetic ideal; rather the abstinence of these righteous beings has so little

[3] Benjamin, 48, 57, 60–1.

[4] Benjamin, 62–3.

[5] Benjamin, 52.

[6] Benjamin, 68.

[7] Benjamin, 68.

> to do with renunciation that it becomes an antithesis to the unbridled lust the storyteller portrays in "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk."[8]

These men are "righteously abstinen[t]" insofar as they lack the hunger to escape solitude. Their bisexual self-sufficiency works contrapuntal to Leskov's more famous novella *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, whose titular protagonist is unable to bear the boredom of her provincial bourgeois life, which unleashes in her "unbridled lust." The contrast here is between otherworldly figures freed from lack (never alienated from the mother) and the bourgeois subject perversely beyond satisfaction. While Benjamin worries the former risks presenting a wish-fulfilling "*imago*" of the non-oedipal, disalienated subject ("embodiments of the world's wisdom, kindness, and consolation"), this quality is also what withdraws these figures from the world of the modern reader, placing them behind the veil of fairytale and freighting them with the residue of a vanishing narrative mode and its social conditions that have disappeared. Their effect is not one of nostalgia or aspirational identification with folk origins so much as "disenchantment (in a fairy-tale sense)" with the present.

Benjamin tellingly calls the defining feature of a skilled storyteller like Leskov "chaste brevity," a term whose sexual implications pointedly contrast with the novel's burning appetites. By "chaste brevity," Benjamin means psychological flatness, an "avoid[ance] of psychological shading," and abstaining from "forc[ing] psychological context…on the reader."[9] Like his "maternal masculine figures," Leskov's narrative "chastity" is not a "renunciation," repression, or winking suggestion of illicit psychological content.[10] Rather, it involves taking up situations in such a way that "eludes psychological analysis."[11] If this narrative mode feels remote to the modern reader, it is because it

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[8] Benjamin, 69.

[9] Benjamin, 55.

[10] "The sublimation of the personal in reticence on which the novel verges (*whereas storytelling avoids it altogether*) is for us a privilege of the bildungsroman." Benjamin, 25, emphasis added.

[11] Benjamin, 25, 55.

harkens back to social conditions that no longer exist. He relates Leskov's storytelling to disappearing artisanal craft, slowly accumulated as a "companion[n]" to "relaxation" and "boredom," rather than as a rapidly produced commodity with the aim of killing a now unbearable boredom by simultaneously quenching and further stimulating "burning interest."[12] What Benjamin's emphasis on desexualization and chastity underscores is that the "beauty" he sees in certain writers' tales does *not* constitute the survival of authentic historical experience that the reader, if sensually open enough, can consummate.

This is a far cry from what Elizabeth Freeman has called "erotohistoriography," an important historiographic mode in queer studies which understands history and "time as fully incorporated, as nowhere existing outside of bodies and their *pleasures*."[13] It resonates with Heather Love's argument that the longstanding association between queerness and backwardness demands queer scholars attend to texts and figures that "choose isolation, turn toward the past, or choose to live in a present disconnected from any larger historical continuum."[14] Although Love's texts exhibit intense inward and backward turning erotics, chaste brevity should not be written off as apolitical, a disavowal of sexuality, history, and history's erotic potential. Benjamin was acutely aware of the politics of history's eroticization, a politics that uniquely appealed to the twentieth-century subject starved of authentic experience. Emphasizing the sensory alienation that creates an exploitable craving for authentic experience, often routed through erotic appeals, allows us to understand Benjamin's critique of the novel, and why he is so drawn to Leskov's "maternal masculine figures." In Benjamin's telling, the novel's rise to formal dominance in the nineteenth century derives from its

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[12] Benjamin, 65, 56.

[13] Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography," *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 57–68, emphasis in original.

