

Consuming Communities: U.S. Women's Regionalism and Consumer Culture, 1870-1930

By

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## Abstract

Literary regionalism has always faced critical devaluation, both at the time of its greatest popularity in the late nineteenth century and during its critical rediscovery in the past twenty years. Even those critics who seek to laud regionalist texts for offering alternatives to dominant national narratives assume that regionalism is removed from centers of power and authority and not involved in the creation of national identity. Regional literature's peripheral communities, inhabitants, and localized lives were seen as somehow more authentically American than urban scenes and city dwellers, but paradoxically regionalism's purported authenticity also doomed the genre in the face of the rising changes brought by modernity and literary modernism.

My dissertation argues that regional literature by American women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not only a product of the expanding consumer culture, but was also fundamentally engaged with this culture, using consumer goods to attempt to define and control the communities they depict. This claim challenges concepts of regionalist literature as a marginal generic category as well as traditional beliefs about the consumer economy's destructive impact on regional community identities. Through my examination of texts by Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Edith Wharton, Anzia Yezierska, and Willa Cather, I challenge prevailing notions of regional literature's marginal status. In these texts, individuals consume to both validate their sense of community and attempt to realize their ambitions for social mobility. In doing so, regionalist authors use consumer objects and material exchange to reimagine communities that transgress the presumably fixed margins of the local to promote fluid, permeable notions of modernity and national identity.

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## Introduction

### Consuming Communities in Regionalist Literature

In his 1994 essay “Bioregional Perspectives in American Literature,” Michael Kowalewski pauses briefly to place literary regionalism in historical context en route to his examination of the growing number of ecocritical readings of regionalist literature. “Historically,” Kowalewski says, “literary regionalism has been a self-conscious attempt to evoke the flavor and distinctiveness of life in rural areas of the country removed from urban centers of power and money” (30). Kowalewski here expresses several key assumptions about regional literature: that it is focused on rural areas rather than urban; that it fixates on rendering with accuracy the “flavor” and “distinctiveness” of these rural areas; and that it is removed from the site of (and presumably from an interest in) power and money. This working definition of literary regionalism is far from uncommon. In Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse’s introduction to their 1992 Norton anthology *American Woman Regionalists*, the presumption of literary regionalism’s separation from a central power is implicit; the editors focus instead on distinguishing between the empathetic portrayal of isolated regional communities they see in literary regionalism and the humorous accounts of idiosyncratic country folk held up for the amusement of Eastern readers often found in earlier local color literature. Despite this distinction, both local color and regionalism are assumed to be produced by regional outsiders for consumption by an urban audience. Even when ascribing an empathy-building intent to their woman regionalists, Fetterley and Pryse remove active agency from these authors while reinforcing distinctions between urban readers who consume and rural authors and texts which are the objects of consumption.

This project seeks to question critical perspectives that cast literary regionalism as marginal by examining regionalism's engagement with one of the key markers of modernity: consumer culture. By interrogating the ways regionally conscious writers use consumer culture and goods to attempt to define and control the communities they depict, I work to unseat romanticized notions that regions were isolated and pre-industrial and complicate the belief that consumer culture negatively influenced communal regional values. In doing so, I challenge two prevailing beliefs. First, I challenge the historical-sociological model of community collapse, which structures an understanding of American history around the belief that local communities, representative of a nostalgic and superior collective history, declined in the face of forces such as industrialization, urban growth, and the rise of consumer capitalism. In contrast, I contend that women's regionalist writing of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era reflects a much more complex relationship with the effects of material exchanges, as well as the idea of community itself. The second prevailing belief this project disputes is that regional literature is preoccupied with local details at the expense of an awareness of more general or universal qualities or events. I argue instead that regionalist texts depict communities that are neither isolated nor fixed, but are dynamically involved in reimagining social order through the use of consumer objects.

The distinct elements of my argument are each concerned with margins or borders in a number of ways. The concept of margins is crucial to much critical discussion of regionalist literature. Questions of what can be considered regional literature often focus on the imagined borders between regional communities and the more generic, national whole, asking where a region ends and the nation begins. Beyond the concept of physical margins, regionalist literature and critical discussions of regionalism also explore the social and cultural margins associated with regional settings. The residents of the regions themselves and the writers of what is



traditionally considered regionalist literature are frequently described as marginal or marginalized—excluded from dominant culture not only geographically, but often within their own communities on the basis of gender, class, race, disability, and ethnicity. In addition, regionalist literature (and its predecessor, local color writing) has generically been classed as secondary to the more respected literary movements realism and naturalism, and even more devalued during the advent of literary modernism.<sup>1</sup>

My discussion of consumer culture also engages with the question of social borders and boundaries, as I focus specifically on the ability of consumer goods and activity to mark or confer a place in a social hierarchy. The rapid spread of consumer culture in the late nineteenth century prompted copious anxiety about the impact such a culture would have on regional communities (both rural and urban), personal relationships, and local and national identities. This debate often centered on questions of consumer culture's impact on margins: would consumer culture reinforce the divisions between social classes, or would broader access to material goods collapse these distinctions? How would transformations in distinctions between types of material goods or the ways in which they are given (handmade versus mass-produced, given as gifts versus purchased in a market economy) change the way goods impact human relationships? Would the distinguishing boundaries of regional communities fade as access to consumer goods erased unique regional identities, products, and ways of life? Would consumer culture therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Many critics of regionalist writings identified regionalist authors not as artists engaged in crafting a narrative through their art, but as mere recorders of a rapidly dying reality. Even regionalism's most vocal supporters would voice their defense of the movement in limiting terms. In William Dean Howells's April 1891 "The Editor's Study," for example, he describes Sarah Orne Jewett's "little stories" as "delicately constructed...little masterpieces" (804). In another "The Editor's Study" later that year, Howells describes Mary Wilkins Freeman's stories in similar terms: as "miniatures" that work to convey to future generations "just the expression of that vast average of Americans who do the hard work of the country, and live narrowly on their small earnings and savings" (20). As Shirley Marchalonis notes, Jewett, Freeman, and other local colorist or regionalist authors were frequently seen by their contemporaries as mere chroniclers of reality, "recording rather than creating" (9). Even when acknowledging the artistry of regionalist authors, critics emphasized their work as secondary or marginal; for example, in an 1895 article examining Boston's literary history since the Civil War, Howells writes that while he does not "forget the exquisitely realistic art of Miss Jewett or Miss Freeman," their stories "[have] hardly the novelist's scope" (868).

contribute to the development of a unified national identity, irrespective of the regional nation-states' diverse characteristics?

In answer to these questions, I propose looking at the relationship between regionalist literature and consumer culture in a way not previously undertaken. My examination of literary regionalism's depiction of consumer culture in regional communities shows that even while authors used material goods to test and stretch community boundaries and divisions between classes, they also depicted the failed promise of class mobility offered by mass consumer culture. Urban-capitalist modernity enters these texts in unexpected ways. Through mass-produced gift objects, consumer culture becomes another way to promote community well-being. Through the figure of an urban professional "touring" a rural region, the market economy becomes an uncomfortable reminder of the ways in which geographically isolated social outsiders are marginalized. Through the rhetoric of Progressive-era domestic advice which urges consuming products that reinforce cleanliness and good taste, consumer culture becomes a means of controlling a burgeoning ethnic immigrant population. And through the wider availability of consumer objects to all people, regardless of class and ethnic background, consumerism becomes a threat to exclusive, nativist national identities. The regionalist writers I examine use consumer exchange to define and control the communities they depict, interrogating romanticized notions of isolated, pre-industrial regions and complicating the belief that consumer culture negatively influenced regional communal values, or even that these communal values are incontrovertibly beneficial.

### Regionalist Literature

Because this project engages in an extended critical analysis of regionalist literature, it positions itself among a number of divergent and competing notions of what regionalist literature

is. Although local color writing and texts that are focused on the depiction of geographic places somehow apart from American urban centers had been written since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century, most critics identify the zenith of regionalism as lasting from immediately post-Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century. Some critics extend regionalism's range into the early twentieth century, but note that by that time, regional literature was widely seen as a nostalgic movement that was losing significance. Fetterley and Pryse have a slightly wider time range, pinpointing the beginning of the movement in 1850 with the writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe and concluding in 1910 with a short story by Willa Cather. Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy study the years 1880-1920 in their anthology, *American Local Color Writing*. June Howard, writing on "American Regionalism" for *A Companion to American Fiction 1865-1914*, points to Bret Harte's 1868 story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" as a key "moment when the writerly strategy of focusing on particular places became highly visible," although this story was not technically the first example of local color regionalism (121). The predecessors for local color fiction and regionalist literature, Howard argues, are numerous: from Western humor stories to village sketches to scenes and characters in sentimental and domestic fiction, all genres popular from the early nineteenth century (121). Charles L. Crow's more recent anthology, *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, follows Howard in identifying regionalism's many literary antecedents, and also reflects a more recent trend of extending regionalism beyond the nineteenth century, looking at twentieth and twenty-first century writers whose works embody characteristics common to regionalist writing, although even those characteristics are not universally agreed upon.

Defining regionalism, as Ammons and Rohy state in their introduction, has long been an issue: "There was never a single local color or regionalist tradition, as suggested by today's

debate about which term best names the tradition” (vii). Critics have struggled with whether to classify local color and regionalism as two separate literary movements, to view regionalism as a subgenre of realism, or to even call regionalism a genre at all. Howard offers historical definitions: “Realism has sometimes been defined as literature of general significance, and regionalism as limited. On the other hand, ‘regionalism’ has sometimes been defined as geographically specific literature that also illuminates the general human condition. . . , with the term ‘local color’ reserved for work considered narrow, quaint, and minor” (123).<sup>2</sup> In the simplest definition, regional literature portrays regional experience, using “the details of real-world geography” to assert the value of the particular (Jordan, *New World*, 7). The particularity of regional literature can vary, but often entails portrayals of the local customs, ethnic characters, and native expressions in addition to geographic specificities of a place.