[14] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 8.

intensification of the sensual hunger produced by loneliness. The novel heightens the reader's isolation, but continuously generates narrative "tension" that "quickens" the "dance" of readerly desire across this estrangement.[15] The disalienation of Leskov's figures is not arrived at through the heightening of lack and its sensual fulfillment; rather, having never been severed from the plenitude of the maternal, they have never been inaugurated into oedipal sexuality and its economy of lack. This lends them their auratic quality within a written nineteenth-century text, auratic insofar as they "elude" the psychology of the present.

"A story of someone who withdrew and learned the art of no longer getting in anyone's way"

Discussing the German author Oskar Maria Graf's collection *Calendar Stories* (1929) and novel *Bolwieser* (1931), Benjamin suggests storytelling's chaste brevity might be considered a political aesthetic mode akin to epic theater, but operating through retreat rather than confrontational excess. He celebrates Graf for telling stories in which "experiences diminish" their protagonists:

> That is the case with Stationmaster Bolwiser, whom we meet in his peak years in full command of a sexuality that magnificently adorns his wretched married life. Bolwieser, the obstinate philistine, the stubborn petty bourgeois, he, too, is unusable. He can only be left to shrink, to sink, to grow more and more stunted, until he becomes a manageable household object in southern Bavaria... He dies off, withering away from the world and from women. Yet the more his human traits shrivel, the more his creatureliness inspires confidence, and in the end, the all but nameless ferryman who was once the stationmaster has become the infallible local weather prophet even though he never asks anything of others, nor do they ask anything of him… This is no novel, but a story of someone who withdrew and learned the art of no longer getting in anyone's way.[16]

Graf's story is one of desexualization to the point of asociality ("he never asks anything of others, nor do they ask anything of him"). Unlike in Leskov, desexualization here begins as punishment for

[15] Recall that for Benjamin "the birthplace of the novel" is the sensually alienated individual, and that "someone reading a novel…is solitary, more so than any other reader." Benjamin, *Storyteller Essays*, 52, 65.

[16] Benjamin, 25–6.

his obstinate philistinism and a petty bourgeois life. However, the more Bolweiser's sexuality "shrivels," the more the story opens onto an interesting, we might say queer, "creatureliness." By creatureliness, Benjamin designates an impersonality, a loss of individuality, which leaves him "all but namelessness." "This is no novel," Benjamin emphasizes, for the novel "proceeds from the construction of a personality," rather than, in storytelling, "its dismantling."[17]

Benjamin makes this point about Graf's recessive aesthetic via a comparison to modernist epic theater. Graf's stories "are diffident attempts to steer the old calendar stories in a direction which a new school calls 'epic.'"[18] Benjamin sees in Graf's recessive fiction an analogous attempt to "eliminate the personal from which the novel takes its due."[19] Yet, where epic theater tends to alienate through confrontation, excess, and shock (often through the removal of distance between diegetic and nondiegetic worlds, e.g. "breaking the fourth wall"), Benjamin is interested in stories that are totally anti-theatrical, "shrinking" from the audience. Graf's *Bolweiser* is a far cry, he notes, from Wedekind, who "would have portrayed the demonic side of [the stationmaster's] unbridled sexuality."[20] The "moral" of Graf's story lies in its "coolness," not its promiscuity, a domestication of desire taken to the extreme of near total social detachment. This subtractive narrative logic is at the heart of what I am calling recessive form. Benjamin offers Graf's story of a man blanched of sexuality and "learning the art of no longer getting in anyone's way" as a larger model of recessive aesthetics. Recessive form gets out of the way. Its parts make minimal or quiet claims on each other and on readers. It exists at a remove. Although Benjamin sees the recessiveness of Leskov and Graf as a rare feature idiosyncratic to these writers, I have been arguing that recessiveness was an

[17] Benjamin, 25.

[18] Benjamin, 24.

[19] Benjamin, 25.

[20] Benjamin 25.

important, if underrecognized, literary current in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in this era's short forms. "These stories have no main point and earn their meager wages with frank and exact observations," Benjamin writes of Graf's *Calendar Stories*, a description that could apply just as well to spinster regionalism's tales of domesticated desire, James' limp forms, and Moore's monochromatic collections.[21] Similarly, I am arguing that the flatness, ungainliness, and muted affects readers attribute to the texts in this dissertation are not merely aesthetic failures, but rather features of recessive form. With Benjamin, we can understand this muted palette in terms of "chaste brevity," insofar as it does not make a strong sensual or libidinal claim on the reader's feelings, identifications, or appetites.

Benjamin's interest in Graf also offers us a useful way to think through "diffidence" rather than dissidence as a mode of political aesthetics. Staging distance through withdrawal, Graf's stories are "diffident attempts" at a mode of narrative that is modern and experimental, but at the same time alien in their backward-turning. Similar to (sexual and aesthetic) dissidence, diffidence lacks fidelity to the tastes of present readers. Rather than taking up a future-oriented avant-gardism, however, they gesture back to obsolete norms. Benjamin's writing on "the collector" further elucidates the political aspects of this attenuated aesthetic. The collector, like Leskov and Graf, is an inheritor of this epic process of storytelling, collecting "extinct nature" and preserving "moribund" forms.[22] This is not, however, a process of revivification. Their deadness is the point, and Benjamin emphasizes that upon entering the collection, the collected "tur[n] to stone."[23] Thus, the collector's relationship to her antique objects is not one of lust or hot pursuit, e.g. the art collector's mode of

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[21] Benjamin, 24.

[22] Evoking the epic poet, Benjamin's ur-collector of extinct nature is a shell shop in the arcades: "Extinct nature: the shell shop in the arcades," a shop that bears all the "unfathomability of the moribund arcades." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 205.

[23] Benjamin, 205.

high consumption or what Benjamin calls the "profane" owner's sheer pleasure in possession. Rather, the collector proceeds by a Kantian process of "'disinterested' contemplation by virtue of which the collector attains to an unequaled view of the object—a view which takes in more, and other, than that of the profane owner."[24] This disinterestedness permits the collection to retain a fidelity to the past, rather than be conscribed to a value system defined by the pleasure or usefulness afforded in the present. Disinterest allows the collector, therefore, to "look through" moribund forms "into their distance, like an augur."[25] The collector is uniquely attuned to historical residues rendered insignificant by modernity: "Even the seemingly most neutral…concerns" her.[26]

It is precisely in her disinterested attunement to the bland, useless, and neutral that she encodes a kind of involuntary historical memory, what Abbas describes as the "*recovery* of all the objects and values that have failed to 'make it' historically'."[27] Unlike the "profane" antiques fetishist, who takes objects out of circulation to take pleasure in their rarity and 'authentic' historicity, the collector "takes objects that *are* out of circulation [already] and confronts cultural history with them."[28] The collection's recessive aesthetic preserves neutered traces of history, neutered insofar as they have failed to reproduce themselves into the present and appear valueless within contemporary regimes of value (economic, aesthetic, and social). The upshot is that the collection—always an "inscrutable" "patchwork" of "neutral" entities to the profane consumer—becomes an archive of superannuated social forms and insignificant others. This conception of the collection as an archive of recessive form deeply resonates with the celibate stories and collections of

[24] Benjamin, 207.

[25] Benjamin, 207.

[26] Benjamin, 206.

[27] Ackbar Abbas, "Walter Benjamin's Collector: The Fate of Modern Experience," *New Literary History* 20, no. 1 (1988): 224.

[28] Abbas, 231.

Jewett, Wilkins Freeman, James, and Moore. The celibate sociality that suffuses these works' content and form constitute a set of intimate values that fail to 'make it,' historically and aesthetically, within an epoch structured by libidinal intensification.