It is equally challenging to determine where regionalism is written. The regions of regionalism grew out of geographic, political, and sectional distinctions, which contribute to competing or flexible boundaries. Numerous critics note the difficulties of aligning regionalism with specific geographic areas, although that is the organizational principle most often applied (e.g. New England regionalism, Southern local color, etc.). One problem is the fluid nature of geographical place names. Northeast, Midwest, South, and West are the four most common groupings (and, indeed, are the categories Ammons and Rohy use in their collection), but those regions could easily be differentiated to a greater degree: why not distinguish further the Great Lakes region, or Appalachia, or the Pacific Northwest?

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<sup>2</sup> A number of critics echo this idea—that traditionally, local color has been neglected and thought to have limited scope and trivial significance, a belief which often extends to regionalism as well. As Crow notes, pre-1960s critical assessments assumed that “regional literature was inherently minor, an art of the miniature, the commonplace, the local, and often the feminine. The term ‘local color’ was used dismissively, as a diminutive,” in contrast to themes believed to be of national importance (1).

Another related issue gestures toward regionalism's perpetual problem of literary devaluation: are regions always peripheral to a more central location, such as urban centers? As evidenced by the quotation that began this introduction, a number of critics associate regional literature exclusively with the rural. In *Reading for Realism*, her discussion of print culture in nineteenth-century America, Nancy Glazener notes that the primary task of regional literature was that of "representing rural life—representing it specifically *as rural*" (192). Mark Storey also works expressly with rural writing as he attempts to recast regional literature as a movement that does "not exist alongside of or separate from the governing literary modes of the time...but within them"—paradoxically creating a further binary by excluding urban regionalism in his examination of rural concerns (Storey 204). The division between rural and urban, regional and "central," is perhaps best probed by critic Raymond Williams, who examines these notions in British settings. In his essay "Region and Class in the Novel," Williams astutely notes that the very act of defining some literature as "regional" carries value judgments; the "steady discrimination" by which only particular regions are seen as regional is "a function of cultural centralization" that focuses not on geography or "kinds of life" but operates instead as "an expression of centralized cultural dominance" (60).

It seems natural, therefore, that a number of critical assessments have considered the ways in which regionalism's peripheral status has influenced its reception and determined its value. These evaluations have typically taken two different paths. One group of critics imagines regionalism as a literature of resistance against a dominant, patriarchal national identity, a critical stance Tom Lutz describes as the "antihegemonic strain of regionalist discourse" (25). Fetterley and Pryse, for example, identify regionalism as primarily a women's literary tradition, examining "the connections between a literature associated with place and a feminist analytic" (*Writing out*

*of Place* 34). According to Fetterley and Pryse, the categories of “women” and “region” “share similar locations within dominant discourses”—locations that are marked as narrow, localized, and restricted (35).<sup>3</sup> Other critics, such as Ammons and Rohy, identify regionalism as a site of racial or social class resistance. Regionalism’s marginal location (both geographically and culturally) becomes a position from which to confront oppressive national ideologies through the portrayal of local difference.

In contrast to the antihegemonic strain, another group of critics sees regionalism’s marginal status not as a location of resistance, but as evidence of appropriation to serve a larger national purpose. Richard Brodhead notes that the more widespread popularity of the regionalist literary genre following the Civil War coincided with “the forcible repression of sectional autonomy in favor of national union and the legal supplanting of the locally variant by national norms of citizenly rights” (119). Regional literature actively contributes to this process; in Brodhead’s words, it “helped compose a certain version of modern history” on the basis of which industrial modernity could be justified and built (121). Amy Kaplan also finds in regional literature a nation-building impetus, describing the work of the “island communities of regionalists...that seemed to elude historical change” as a deceptive nostalgia created by the dominant urban industrial society that simultaneously willfully forgets genuine American history and its sectarian conflicts while inventing “multiple and contested pasts to claim as the shared origin of national identity” (“Nation” 242). Glazener argues that the project of regional literature (which she identifies as largely rural) involves an act of appropriation, “distinguishing the rural from the urban, assessing the practical and symbolic value of the rural to the nation as a whole”

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Fetterley and Pryse, other critics who approach literary regionalism as largely a female-centered movement include Josephine Donovan, “Breaking the Sentence: Local-Color Literature and Subjugated Knowledges” and *New England Local Color Literature*; Barbara H. Solomon, *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman*; and Kate McCullough, *Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women’s Fiction, 1885-1914*.

(191–92). Glazener, like Brodhead and Kaplan, identifies the function of regional literature as a peripheral imagined space that receives and reflects back idealized images of the national.

The narrative of cultural appropriation is rooted in the historical promotion of regionalism as a literary field. As one of regional literature's greatest supporters, William Dean Howells both promoted the literary trend and attempted to define it. As editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells encouraged the publication and review of works that paid careful attention to the detail of local communities, which he saw as a means of making the arts democratic and reflecting a national spirit that differed from the literary products of England and Europe. The ultimate goal of literature, Howells argued, was to reveal that "[m]en are more like than unlike one another"; through authentic depictions of local detail, Howells believed diverse populations would come "to know one another better, that they may all be humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity" (*Criticism* 188).

I see both value in and problems with these two critical approaches to regionalism. The oppositional or antihegemonic stance has an unfortunate tendency to flatten differences between writers in order to see them as part of a unified effort against political and social oppression. In addition, antihegemonic critics exclude from their examination the works of authors who in other ways seem to fulfill the criteria of regionalism because they do not fit into the rubric of resistance (so feminist critics such as Fetterley and Pryse only examine women regionalists, excluding the regional writing of white men as well as men of color whose resistance might add a layer of complexity to their examination). The critical argument of national appropriation is similarly problematic, as it removes the possibility of political agency from regionalist writers, casting them instead as either hapless pawns or unwitting accomplices in the project of building a unified national identity. In addition, both approaches run the risk of further inscribing

regionalism's marginalization by imagining that regional writing serves only a single political purpose or that regional literature depicts "internally homogeneous regions," as Stephanie Foote notes in *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (13).

In this project, I propose an alternative reading of regionalism that brings together facets of both the antihegemonic and the national appropriation critical perspectives. On the one hand, I examine regionalist texts that both resist and offer alternatives to national narratives. However, unlike the antihegemonic strain of criticism, I argue that these texts do not present a unified front of resistance. These texts frequently depict conflict, exclusion, and marginalization rather than unity and homogeneity within regional communities. In addition, in contrast to the narrative of national appropriation, I argue that these conflicts come not from regional literature's separation from the more universal idea of the national or from agents of modernization, but rather from its direct, complexly varied interactions with them.

In making this argument, I build on recent critical support for reading regionalism beyond the frameworks of cultural appropriation or opposition. For example, Foote describes the project of regionalism not as "representing a common national past" but characterizing in its diverse communities the conflicts over immigration, industrialization, and modernization that were plaguing the nation (*Regional Fictions* 13). Lutz also defines regionalist literature as exemplified not by nostalgic consistency, but as "dramatiz[ing] the differences between and within classes, regions, sexes, and communities," seeking not resolution but "an oscillation between the sides" (28). What Williams observes in the British regional novels of Thomas Hardy also applies to the regionalist texts of American authors: "what happens in them, internally and externally—those two abstractions in a connected process—involves a very wide and complex, a fully extended and extensive, set of relationships" that move beyond local, rural concerns (62). Regional



literature's depiction of regional communities is then characterized not by nostalgic imagining or by marginalized resistance but by active engagement with the construction of relationships within and among regions, between region and nation, and (pressingly during the turn-of-the-century rise in American imperial efforts) between the region and the world.

Focusing on regionalism as dialectic and transregional, as Williams, Lutz, and Foote have done, opens up regionalism to more dynamic considerations, including the idea that regionalism is actively engaged in the modern forces they have been seen to resist. In *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Hsuan L. Hsu examines literary regionalism from the perspective of cultural geography, noting that even writers who are complicit in portraying their regions as nostalgic or pre-industrial are subject to the global or national forces their regions imagine to escape:

Largely the products of social and political economic forces, regions are spatial units organized around production, or the extraction of profit from the coordinated workings of nature and labor. The relation between literature and regional production involves not only the production of literature about regions but also the ways in which literary works 'produce,' reimagine, and actively restructure regional identities in the minds and hearts of readers. Moreover, this process of regional transformation occurs in relation to large-scale phenomena such as migrant flows, transportation networks, and international commerce. (Hsu 164)

Like Hsu, other critics see regionalist writers engaging with elements of modernity, whether that engagement is deliberate or inadvertent. For example, Storey states that the literature characterized as regional reveals "the hidden and encoded traces of social and cultural change on a level that is shared and transregional," a depiction that is always in dialogue with "the

geographically indiscrete experience of modernity” (205).<sup>4</sup> “Crossroads,” Zitkala-Ša’s term for her position on the border of two cultures, becomes in Lutz’s recent text the descriptor of regional literature’s location between the local and the national or international, what he terms the “cosmopolitan.” Edward Watts similarly focuses on regionalism’s “moments of interregional exchange,” which are characterized by “continual tension” between loyalty to the region or the nation (178).

In positioning my argument alongside that of recent critics who view regionalism’s margins as fluid and permeable, I also apply that fluidity to regional literature as a genre. This project reads regionalism broadly, focusing on texts that are considered both traditionally regionalist, those that have tended to fall into different categories, such as naturalism, immigrant literature, or realism, and those by authors who have been seen as following or even resisting regionalism. In this way, I agree with Howard’s description of the generic categories of regionalism and local color as “opportunities...not outcomes” for authors (123). I take Howard’s advice as she encourages reading a work “in relation to a form or practice that illuminates” both individual texts and cultural and historical context (123).