"Those from whom *the world* has already so largely detached, and then who detach back"

Benjamin's turn to diffident or recessive form is a crucial insight for queer studies, a field founded on its commitment to sexual dissidence. Insofar as this dissertation's archive of recessive forms drag against not only the crystallization of modern sexual identity, but also the compulsorization of erotic desire and consequent expansion of repressive logics, these recessive forms are also queer forms. However, the inclusion of these recessive forms within a queer canon necessitates revising queer studies' framework for what constitutes queer form, anchored as this framework is in libidinal excess. Teresa de Lauretis' important definition of "queer text" is paradigmatic here. Queer texts deploy "sexuality as an unmanageable excess of affect" which drives the text "beyond representation."[29] A queer text of fiction, she writes, "not only work against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referential language and the referentiality of images, what Pier Paolo Pasolini, speaking of cinema, called 'the language of reality.'[30]" One problem with this version of queer form is its indebtedness to, and reproduction of, high modernist aesthetic ideals.[31] What marks out the texts of my dissertation as aesthetically recessive is their ambivalent relationship to the

[29] Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future," *GLQ* 17, nos. 2–3 (2011): 247.

[30] De Lauretis, "Queer Texts," 244.

[31] De Lauretis tellingly takes Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) as an exemplary queer text, given that its inscrutable density of language produces an effect similar to Pasolinian anti-realism.

emergence of modernism.[32] They profess a greater aesthetic affinity to Balzac or Austen, which Bersani uncoincidentally points to as the height of literary realism's erotophobia, than to the modernist aesthetic currents that will result in the works of Djuna Barnes and Richard Bruce Nugent.[33]

These texts scarcely fit better within interventions into queer's theoretical association with formlessness. Tyler Bradway critiques de Lauretis and others for positing "a universally antagonistic relationship between queerness and narrative," advocating instead for a "strategic formalism" that views queerness in terms of "patterning arrangements that move promiscuously across social, aesthetic, material, and other domains."[34] Ramzi Fawaz similarly pushes back against queer formlessness, insisting that "a fantasized ideal of ceaseless gender and sexual fluidity…will simply not do in a world where human beings necessarily take shape and inhabit specific forms."[35] Fawaz initially defines "a *queer* form" capaciously enough to fit the celibate texts of this dissertation: "any material shape, construct, or pattern that is articulated to, or comes to be inhabited by, some aspect of gender and sexual nonconformity or divergence."[36] Fawaz immediately puts queer form to work as a project of promiscuous transformation he calls "shapeshifting," cultivating in readers/viewers "an affective openness to the measured and meaningful evolution of gender and sexual identities over time," the plasticity of "an evolving self," "'bridg[ed]' emotional and political distances," and "the endless proliferation of forms."[37] The recessive forms I have been grappling with fail to live up

[32] Bersani, *Future for Astyanax*, 70–77.

[33] Recall James' dissatisfaction over literary intoxication in "The New Novel" and the odd investment of Moore's Celibate collections in artists left behind by early modernisms (Wagner, impressionism).

[34] Bradway, "Queer Narrative Theory," 712.

[35] Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 9.

[36] Fawaz, *Queer Forms*, 36.

[37] Fawaz, 45, 52, 44, 12.

to this hyperanimated virality, which is precisely what I argue makes them queer. What is queer aesthetics without sexual drive as an orienting device? Can texts that are withdrawn, recalcitrant, and ambivalent about evolving "new" sexual forms be queer forms?

This flags a broader problem facing queer studies. If "queer criticism has always attested to the primacy of sex and sexuality to any future paradigm of radical thought," there is a concomitant tendency to disavow relational modes and analytics which challenge sexuality's absolute primacy.[38] Queer studies has thus had difficulty in accounting for anhedonia, libidinal indifference, and the drying up of desire as anything more than the cruel damage of discipline, let alone important features of queer life and history. Thus, the spate of work that takes pains to affirm the profound eroticism of asexuality and historical celibacy without adequately attending to the aneroticism often characterizing these social forms. This work is symptomatic of queer studies' broader tendency to affirm the potential eroticism of any experience, from debilitating disease to sexual harm to historical isolation. Recent works like Gila Ashtor's *Homo Psyche: On Queer Theory and Erotophobia* (2021) and Davis and Dean's *Hatred of Sex* (2022) take aim at criticism that insufficiently insists on the absolute autonomy of sexuality from social structure, work it charges with "erotophobia." The aversion to, harm from, and impossibility of sexual desire for many people (the titular "hatred of sex") are constructed as symptomatic of a disciplinary culture that obstructs the (ostensibly intrinsic) "appeal of psychic violation" and radically anti-social experience of sexual abandon. Davis and Dean advocate that queer theory defiantly "redefine" sex's "capacity for harm…in terms of pleasure," rather than think through this hatred of sex as its own kind of anti-sociality.[39]

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[38] Ashtor, *Homo Psyche*, 1.

[39] One major consequence of this (anti)disciplinary response is that it renders work that importantly explores the undesirable political complicity of sexual liberation (e.g. Ferguson's *One-Dimensional Queer*, Sharon Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism*) as an "ideological smear campaign against sex," because it "displaces the focus from sex to race" and challenges sexuality's idealized antagonism to social structure. Davis and Dean, *Hatred of Sex*, vii, 51, 62.

It has become almost cliché in queer studies to argue that the work of queerness is attacking immobile, monadic, and rigidly structured forms. Davis and Dean are typical in describing erotophobia as sexual desire that is "delimit[ed]," "reterritorialized," "localiz[ed]," "institutionally domesticat[ed]," and "[bound] very tightly so as to limit its significance"[40] "Localizing sexuality through binding always serves as a strategy for controlling it," they write, whereas queers open themselves to unbidden drive, leading to "the *jouissance* of exploded limits," the demolition of circumscribed libidinal economies.[41] This paradigm makes sense in a context wherein libidinal boundedness means monogamy, marriage, heterosexism, and the privatization of intimacy. They contribute less to my project, where we see the expansion of eugenics and consumer capitalism promulgating similar fantasies of boundless erotic potential to explode the limits of racial (re)productivity and consumption, respectively. Celibacy's diminished or absent libidinal economies both fueled (as a specter to be overcome) and deflated (as an obstinate force unable to be completely residualized) these fantasies. Aesthetically, these axes—aligning libidinal and formal constraint with conservatism, radicality with exploded limits—accord with modernist epic theater, but they efface whatever queer politics inhere in reticence.

The celibate texts I examine could be said to take up a queer politics of asociality precisely to the extent they exhibit a bound, localized, or narrow libidinal economy. They fit less well within queer theory's focus on antisociality, given their aesthetic minimalism in contrast to modernist anti-realism and agitprop oppositionality.[42] Queer anti-sociality centers on sexuality as a heightened affective space through which subjects encounter psychic negativity, the destruction of fantasies of

[40] Davis and Dean, 62, 75, 76, 83.

[41] Davis and Dean, 85, 70.

[42] I prefer a language of recessivity and minimalism over opacity given the latter's association with modernist illegibility, anti-narrativity, and linguistic flight from meaning. The texts in this dissertation all have highly legible, even if minimal, plots, arguable excepting James' "Beast In the Jungle."

identity coherence, self autonomy, and intimate reciprocity which stabilize normative life. Rather than stage negativity as an "unmanageable excess of affect" encountered in the shattering intensity of sexual experience, my dissertation's corpus stages relational negativity as an everyday, not especially shattering, experience for subjects who do not participate in normative vectors of attachment formation like sex, romance, and the family. [43] Queer studies' emphasis on sexuality's intensity as a unique force opening up the subject to shatter neglects other ways of living with negativity.