I group the writings of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Edith Wharton, Anzia Yezierska, and Willa Cather together because of a number of linked concerns in their texts that relate to regional literature but also reflect that category’s fluid margins. In that sense, these works could also be described as “regionally conscious,” in the words of Kelsey Squire—surpassing the traditional boundaries of literary regionalism while still depicting “characters that immerse themselves in the intricacies of place through detailed observations that engage the senses, experiencing the environment by movements through it and reflection on it” (9).

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<sup>4</sup> While I disagree with Storey’s decision to turn to a study of only rural spaces as a kind of corrective to traditional critical perspectives of regional literature as a literature of resistance, I do appreciate his illumination of the “kind of transregional phenomenon of modernity” that he believes can be best read in rural spaces (207).

Focusing on “regionally conscious” texts also allows for the examination of authors who write familiarly about regional locations that they are not native to, such as Wharton’s western Massachusetts novels or Cather’s American Southwest. “Regionally conscious” moves beyond native connection; Squire notes that the mobility featured in regionally conscious texts enables ways of forming place attachment that surpass “a genealogical attachment to place” and therefore opens up regionalism to non-local authors (12). Because I wish to argue for the inherent internal flexibility and permeable margins of regional literature, however, I will continue to use the term “regionalism” to describe the texts I examine here as a way to push against the limiting notion of regionalism that has persisted in criticism. These authors engage with the specificities of place and community as a way to work out the use of consumer goods and notions of modernity in innovative, unexpected ways. In employing markers of modernity as a way to probe both local details and national qualities, the regionalism of Jewett, Freeman, Wharton, Yeziarska, and Cather actively questions boundaries of community and class.

Of course, these authors are each linked by another characteristic: they are all women. My examination of women regionalists grows out of a number of interrelated cultural ideologies that describe regionalism, community formation, and consumption as gendered movements or activities. The relationship between literary regionalism and the feminine has been examined by a number of critics, including Fetterley and Pryse. In part, the notion that both women and regional are peripheral identities is evocative of larger critical conversations about literary style and national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. James Lane Allen’s influential 1897 *Atlantic* essay “Two Principles in American Fiction” is an excellent illustration of this way of thinking. Allen calls for a movement away from the refined and tactful smallness of what he calls the “feminine principle,” best seen in local color fiction, to the rough

“massiveness” of the masculine principle, which in its rawness and vigor promises to bring American literature more prominently to the forefront of the world (436). In this type of consideration, the feminine, the regional, and the peripheral occupy shared space in the cultural imagination.

Notions of gendered identity also feature in studies of consumer culture. As Victoria de Grazia notes in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, “feminist researchers have long been aware of the conventional association of women with consumption, as a consequence of their role in the household division of labor and as reified objects in the commodity exchange system” (7). However, scholars disagree whether the relationship between women and consumer culture is exploitative or liberating to women. I argue, as does de Grazia, that this is a false dichotomy. For one, focusing on whether consumer goods are oppressive or beneficial to women assumes a monolithic idea of gender identity. Although each of the texts I examine explores consumer culture as a way to shape community and national identity, their perspectives on the relationship of woman to consumer objects ranges widely. These authors propose readings that highlight a number of conceivable options: the ability of consumer goods to make space for women without families who are therefore marginalized by the dominant domestic narrative, the failure of consumer culture to allow marginalized women to access higher class status, the role consumer goods play in imposing notions of taste and issues of “whiteness” on immigrant women, and the nativist perspective that attributes the decay associated with unfettered consumption to the feminization of culture.

In many of these texts, establishing the ways in which consumer culture impacts the formation of identity has as much to do with issues of ethnicity, class, and geographic setting as it does gender. Therefore, I seek to reveal the manifold ways regionalist texts by women employ

consumer culture to refashion notions of gender, class, ethnic, and geographic identity. These texts also each assign to their female characters a wide range of roles within their communities. Women in these texts can be responsible for the vitality of their communities, but also barred from agency on behalf of these communities. My focus on women regionalists reveals not unified resistance, but fundamental differences in perspectives on the use of consumer culture, the significance of community, and the relationship between region and nation.

### Narratives of Community

In addition to probing the flexible dialectic of regionalism, this project focuses on the margins of belonging in both small- and large-scale communities. But the term “community” is nearly as challenging to define as “regionalism.” As Margot Kempers notes, even in the absence of a definitional consensus, “there is general agreement that ‘community’... is applied to particular people and places as well as to more abstract experiences, social relations, and aspirations” (5). The term is fundamentally ambiguous and contradictory, and can both represent social solidarity and enforce divisions and exclusions:

Community is frequently the rationale for developing symbolic and physical boundaries to keep outsiders ‘out’ and insiders ‘in.’ Conversely, community is often identified as the means or reason for surmounting the many barriers that keep people apart....The term ‘community’ has been used to justify both social unity and social separation. (Kempers 6)

The relationship between theoretical discussions of community and regionalism is clear:

Community, like regionalism, is often worded in terms of belonging and examined by way of an internal coherence that is in some way differentiated from the dominant culture. Kempers’s notion of community echoes Foote’s claim that regionalism “was less a coherent genre than a

remarkably coherent system of ordering and presenting places and characters who were, when measured against a standard middle-class identity, distinctly foreign” (14). Community, too, measures who is inside and who is outside.

Similarly, both the study of community and the study of regionalism are profoundly concerned with the impact of modernity on identity. If, as Storey states, the critical reclamation of regionalist writing “is frequently built on the assumption that the works in question resist a marauding modernity intent on the hostile takeover of a purer, more humane local identity,” the same pitfall can be said to apply to the study of community (199). Since Ferdinand Tönnies developed his theories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (community and society) in 1887, social theory has been dominated by the belief that the two concepts are opposites, that modern urban society has moved from the former to the latter, and that this progression is detrimental to society. In this organizing theory, society (represented by the capitalist marketplace, urban centers, industry, and other markers of modernity) imposes upon and ultimately ensures the collapse of local communities. However, in his study of historical and sociological meanings of community, Thomas Bender interrogates the assumption that as urbanization has progressed, community has declined. This theory of community collapse, Bender argues, has been central to historical analyses of various communities and has gone largely unquestioned. As an alternative theory, Bender argues that community is actually an enduring form of social interaction despite (and even because of) the rise of society.

Despite Bender’s reassessment, the community collapse theory continues to influence a number of critics, including those examining literary depictions of community. Sandra A. Zagarell’s essay “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” examines fictional accounts of pre-industrial, pastoral communities, such as Jewett’s *The Country of Pointed Firs*.

According to Zagarell's reading, industrialization and other markers of modernity are disastrous to these regional communities. In a similar vein, J. Gerald Kennedy encounters the idea of community (albeit outside the framework of literary regionalism) in his essay focusing on fragmentation and isolation in short story sequences that center on a community of characters. Kennedy mourns the loss of specifically local identity in the wake of "modern mass culture and its transformation of life and language" (202). The U.S., Kennedy argues, "has achieved a complex, highly integrated infrastructure in support of a materialistic 'good life' at the expense of the 'larger common life,' the sense of communal belonging that resides in local concerns and goals" (202). Both Zagarell and Kennedy here convey the idea of a pre-industrial "community" that is separate from (and dependent on the absence of) the market economy of the industrial age—oppositional strains that, as we have seen, characterize much regional criticism as well. David Jordan perpetuates the notion of community collapse: "Today, the essential sense of community that assures each individual a place in the world is once again threatened by technology...[including] electronic communication, which would seem to make regional loyalty an anachronism" (*Regionalism Reconsidered* xv). The language here clearly promotes a simplistic notion of "community" as being inherently beneficial, offering a place for each individual, and glorifying loyalty to geographic region over a more adaptable sense of belonging or relating to others.

In addition to Bender, a number of recent critics have worked not only to counteract the community collapse model, but to highlight the potentially detrimental side of community. Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community* uses a Marxist/poststructuralist/cultural studies approach to demonstrate the disciplinary, paternalistic, and exclusionary nature of community. In her analysis, Joseph uncovers a paradox: community offers itself as an alternative

to capitalism, but in doing so, it masks its own involvement in capitalism's ongoing injustices. Rather than an alternative to or opposite of capitalism, Joseph argues "that both the rhetorical invocation of community and the social relationships that are discursively articulated as community are imbricated in capitalism" (viii-ix). Joseph's use of the word "imbricated" implies a multi-layered involvement of community in the formation, growth, and spread of capitalism. Joseph therefore challenges scholars and activists alike to abandon their romanticizing of the community ideal, adopting instead a critical relationship to it: "Fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation" and also the ways we might more effectively encourage collective action (ix).

Joseph's examination focuses primarily on late twentieth-century iterations of community discourse, but her articulation of the persistent "romance" of the narrative of community that separates the idea of community from any material conditions makes clear that a reexamination of the relationship between community and capitalism is needed in other time periods and fields. As Joseph astutely points out in her analysis of texts such as Robert N. Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, the community collapse model works to separate community from capitalism by placing community values in an idealized past. In doing so, this discourse "elides the material processes that have transformed social relations" (9). Once the notion of community is separated from any materiality, the nostalgic, romantic discourse of community tends to remove community from the realm of progressive political action and to use it instead as a kind of reactive, conservative trope. Rather than encouraging collective action, community comes to be "quite passive, static, conservative," emphasizing "values held and inherited...rather than purposes or goals to be achieved" (Joseph 10). Once again, community and regionalism align, as they are both viewed as a site of mythical authenticity or foundational values.



This perspective on the limitations of community is particularly apt for my examination of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century regional literature, not only because of the clear parallels between notions of community and critical formations of regionalism, but because of the material conditions surrounding literary regionalism that drive both its formation as well as its relationship to consumer capitalism. Like Alan Trachtenberg, who traces the “incorporation of America” during this era, Bender pinpoints the Gilded Age as the time period when a “bifurcated society” arose, as the rise of the capitalist market signaled the emergence of *Gesellschaft* (or society) in areas of life formerly given over only to *Gemeinschaft* (or community) (114). But rather than society crushing community or community offering a romanticized escape from society, the rise of the market led to ongoing “tension and interaction” between concepts of geographic community and urban progress (Bender 119). “By focusing on the shift from community to society, from personal to impersonal forms of social organization, historians have largely overlooked” the complexities of social relations during the late nineteenth century, Bender contends (118). Instead, community should be viewed not as a geographical locality but a “network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds,” a shift which allows us to replace the model of community collapse and recognize the persistence and further evolution of these types of social relations even in the face of modernity (Bender 7).

This is a theme echoed by more recent critics, such as Gerard Delanty, who argues that “community is essentially social” and reliant on social interaction (xiii). Kempers similarly prefers a theoretical model of community that emphasizes interaction over shared geographic or spatial characteristics. More recent attention to fluid, diverse notions of identity and belonging have encouraged revisiting the notion of community in literature, as well. Zagarell, for example, returns nearly two decades after she coined the term to the idea of “narratives of community” in

the collection *Narratives of Community: Women's Short Story Sequences*. Zagarell states that in her original thoughts about community, she “idealized it as a fully positive form of social organization” (“Reflections” 434). Zagarell notes that her earlier imagining of narratives of community cast them as oppositional to the national focus on “individual well-being and the cash nexus” ushered in by the market economy and modernity (“Reflections” 434). However, Zagarell states that she has come to “recognize community, and representations of community, as many-valenced....[some] are sustaining, some limiting, some destructive; all are contingent on the specific history, culture, social structure, economic circumstances, cultural geography, racial and ethnic circumstances, gender relations, sexual norms, and other factors which inform them” (“Reflections” 435). Zagarell claims that the texts on which she focused in her 1988 essay did promote an idealized interpretation of community—an embedded nostalgia that I agree is present in some regionalist works. However, I argue that texts that attempt to portray romanticized elements of nostalgia cannot completely uphold that image. The margins of community are too unfixed and dynamic—fractures in the façade will always appear. In addition to being informed by a vast network of historical and cultural forces, communities (and literary depictions of communities) are concerned with testing the boundaries of social order, even if on the surface they appear nostalgic.

Focusing on the interactions and tensions characterizing local communities' negotiations between personal and public, between community and society, instead of assuming (and therefore lamenting) a model of community collapse will help reveal these complexities and illuminate their significance to social interactions. In this, I follow Bender's proposed alternative to the community collapse model, and find the best example of the ongoing interactions between markers of region and nation in depictions of consumer culture in regionalist texts. The material

objects and exchanges linked to consumer culture are not oppositional to regional communities and their “values.” I argue that regional communities and consumer culture are interconnected and are involved in each other’s construction and maintenance in complex ways.

### Material Goods, Gift Theory, and Consumer Culture

It goes without saying that consumer culture is an important facet of modernity and a key component in the rise of the market economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I identify consumer culture, one of the central harbingers of modernization, as crucial to regional communities’ interactive reimaginings of social order. But in doing so, I am also breaking down boundaries between types of material goods and the situations in which those goods are exchanged, further supporting my thesis of fluid margins in the literature of regional communities. Traditionally, critics identify consumer culture as impacting regionalist texts in one of two ways. First, critics read regional literature as registering consumer culture’s disruption of so-called communitarian values (the rural family, the agrarian economy, the home-based handicraft market, etc.). Secondly, critics see the literary movement regionalism itself as a product of the burgeoning consumer culture. The widespread popularity and affordability of magazines and journals that printed local color sketches and regionalist short stories helped create a market and a demand for regionalism—in other words, made regionalism into a commodity. The first critical perspective follows the community collapse model of thinking and tends not to notice the nuanced and at times contradictory responses to the market economy that even the most nostalgic of regionalist texts registers. The second critical perspective, while true, veers dangerously close to casting literary regionalism as a passive outcome of consumer culture rather than an active agent in the dissemination of consumer capitalism. Both of these critical

arguments about consumer culture and regional communities take a narrow view of regionalism's engagement with the economic and material markers of cultural modernity.

As Viviana Zelizer notes, the time period between 1860 and the early 1930s in the United States saw a "monetization of social life" which "[spread] uniformity, precision, and calculation," thereby making "a significant difference to social organization" (12). The alignment of several cultural, social, and political factors during this time period, including, notably, the rise of the "leisure class" as well as the shorter hours movements for more leisure time, the demand for "living wages," the rise of advertising as an industry, and the growth of department stores as acceptable sites for consumer activity, mark the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the transition period into the modern concept of consumerism. Each of these factors led to new areas of concern: "Making more money and spending it...raised a new set of confusing and often controversial noneconomic quandaries" (Zelizer 31).

The social framework through which Americans self-identified and through which they recognized markers of class, gender, and ethnicity was substantially shaped by consumer exchange. The negotiation of identity occurs because the problem of consumption, stated consumer economist Hazel Kyrk in 1923, was "fundamentally a problem of choice, a selection between values" (Kyrk 9). For some Gilded Age and Progressive Era critics, consumerism's promise of freedom clearly suggests that consumerism was a societal good. Simon Patten believed that economic affluence was ushering in an era where cheap consumer goods would create a nearly perfect society.<sup>5</sup> This theme is explored in fiction as well; author Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* depicts a radically transformed twenty-first century

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<sup>5</sup> Developed from a series of lectures sponsored by the Charity Organization Society of the city of New York, Simon N. Patten's *The New Basis of Civilization* (1907) argued against the permanence of poverty and financial inequality. Patten's theories of abundance depended, however, not on unchecked consumer culture, but on the more equitable distribution of wealth and widespread social activism to improvement the standard of living.

America. Bellamy's vision of equal access to a wide variety of consumer goods is ostensibly socialist, but the promise of a return to an idyllic America based in part on individual freedoms is also unmistakably part of the traditional nostalgic dialogue surrounding American identity. Many critics who study consumerism note the link between social activity and market activity; as Lawrence B. Glickman states, while early connotations of "consumption" carried overtones of waste and loss, the industrial revolution ushered in a new interpretation of consumption as "the more neutral, or even positive, connotation of productive social activity in a market economy" (1).

Other Gilded Age and Progressive Era thinkers were less optimistic. Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* expressed uncertainty with the possibility of social mobility associated with "conspicuous consumption," a term he coined in the 1899 work. Veblen argues that the motivating factor behind the rise of consumption is the desire for Americans from all classes to achieve "a favourable comparison with other men" (33). While Americans purchase unneeded items in order to emulate their social betters and raise their social status, Veblen notes, real social mobility is rarely attained, and the product of emulative spending is only an apparent flattening of distinction. Similarly, Stuart Chase's *The Tragedy of Waste* contrasts a functional society, "where industry is devoted primarily to supplying human wants, and where profits are a by-product" with the acquisitive society he saw in the Progressive Era, where the production of useful goods and services is second to individual profit-seeking (28). For Chase and for others, the prominence of luxury goods and services sought by the wealthy shifts the focus from the social obligation of improving the human condition to improving individual well-being.

Robert Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd's 1929 *Middletown* offered the first extended survey of consumer activity among the members of a representative American community. Their

analysis of Muncie, Indiana residents' consumption patterns similarly reveals the lack of empowerment such consumption enables. Although members of all classes are perceived as “running for dear life in this business of making the money they earn keep pace with the even more rapid growth of their subjective wants,” the Lynds note that attaining new goods does not equate attaining more social power, particular among the working classes (87). Spending and “leisure time” has replaced work, religion, and civic activity, the Lynds argue—a transformation they clearly imagine as negative, and which resembles the rhetoric of community collapse (125).

Contemporary critics also articulate these vacillations. As Tom Schlereth notes, Americans found that the “goods life” offered legitimate answers to some of their more pressing physical needs. Many consumers were glad to be rid of the drudgery associated with home production, and the decrease in cost often made it advantageous for a family to purchase goods rather than spend their valuable time producing them. Even when midcentury critics such as David Potter argue that mass consumption aided in the development of a modern (and generally advantageous) national character, that character is seen as problematic.<sup>6</sup> Critics like Daniel Bell and Daniel Horowitz warn that this “character” is permeated by economic exclusivity, overt class conflict, and anti-democratic sentiments, warnings that implicitly assume the model of community collapse.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Potter's *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, which grew out of a series of lectures on the influence of economic abundance on American life and the American national character, argues optimistically that the rise of modern consumer capitalism had provided the United States with “a condition of mobility far more widespread and pervasive than any previous society or previous era of history” (94). Potter simultaneously hints at the model of community collapse, however, when he suggests that the resultant social instability of a more open society had stripped Americans of the comfort of simply “having a place” in a social order that bound together the individual and the community (188).

<sup>7</sup> For example, in *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940*, Horowitz speaks of a shift “from self-control to self-realization, from the world of the producer, based on the values of self-denial and achievement, to a consumer culture that emphasized immediate satisfaction and the fulfillment of the self through gratification and indulgence” (xxiii). Similarly, in *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell describes the same time period in terms of a detrimental change in subjectivity “from a society once geared to frugal saving and now impelled to spend dizzily” (246).

The influence of the community collapse model on criticism of consumer culture of the late nineteenth century is apparent to many critics. Tom Pendergast writes in his insightful survey of scholarship on consumerism in America before 1940 that much consumer criticism “is deeply colored by the ideological biases of scholars who see the sweeping transformation at the turn of the twentieth century as destructive of essential American values” (38). These scholars cast consumer culture in largely negative terms, mourning the detrimental impact of the market economy on the values and assumed stable sense of self that many critics assert existed in the pre-industrial world. James Livingston, in his article “The Politics of Pragmatism,” contends that these dominant critical perspectives of consumer culture depict the “self-mastering citizens characteristic of proprietary capitalism [giving] way to the rootless, hedonistic, apolitical, and artificial personalities... sanctioned by consumer culture” (156). Consumer culture impairs true cultural, personal, and national development, these critics maintain.<sup>8</sup> I argue, however, that consumer culture and exchange does not simply produce community collapse, and that critical perspectives who assume the model of community collapse as much miss the opportunity to examine the range of identities suggested in literary depictions of consumer culture and regional communities. As Gary Cross notes in his recent book, *An All-Consuming Century*, consumer behavior “cannot be reduced to economic manipulation or social emulation.... Modern people, and especially Americans, communicate to others and to themselves through their goods” (viii).