This is the moral of a third fairy tale of desexualization, this one more recent than Leskov's or Graf's. Lauren Berlant concludes a review of Bersani and Phillips' *Intimacies* (2008) and Halperin's *What Do Gay Men Want* (2007), both canonical queer texts that make sexuality the privileged site for forging "a different kind of future in human relatedness," with a hypothetical:

> Here is another fairy tale. One day perhaps you will discover that you have stopped having sex with others, probably for forever. But even then, you will not have stopped having sexuality, nor stopped managing distance and intimacy, touching and being touched, and fantasy. You will not have stopped succumbing to the aggressive drive to order somethings and disorder others that accompanies the bodily and psychic will to induce reciprocity on the world. When you do stop enacting that kind of inflation, people will say that you are depressed. They will say, Keep trying, even in the face of not mattering! Would reading Halperin or Bersani on the pleasures of sacrificed sovereignty and ego dissemination provide other ways of flourishing for those from whom *the world* has already so largely detached, and then who detach back? Not all history comes from the subject, and not all subjects are trying to make worlds or to induce reciprocity on worlds that [...] are not there for them. I love these books, but I'm just asking.[44]

[43] As Berlant notes, this fort/da logic is precisely what has made sex an exceptional site of study: "Sex makes and it destroys. Someone is always inflating his ego and someone is being dominated, sometimes the same person at the same time. Sex thereby provides a singular scene for talking about the limits to associating the human with ethical, intentional action" and "scenes of reciprocity." Lauren Berlant, "Neither Monstrous Nor Pastroal, but Scar and Sweet: Some Thoughts on Sex and Emotional Performance in *Intimacies* and *What do Gay Men Want?*" *Women & Performance* 19, no. 2 (2009): 264.

[44] Berlant, "Neither Monstrous Nor Pastoral," 271.

The conditions for optimism necessary to sustain desire are unevenly distributed and can rapidly collapse with age, illness, trauma, etc. Marginality and precarity are frequently desexualizing, a not especially simple fact these two major works of queer theory sidestep in their homogeneously sexual universes.[45] The depression-like detachment Berlant highlights is antithetical to the erotic drive and pursuit of sex typically made the apex of queer art and life, but it is no less queer insofar as it absorbs into itself the negativity that others encounter uniquely through sexual attraction.

Recessivity is one way of rendering this quotidian negativity without assuming that "all history comes from the subject" and all subjects are at all times engaged in erotic projects. Collections like *Celibates* and *A New England Nun* grapple with detachment from normative intimate frameworks (eros, romance) as an ongoing condition that is itself a relational mode (rather than its antithesis). George Moore names this "star friendship," a concept motivating his early turn to the collection form. What has bothered readers is these texts' narrative "ungainliness," their "windless closures" of desire, their excessively small "drama[s] of a broken teacup," their "thwarted emotions," and their muted palettes of only "two or three tones." They are, in short, disturbing in their affective minimalism which fails to meet the magnitude of readerly desire. They grapple with sexuality's historicity not through "the subject," her erotic exertions, or the interior texture of her embodiment, but through textual insufficiency, a failure to position characters as objects of readerly cathexis and texts as vehicles of cross-historical eros. Pointing to the queerness of aneroticism's recessive forms, I hope, nuances the formal features we associate with queer literature beyond intensity, fracture,

[45] Previewing their later work on lateral agency, Berlant emphasizes the uneven conditions conducive to the radical erotic mandates of *Intimacies* and *What Do Gay Men Want?*: "It's important to remember that some subjects of biopolitical negation, some of the racialized, sexualized, overembodied, poor, migrant, sarcopolitical subjects associated with appetitive incompetence and lack of self-control, feel unlicensed to sustain the ego swelling whose privilege has been poisoning the privileged classes for so long. Whiteness, US citizenship, masculinity, cultural capital, and class-based meritocratic and intimate expectations," Berlant continues, "these things prop up not only the tendency to inflate but the likelihood of getting bailouts when the risks and exposures of self-expansion are unprofitable." Berlant, 271.

opacity, promiscuity, and overdrive. My hope is to potentiate readings of texts, genres, and forms written off as conservatively erotophobic (e.g. Victorian realism) while slackening the impulse to disavow their aneroticism in doing so.

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