The logic of community collapse also bears a striking similarity to the concurrent argument that links the rise of consumer capitalism and the market economy to the fall of

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<sup>8</sup> Among the critics who find in the rise of consumer culture a decline or collapse of prior values are Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations*; T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: a Cultural History of Advertising in America* and *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*; Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1920*; David Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Culture*.

alternative economies, like gift exchange or local handicraft economies. As John Frow notes in *Time and Commodity Culture*, “one of the most powerful and most illuminating ways of thinking about the pattern of relations between persons has been through the opposition of the gift to the commodity” (102). Frow says that the “apparent clarity of the contrast” between the gift and the commodity has supported the “logic that opposes traditional or archaic societies to industrial modernity,” logic that has buttressed theories like that of community collapse. However, Frow calls such logic “a form of mythical thinking”; in reality, “the concepts of gift and commodity seem to partake of each other” (102). Hildegard Hoeller investigates the ways gifts and commodities interact in her recent *From Gift to Commodity*, which explores the “problematic relationship between gift and commodity economies in the nineteenth-century American novel” through what she perceives as the clash between self-interest and self-sacrifice (2). Hoeller supports Frow’s concept of a gift-commodity dialectic, noting that “thinking about the gift offered Americans a way of reflecting on capitalism, and vice versa” (3).<sup>9</sup>

Hoeller’s is the first examination of gift theory in connection with nineteenth-century American literature; as she notes, while there have been studies of gift theory in other national literatures or other time periods, the U.S. nineteenth century has been curiously neglected.<sup>10</sup> Hoeller’s is also the first to work to overcome the critical division or opposition between the gift and the market economy; although economic evaluations of American literature from the federal

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<sup>9</sup> While Hoeller recognizes that the boundaries between gifts and commodities is more permeable than fixed, she describes the encounter between these two economies in terms of tension, conflict, and collision. I differ slightly, finding that many regionalist texts bring similar attitudes to the market economy and the gift economy. I explore the possibility for identity- and community-formation offered by both economies.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of gift theory approaches to literature of other time periods or nations include *Selfish Gifts: The Politics of Exchange and English Courtly Literature, 1580-1628* by Alison V. Scott (2006), *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* by Natalie Zemon Davis (2000), *Blake’s Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange* by Sarah Haggerty (2010), *The Function of Gift Exchange in Stendhal and Balzac* by Doreen Thesen (2000), and *Gifts, Markets, and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf* by Kathryn Simpson (2008).



period through the twenty-first century abound, almost all consider gift exchange to fall outside their reading of economy in U.S. literature. However, Hoeller “makes a forceful case for . . . a paradigm shift that would allow us to not just conceive of economics in a strictly Marxist sense but also take into consideration the important role ‘the gift’ as concept plays in literature, in the life of artists, and in our thinking about capitalism” (4). Indeed, the existing economic examinations of American literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries perpetuate the notion that gifts fall outside the realm of the market economy, or are somehow opposed to consumer capitalism, notions that I argue are mistaken.

Although I will work in this project to reimagine the boundaries between gift and commodity, my focus on the economies that incorporate all types of exchange is nonetheless informed by the wealth of economic criticism that has been produced in the past two decades. These prior economic examinations can be roughly grouped into two categories. The first type of economic criticism is poststructuralist readings which are concerned with monetary symbolism and money. These poststructuralist critics, who largely draw on the work of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Jean Baudrillard, argue that money, like language, is a symbol that can never fully bridge representation and reality.<sup>11</sup> The second type of economic criticism is influenced by the rise of New Historicism and the turn to cultural studies in the past twenty years. Recent historicist scholars have focused on the material conditions that have shaped the relationship between literary and economic culture. Where poststructuralist economic criticism has tended to

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<sup>11</sup> Notable examples of poststructuralist economic criticism include Kurt Heinzelman’s *Economics of the Imagination* (1980), Jean-Joseph Goux’s *Coiners of Language*, and Marc Shell’s *Money, Language, and Thought* and *The Economy of Literature* (1978). By grouping these critics together, however, I do not mean to suggest that their poststructuralist approaches to economic criticism are in agreement about the aptness of economic readings of literature—this is not the case. For example, in their introductory essay to the collection, *New Economic Criticism*, Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen describe two early examples of economic criticism, Heinzelman’s *The Economics of the Imagination* and Shell’s *The Economy of Literature* (1978) as paradoxically assuming “the very rift between discourses and disciplines” that they wish their “new economic criticism” to bridge (5).

be theoretically driven and broad in chronological scope, the historicist scholars have largely produced material culture readings of periods and national literatures.

Within the particular study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature, economic criticism has tended to be historically and culturally grounded. Walter Benn Michaels's foundational *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, for example, investigates the relationship between nineteenth-century literary realism and the financial practices of the appropriately named Gilded Age to reveal the complex ideas of individual and national subjectivity constructed by the rise of consumer capitalism. More recently, David A. Zimmerman's *Panic! Markets, Crisis, & Crowds in American Fiction* explores what he calls "panic fiction," or novels published between 1898 and 1913 that are plotted around "markets in crisis" (223), to recuperate the cultural anxieties that occupied authors like Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser and to investigate the ways these authors used the subject of panic to "test the limits of their own enterprise" as authors (4). Michael Germana's *Standards of Value* deftly examines the correlation between shifts in U.S. monetary policy and transformations in the representation of racial difference by American writers, including a chapter on the gold standard and passing narratives.

In my examination of the ways regional literature uses consumer goods and engagement with consumer culture to test or shore up the boundaries of community, I am indebted to each of these economic considerations. However, none of them investigates these economies in the context of regional literature or the formation of community, and with the exception of Hoeller, most consider gift objects to be fundamentally distinct from the consumer objects of a market economy. In contrast, my project investigates both gifts and commodities (and often simultaneous gift/commodity) to show that the ways these objects are given, exchanged,

purchased, taken, and displayed in regional communities challenges the division between definitions of gift and commodity. As Marcel Mauss pointed out in *The Gift*, the Western concept of the gift depends on a series of binaries, such as “liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity, and luxury as against savings, interest, and utility” (73). The gift, Mauss argues, is supposed to be freely and generously given, free from the burden of expected reciprocity or the drive for self-betterment. But this notion of freedom and generosity in gift exchange is a myth; Mauss works throughout his text to illuminate the ways in which the gift is in fact motivated by the same kind of social self-interest that drives the market economy, a self-interest, I argue, that challenges nostalgic notions of regional communities.

Along with Mauss, other gift theorists have noted this self-interest inherent in gift culture. As Arjun Appadurai states in *The Social Life of Things*, the tendency in anthropological writing to exaggerate and reify “the contrast between gift and commodity” (11) masks “the calculative dimension in all these forms of exchange,” including commodity exchange, barter, and gift exchange (13). Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist approach in *Given Time* focuses on the gift’s impossibility, describing the gift as “at once reason and unreason, because it also manifests that madness of the rational *logos* itself, that madness of the economic circle the calculation of which is constantly reconstituted, logically, rationally” (36-37). Far from being altruistic, Derrida notes, gift exchange opens up circuits of complex social obligations that are heavily involved in the market economy, not separate from it. As Mary Douglas claims in her foreword to Mauss’s *The Gift*, “There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions” (xi). This is an issue David Cheal in *The Gift Economy* notes as well, describing the tradition of seeing the gift as separate from culturally specific social practices as “elementarist,” (2) and stating that the “unfortunate consequence of the elementarist

approach has been that the diversity of gift giving in modern societies has been ignored” (3). Ignoring what Habermas has called “the situated character of social practices” impoverishes the power of the gift in considerations of the influence of economy on social formation (Cheal 4).

My examination of the implications of various types of object exchange associated with the rise of consumer capitalism in literary depictions of regional communities is not only influenced by economical criticism and gift theory, but by material culture studies of the same time period. The field of material culture studies sheds light on the uses, symbolic meanings, and exchange values of material objects, and has long held an important place in the study of the history of consumerism. Of particular note, Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things* (2006) examines novels and stories by late nineteenth-century authors Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Henry James, to ask “why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or remake ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (4). Brown’s focus on the “personification of things” (44), or the power of objects to generate social identity through a metaphysical power of their own, blurs the distinction between subject and object in a way that challenges simplistic ideas of the rise of consumer culture.<sup>12</sup>

Other material culture studies specific to individual authors, particularly Gary Totten’s *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture* and Janis P. Stout’s *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World*, stress the importance of grounding our readings of these authors and texts in their historical and cultural settings.

While material culture studies and its focus on the thingness of things is an essential component of my examination, I am equally interested in the social relations the exchange, purchase, use, and display of objects forges. I believe that bringing together material culture studies, gift theory,

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting also that Brown’s examination of Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* posits a regionalist paradigm for imagining things, which he connects to later texts, including Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, a point I will revisit in Chapter Four.

and consumer studies in the context of literary regionalism will illuminate both late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature and contemporary understandings of U.S. national identity which are grounded in these notions of community and consumption.

As such, I argue that the regionalist texts I have studied represent the changing economic and cultural scene in their regional communities as a way to explore the potential for consumer goods to shape new social and communal identities. While consumer culture certainly transforms the types of social relationships that characterize local life in these regional communities, it is reductive to imagine that transformation as simply positive or negative. The type of communal selfhood scholars depict in regional communities prior to the rise of consumer culture could be exclusive and suffocating to those who did not conform or were outsiders in some way. For many of these “strangers,” consumer culture appears to offer an opportunity to forge new bonds within and beyond the community’s borders. When read in the context of deliberate engagement with consumer objects, regional representations emerge as immersed in constructing new communities and social orders.

In order to explore the range of regional interpretations of consumer exchange and community boundaries, I begin the dissertation with a chapter that depicts a regional revision of a persistent cultural narrative about Christmas in the nineteenth century. Chapter One, “The Neighborly Christmas: Consumer Culture, Community, and Regionalist Christmas Stories,” explores Christmas stories by noted regionalist authors Jewett and Freeman. Rather than portraying the domestic Christmas, with its emphasis on the middle-class family, private domestic spaces, and gift exchange separated from the market economy, Jewett and Freeman present a regional alternative that I call the “neighborly Christmas.” These stories depict a communal alternative to domesticity by examining the social benefit of Christmas generosity for

marginal, regional communities and their fractured, non-traditional families. Illuminating the “neighborliness” resulting from consumer exchange, the Christmas stories by Jewett and Freeman demonstrate the power of consumer culture to create social bonds that go beyond the individual or the narrowly focused family unit.

I turn in Chapter Two, “Competing Economies and Regional Commodification in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*,” to one of the central thrusts in the study of consumerism: the way material goods are seen as having the power to confer position in a social hierarchy. Wharton’s *Summer* contrasts two opposing economies: the gift economy, which uses material exchange to build empathetic connections, and the market economy, which relies on a notion of reciprocal exchange. Although Wharton works in her text to condemn the individually focused market economy through her portrayal of urban consumerist Harney and to romanticize the bonds formed through gift exchange, this representation is problematic. For one, I believe Wharton’s notion of separate economies emphasizes the nostalgic concept of rural regions as peripheral and urban centers as dominant. In addition, Wharton consistently portrays central character Charity’s efforts to perform and achieve a higher class status through the use of material objects as failing. Charity finds that she cannot use material goods to access a better life, but that she must locate the source of her identity in her stagnant community and her troubling relationship with her foster father. It is not just that objects fail to confer higher class status in *Summer*, but that Wharton seems devoted to the preservation of class divisions despite cross-class object exchange. Wharton’s representation of local places and characters as a way to reinforce class distinctions combined with her eagerness to distinguish herself from the local colorists like Jewett and Freeman whose work she decries ultimately contribute to her own regional commodification.

Chapter Three, “The Modernist Aesthetic and the Immigrant: Anzia Yeziarska’s *Communities of Countrymen*,” focuses on the way assimilationist narratives use consumer objects to enforce notions of taste and standards of beauty and cleanliness associated with the dominant culture. While Anzia Yeziarska’s urban regionalist novels of the 1920s have traditionally been read as thinly veiled retellings of her own autobiography, I argue that her multilayered examination of ethnic communities, the rhetoric of assimilation, and consumer goods reveals more complex portrayals of immigrant women forming subjectivity in America. This chapter centers specifically on the use of a modernist aesthetic to promote homogenizing assimilation in turn-of-the-century America. While some of Yeziarska’s characters explore the ability of material goods to enable attaining the idealized white American middle-class status, others, including Yeziarska herself, propose that consumer goods can be used as a sign of difference instead of uniformity. Yeziarska’s heroines appropriate the domestic advice rhetoric of aesthetic simplicity within spaces of ethnic difference to encourage the formation of communities of countrymen.

In Chapter Four, “Icons of Permanence: Cosmological Authentication in *The Professor’s House*,” I interrogate the benefits of the communities created by consumer objects, revealing that community is not always constructive and inclusive. Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* raises troubling questions about the way consumer objects can be used to construct a nativist American identity. Focusing specifically on an investigation of the commodification of inalienable possessions, this chapter traces Professor St. Peter’s reaction to the rise of a more democratic consumer culture in which concepts of masculinity and civilization are no longer the markers of cultural authority, but are instead thrown aside in favor of the new materialism embraced by those with economic capital. This shift in power threatens to relocate the source of

status, taste, and class from the holders of cultural currency to those in economic power, a shift St. Peter finds threatening. Ultimately, St. Peter's attempts to use material objects to shore up exclusive community boundaries fail.

Each chapter of "Consuming Communities" works to examine the ways literature of regional communities is bound up in consumer capitalism. Regional communities resist the totalizing rhetoric of community collapse that seeks to romanticize community; these regional communities are not unified or homogenous, but instead struggle with deep-seated strife, exclusion, and marginalization. Regional literature is similarly not divorced from agents of modernity such as consumer culture, but instead deeply involved in using consumer goods and exchange to test, strengthen, or reimagine community boundaries. Hence my title reveals the multivalent relationship between consumer culture and regional literature's portrayal of communities. *Consuming* could be seen as modifying *communities*, describing the acts of consumption in which these communities and their members participate. It could also describe *communities* as the object (or victim) of consumption, which regionalist criticism and the model of community collapse suggest. But *consuming* also suggests an act of eating away at or breaking down boundaries. My examination of regional literature and consumer culture reveals that as communities consume or are consumed, other imagined barriers, such as those between the regional and the national, between insider and outsider, between masculine and feminine, between classes, and between ethnicities, begin to dissolve as well.



## Chapter One

### The Neighborly Christmas: Gifts, Community, and Regionalist Christmas Stories

In her 1994 article “‘Not in the Least American’”, Judith Fetterley argues that women’s regionalist writing has been marginalized because of its “un-American” nature, by which she means its resistance to both national narratives and generic forms. Fetterley’s purpose is to critique the canon by exposing “how the term ‘American’ has been used to create a literary canon so hegemonic in the privileging of certain subjectivities” that the study of texts centering on non-white, non-male, rural, and lower-class subjectivities is tantamount to “treason” (879). The title of Fetterley’s essay comes from Sarah Orne Jewett’s 1877 story collection *Deephaven*, which focuses on a town described by the narrator as “not in the least American” due to its lack of excitement, bustle, industry, and multiculturalism (84). Jewett’s statement appears to support the belief that regional literature depicts places, people, and plots outside of national identity, a notion that has a long history in critical reception of literary regionalism.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, however, Jewett describes in more detail the relationship she sees between regional stories and the nation. In a letter to one of her editors, Frederick Mercer Hopkins, on May 22 1893, Jewett outlines her philosophy of neighborliness that extends beyond regional communities: “You know there is a saying of Plato’s that the best thing one can do for the people of a State is to make them acquainted with each other, and it was some instinctive feeling of this sort which led me to wish that the town and country people were less suspicious of one another” (83). Jewett expanded on this philosophy in her preface to the second edition of *Deephaven* later

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<sup>1</sup> For example, as Charles Crow notes in *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, pre-1960s critical assessments assumed that “regional literature was inherently minor, an art of the miniature, the commonplace, the local, and often the feminine. The term ‘local color’ was used dismissively, as a diminutive,” in contrast to themes believed to be of national importance (1). June Howard in “American Regionalism: Local Color, National Literature, Global Circuits” similarly states that “realism has sometimes been defined as literature of general significance, and regionalism as limited” (123). A number of critics echo the idea that traditionally, regional literature has been neglected and thought to have limited scope and significance.

that year, noting not only the need for neighborly understanding both within and beyond regional villages, but pinpointing the problem more specifically with the rise in regional tourism. She was “possessed by a dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one another,” a fear driven by encounters between the moneyed urbanites using Maine for vacations and the rural villagers who lived there year-round (1). While decrying the antipathy of the tourists themselves to her home state, Jewett nonetheless optimistically hopes that someday the “aggressions and ignorances of city and country cousins” would turn instead to “compliments between the summer boarder and his rustic host” (1).<sup>2</sup>

That Jewett outlines her hope for a neighborly reconciliation between country and city by way of introduction to a specifically regional text, one with a focus that is “not in the least American”, supports my belief that literary regionalism’s un-American scenes and stories are not in fact detached from or disinterested in more universal national narratives. Instead, literary regionalism by Jewett and her contemporary Mary Wilkins Freeman actively resists the detrimental effects of homogenizing national narratives through the presentation of regional alternatives to national discourses. Jewett’s concern with the economic repercussions of regional tourism points toward literary regionalism’s overarching awareness of the implications consumer capitalism had for regional communities and values. This concern is compounded by the knowledge regionalist authors had that they were producing literature to be consumed by a national audience. Rather than retreating from issues of modernity, however, regional authors engage those issues and imagine alternative ways of partaking of modernity.

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<sup>2</sup> Critics including Louis A. Renza and Elizabeth Ammons state that Jewett masks the historical impact of tourism and industrialism in her native Maine. I believe Jewett recognizes capitalism’s influence in more nuanced ways. Similarly, June Howard argues that Jewett’s portrayal of regional hospitality in “A Late Supper” is influenced by her knowledge of the modern stock market.

In this examination of three Christmas stories by Jewett and five by Freeman, I argue that regionalist literature imagines an alternative to one specific national narrative: the “domestic Christmas” that we typically associate with the nineteenth century. In particular, Jewett and Freeman present an alternative to the domestic Christmas’s disruption of the social function of gift exchange. In the domestic Christmas, the giving of gifts becomes a socio-political tool used to sustain class divisions and promote consumption that benefits the individual or the family as opposed to the collective. The narrative that Jewett and Freeman construct, which I call the “neighborly Christmas,” redirects attention to the needs of community (both economic and social) and the moral obligation to recognize those who fall outside of the domestic family unit. Jewett and Freeman’s Christmas stories interrogate transformations in gift exchange at a key moment of economic expansion in American capitalism. While anxiety over the impact that the rising consumer culture would have on class and gender divisions drove attempts to mask the consumerist basis of Christmas gift exchange in the domestic Christmas narrative, the regionalist Christmas stories I examine demonstrate that the problem is not capitalism or consumer culture, but the destructive loss of cycles of gift exchange that promote empathy and community well-being.

The significance of regional revisions of portrayals of Christmas gift exchange is best understood in the context of gift theory, which originated with the publication of anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* in 1924. Through a systematic examination of the social phenomenon of gift exchange, Mauss concludes that the giving, receiving, and reciprocating enables individuals to locate themselves within society, while “to refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (13). Mauss observes that the eventual rejection of a gift economy among the

Romans came about because of the perception that the exchange of gifts was “overexpensive and too sumptuous, burdened with consideration for people, incompatible with the development of the market, commerce, and production” (54). Key to understanding the failure of gift exchange is this idea of wanting to be removed from the “burden of consideration” for people in the broader community. The movement away from reciprocal gift exchange marks a culture’s movement from prioritizing social or spiritual bonds to individual gain and opportunity.

Jewett and Freeman’s stories focus on the necessity of the burden of consideration for others, revealing the detrimental impact of failed gifts not just for marginalized individuals but the entire community (and, by extension, the national community). While Jewett and Freeman depict marginalized figures excluded from the national portrait of domestic tranquility in many of their texts, I argue that their attention to the impact of the loss of empathetic gifts and neighborly generosity is particularly apt in their depictions of Christmas, a holiday that had already become synonymous with gift exchange in the late nineteenth century. In addition, Freeman in particular uses her examination of gifts that fail as way to work out the issue of the misuse of her artistic gifts through regional and literary commodification.

Although critics have examined a few of the stories I focus on here, none has considered these stories in the context of the national narrative of the domestic Christmas. Most frequently, when these stories are examined, they are done so in the context of more dominant critical considerations of Jewett and Freeman, especially feminist criticism.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, critics seem quick to dismiss Christmas stories by Jewett and Freeman because these stories were often

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<sup>3</sup> Readings that examine Jewett and Freeman’s female narrators or characters in the context of their encounters with oppressive patriarchal systems or individuals abound. For a reading in this vein of Jewett’s “A Neighbor’s Landmark,” see Margaret Roman’s *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett*. There is particular attention paid to Freeman’s collected stories in this regard. For example, Susan Allen Toth describes “A Church Mouse” as “a parable of the feminine will to survive even in the harshest of male worlds” (126). Martha Satz similarly classifies “A Church Mouse” and “Christmas Jenny” among Freeman’s stories featuring characters who “evinced strength and challenge patriarchal values” (194). Mary Reichardt describes “Christmas Jenny” as evidence of the historical superstition directed toward unconventional women in particular (*Short Fiction* 60).

solicited for holiday-themed issues.<sup>4</sup> On one level, the critical dismissal of regionalist Christmas stories reflects general attitudes assuming literary regionalism's minor status. However, I believe that the link between regionalism's marginal standing and its depiction of marginalized figures makes this genre uniquely poised to take on the domestic Christmas's cultural values. Many of Jewett and Freeman's stories center around those who are outsiders in some way: widows, old maids, orphans, beggars. In part, the fragmented families in these stories are realistic depictions of the impact on rural New England villages of the nineteenth-century movement of fit young people to more populous urban centers. But beyond their inherent realism, Jewett and Freeman's "outsider" figures work to break open the traditional family unit central to the domestic Christmas and to give voice to characters who are, like regionalism itself, neglected and marginalized. Examining Jewett and Freeman's Christmas stories specifically in the context of the domestic Christmas narrative shows the two authors intervening in questions of national identity. At a time when the nation was focusing on post-war rebuilding and the renewed articulation of national identity, the contrast between the domestic and the neighborly Christmas (which is, in essence, about whether our values should be geared toward satisfying the desires of the individual or the needs of the collective) becomes a version in miniature of the debate over national values.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Cary, for example, has criticized some of Jewett's holiday stories because they were commissioned by newspaper or magazine editors: "As is the proclivity of such pieces written to order, they glorify the cultural import of the day, far too often at the expense of esthetic imperatives" (xiv). Similarly, Mary Reichardt refers to the inferior nature of most of Freeman's holiday-themed writing in her introduction to *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*, describing the "solicitations from numerous publications for holiday tales" as one of the "mixed blessings" that came from Freeman's immense popularity in the first part of her career (xii). Some of these "bread and butter" stories are "formulaic and trite," Reichardt claims, while others "succeed *despite* their holiday themes" (xiii, emphasis added). Other critics, however, have questioned the dismissive impulse Cary and Reichardt display. In particular, Charles Johanningsmeier's excellent analysis of Jewett and Freeman's publication in newspaper syndicates demonstrates that each writer's pragmatic reasons for publication should not inherently remove commissioned stories from critical consideration. In "Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Taste of Necessity," Virginia Blum similarly puts to the test the persistent critical belief that aesthetic taste and financial necessity are mutually exclusive. A few critics have begun highlighting the significance of Jewett and Freeman's range of writing styles and publication venues, such as Valerie Kinsey's recent note on a recovered Freeman Christmas story for children, which she describes as "imaginatively rich" for critical analysis.

### Competing Notions of the American Christmas

Although Jewett and Freeman's fictional representations of the neighborly Christmas offer the most fully developed depiction of neighborly generosity as an alternative to the domestic Christmas, the neighborly Christmas does not exist only in regional stories. "The old 'Merrie Christmas' of England, with all its glad fun and wild revelry, takes on a different character when filtered through the American mind," declared an editorial from the *Boston Traveller*, reprinted in the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* on Christmas Day in 1880. While Americans do have a "utilitarian side" to their Christmas, code for the rote exchange of gifts, the author claims this activity in America is "redeemed from the materialistic by the insight of love, or of true neighborly kindness." The potentially vulgar consumerism of Christmas gifts is here "redeemed" by a sense of social obligation. Christmas gift exchange should be the physical embodiment of the American virtue of extending thoughtful words and loving regard to friends and neighbors on a daily basis. It is clear that a primary goal of what is seen as a characteristic American Christmas, "to have made some one happy," is to place foremost one's social responsibility to friends, family, and community, and that this goal is rooted firmly in the notion of America as a new Christian nation.

A similar article appears in the Chicago newspaper *The Daily Inter Ocean* on December 25, 1888. The purpose again is to define the distinctiveness of American celebrations of Christmas in contrast to their European counterparts. What makes Christmas American in this author's estimate is the cultural adoption and adaptation of multiple holiday traditions. While Americans have kept the English tradition of gathering as a family for a feast, and have embraced other holiday customs, such as the Germanic Christmas tree, they have done so always with an eye to refining and revising those traditions to match the American character and

climate. The growth of an American Christmas, the author claims, reveals the “receptive and adoptive power of the American people” in a way no other national tradition has. The American Christmas is defined by a “charitable extravagance,” an outgoing and “kindly spirit that fills the homes of America today.” This generous spirit surpasses the boundaries of the family home, “makes overflow and goes into the highways and byways in search of guests upon whom to lavish its hospitality.” Americans have collected the best traditions from Europe and perfected them via an injection of American lavish hospitality and generous democracy. “The American Christmas,” the editorial boasts, “is as homelike as the English, as social as the German. It unites the best of each in an original whole.”

Read together, these editorials depict a national holiday that emphasizes the fusion of household and community in celebration. Signal phrases in each (“true neighborly kindness” in the first, “charitable extravagance” in the second) demonstrate the importance of an outwardly focused sense of social commitment at Christmastime. The seasonal spirit of generosity and goodwill begins in the home, but “makes overflow...in search of guests” outside the family home with whom to share this extravagant benevolence. Although the immediate impression these editorials give is one of pride in the superior American holiday, the version of the American Christmas they articulate is carefully crafted to depict not what Christmas had widely become by this point (the self-interested, consumer-based domestic holiday), but to portray instead a celebration of social responsibility to those in not only the domestic unit but the wider community and nation. The American Christmas “unites the best” features of Christmas elsewhere “in an original whole,” an origin narrative that elides the domestic Christmas, veiling the lack of generosity and loss of social goodwill that had developed with the rise of the domestic holiday following the 1820s. These accounts of Christmas in America may not have

reflected the *actual* experience of the holiday for a majority of Americans, but they influenced the *idea* of what a true American Christmas was—or should be.

### The Rise of the Domestic Christmas

The domestic Christmas arose during the antebellum period in response to a number of cultural anxieties, including growing concerns over consumer culture's impact on national character and the upper class's fear of mob violence.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the 1840s, Christmas celebrations in America were dominated by pagan and cult traditions and featured the performed inversion of gender, class, and age roles. Penne L. Restad notes that Christmas through the antebellum period was marked by groups of people, primarily men, who would assemble in the streets to “shoot off firecrackers and guns,” play musical instruments loudly, and roam from house to house “in garish disguise” to beg (10). These “maskers” could only be dismissed if given food, drink, and even money by the often unwilling homeowners. The riotous nature of the disorderly public Christmas was also evident in its rituals of gift-giving, which reflected earlier European practices such as wassailing, wherein gifts were given from those in positions of authority to those of lower status. Upper-class concerns with the threat posed by disorganized Christmas festivities gained an extra dimension as the American population moved to cities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The rise of the cult of domesticity and sentimentalism in the antebellum period fostered a cultural climate that encouraged a family-centered, home-based holiday as an alternative to the disorderly Christmas. Stephen Nissenbaum notes that “the creation of domesticity and of ‘childhood’ itself in the nineteenth century” assisted in slowly transitioning the public, street-

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the domestic Christmas, see especially Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*. For general analysis of Christmas, see Paul Frodsham's *From Stonehenge to Santa: The Evolution of Christmas*. Recent critical works focusing solely on the American holiday include William B. Waits's *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving*, Penne L. Restad's *Christmas in America: A History*, and Richard Horsley and James Tracy's *Unwrapping Christmas: Christ, Consumerism, and Culture*.



based festival of Christmas to a private, domestic household celebration (110). Rich meals, decadent treats, luxurious toys, festively decorated trees, and other holiday traditions spring in part from attempts to reframe the public, interclass holiday as private and familial. But this domestic, family-centered turn essentially removes the social focus of Christmas gift exchange that Mauss describes as essential. In contrast, the domestic Christmas's rituals of gift exchange prioritize acquisitive self-interest, reinforce hierarchical social and gender divisions, and disregard the needs of the community.

In addition to counteracting the threatening public nature of prior Christmas celebrations, the domestic Christmas ideology responded to another dramatic cultural change of the nineteenth century: the rise of consumer spending on Christmas gifts.<sup>6</sup> Critics differ on when store-bought Christmas gifts ritually exchanged gained popularity over homemade handicrafts or cross-class giving, but Nissenbaum's illuminating examination of the Sedgwick family letters (including author Catharine Maria Sedgwick), which tracks the transformation in family Christmas celebrations over the course of about forty years from the 1800s until the 1840s, shows that commercially produced goods became part of Christmas gift exchanges almost from the domestic Christmas's inception.<sup>7</sup> The Sedgwick family's letters reveal the family encountering issues associated with the modern Christmas holiday, including forgetting to buy gifts until the

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<sup>6</sup> For example, William B. Waits identifies 1880 as the transition year in his cultural history of gift giving, noting the wider availability of manufactured goods to even isolated Americans in rural areas, the rising population of wage workers in urban areas, and the loss of free time for many laborers in which to make handmade goods as contributing factors (17). Prior to 1880, Waits argues, "the volume of commerce generated by the festival was not a significant part of the total national economy, not only because fewer presents were exchanged but also because those presents were usually handmade" (1). James Tracy believes that the late nineteenth-century Christmas was "a season of relatively minor indulgence encouraged by enterprising manufacturers" while the contemporary holiday "is now so gargantuan a retail orgy that it is fervently monitored by Wall Street as a fundamental index and determinant of the nation's economic soundness" (Horsley and Tracy 9). For Tracy, the twentieth-century culture of excess and showy display would baffle the typical Victorian, who still identified with the values of "frugality, temperance, delayed gratification, and self-control" in the face of economic scarcity and frequent recessions and depressions (9).

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Sedgwick family's letters in relationship to the domestic Christmas and gift exchange, see Nissenbaum, Chapter Four, "Affection's Gift: Toward a History of Christmas Presents."

last minute, recipients who are difficult to shop for, and recipients who are disappointed with their gifts. The Sedgwick family makes clear that at least the higher classes began participating in a consumer Christmas during the antebellum period. Even if Christmas consumer activity during this time period made little impact on the national economy and operated on a much smaller scale than later time periods, what Christmas gift exchange did take place brought with it all the anxiety associated with consumerism and commercialization.

The rise of consumer goods as gifts introduced the pressure to embed store-bought Christmas gifts with the appropriate sentiment—and to erase traces of the market from these sentimental presents. As Mark Osteen notes, one of the primary impulses of gift theory is “to distinguish gift exchanges from market exchanges, and thereby to discriminate between gifts and commodities” (“Gift” 229). Practices such as removing price tags from purchased objects or gift-wrapping presents appear to allow these gifts to perform their proper cultural role: removing the barriers between people and creating non-hierarchical relationships based on empathy rather than reciprocity (Osteen, “Questions” 8).

However, one invention crucial to the domestic Christmas narrative demonstrates that attempts to mystify the connection between the marketplace and Christmas gifts were based on anxiety about the contaminating effects of consumer culture and not on a desire to promote empathetic understanding. The figure of Santa Claus created a pseudo-historical filter that allowed practitioners of the domestic Christmas to “believe that the holiday gift exchange was rooted in something deeper and more ‘authentic’ than the dynamics of the marketplace” (Nissenbaum 173).<sup>8</sup> Unlike the unruly gangs of Christmases past, who would demand goodwill

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<sup>8</sup> The figure of Santa Claus owes his popularity in the US to two nineteenth-century literary sources. The first is Washington Irving’s *History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, a work popularly known as *Knickerbocker History of New York*, published in 1809 under the pseudonym Dietrich Knickerbocker. Irving familiarized St. Nicholas, a sort of satirical patron saint of the Dutch settlers of New

via food and drink from the upper class, Santa Claus disturbs the sleep of the master of the house not to request gifts, but to benignly give gifts to children. In addition, by shifting the celebration indoors, to a family's home, the figure of Santa bolsters the development of a domestic Christmas. St. Nick simultaneously undermines the older patron-client exchange of gifts and goodwill and transfers the site of gift-giving to within the family unit.<sup>9</sup> The ritual of gift exchange surrounding Santa Claus was intended to convey the message that sincere expressions of domestic intimacy were not connected to money and the market.

In addition to mystifying the connection between the marketplace and Christmas gifts, St. Nick performs other important cultural roles. As early as the 1820s, Restad states, Santa Claus reinforced “the importance of good behavior” and “endorsed parental punishment” by leaving a rod in the stocking of naughty children, presumably to be deployed by parents (54). Nissenbaum also highlights the role the domestic Christmas's customs of gift giving play in controlling children, describing the movement from the earlier tradition of children waking their parents up to demand presents to “that of waiting for the ‘Christmas tree’” as “the difference between children playing the role of active agents in the gift exchange and their assuming the passive role of silent, grateful recipients” (214). In addition to the St. Nick's corrective ability to judge worthy and unworthy children and modify behavior, Elizabeth H. Pleck notes that domestic gift-giving itself replicated and reinforced hierarchical family structures, with husbands able to give more expensive gifts to wives because of their role as breadwinner, for example (53).

Beyond establishing rules and rituals surrounding gift exchange that enforce sentimental domestic bonds and hierarchical familial roles, the domestic Christmas promoted the distinction

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Amsterdam; the second literary source popularized him: Clement Moore's 1822 poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” known more commonly by the name under which it was later published, “The Night before Christmas.”

<sup>9</sup> For more on Christmas's patron saint and his complex history, see Leigh Eric Schmidt 134-47 and Nissenbaum 61-64.

between gifts, which were given to family and friends, and charity, which was given to the needy and distributed by charitable organizations. Christmas charity during this time period was often a public spectacle, like the large-scale charitable Christmas dinners given for the poor during the nineteenth century that the public were invited to watch.<sup>10</sup> The distinction between gifts and charity removes the disorderly Christmas's opportunities for cross-class Christmas gift-giving, and also creates a hierarchy of giving, as Christmas presents tend to be more carefully crafted handmade items or luxury purchased goods while charity typically consists of necessary goods and services.<sup>11</sup> In addition, successful Christmas presents are given in person and in private, and are chosen for each individual recipient, while charity is often filtered through an aid organization, removing the personal contact of giver and recipient.

The literary model of Christmas charity is Charles Dickens' well-known *A Christmas Carol*, which has become so synonymous with the holiday season that one widespread myth is that Dickens, through this story, invented our modern-day Christmas. Several critics, among them Frodsham and Nissenbaum, note that Dickens's story did not so much originate Christmas traditions and values as reflect many already in existence. The story's immense popularity, not only in Dickens' native England but also in the United States, allowed many of its diverse and

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that spectacles of charity are not limited to Christmas events during this time period. As Susan K. Harris notes in *The Cultural Work of the Late Nineteenth-Century Hostess: Annie Adams Fields and Mary Gladstone Drew*, social crusaders like Fields witnessed and eventually organized charitable events similar to Christmas dinners at other times of the year. Clearly, regardless of the time of year, these types of large charitable events are meant to produce a phenomenon of exhibition or display, as well as evoke genuine emotional response. Fields herself was drawn to social reform after touring the slums of London with Charles Dickens in a series of carefully organized encounters designed to elicit sympathy and the emotional outpouring of goodwill. This charitable tourism is more deeply examined in Harris 132-41. I argue that because of societal expectations for Christmastime and its domestic, family focus, charitable spectacles were particularly important at Christmas.

<sup>11</sup> When gifts are given in charitable situations, they are often large lots of the same item, such as when Louisa May Alcott accompanied Anna Rice Powell, wife of the reformer Aaron Powell, James Gibbons and his wife Abby Hopper Gibbons to Randall's Island, the site of the charitable Convent of Mercy. In a letter to her family written December 25, 1875, Alcott notes that she carried "a great box of dolls" while a young reporter with her took "a bigger box of candy" to the unfortunate children in the island's hospital and "idiot house" (211). Each child receives the same gift—a doll and some candy. The lack of individualized tailoring of the gifts emphasizes the charitable nature of the giving.

disparate ideas about the holiday to take root. But the charity and neighborliness for which Dickens's story is remembered today is less evident when the original text is closely read.<sup>12</sup> Scrooge's moderate charity signifies to a reading public dealing simultaneously with guilt over the loss of generosity across class lines and concerns with the extent to which one must be generous that there were ways to be charitable without giving to every beggar. Christmastime's charitable endeavors were seen as absolving the giver from responsibility and guilt for the annual cycle.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, the key features of the domestic Christmas were firmly in place. Christmas was largely viewed as a time for concentrating on the family rather than engaging in rowdy public celebration. Within these family celebrations, myths like Santa Claus mask Christmas gifts' market origins to hide the fact that sentiment objects had economic beginnings. Gift exchange in the domestic Christmas disciplines the family and, by extension, the community and the nation, by establishing and affirming proper social hierarchies and behavior. And the domestic Christmas's family-based celebration and exchange of gifts firmly

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<sup>12</sup> As Nissenbaum notes, Ebenezer Scrooge is not an industrial baron, and in reconciling with the Cratchit family by the tale's end, he is not stooping to associate with a member of a distinctly different class. Scrooge is a merchant, a member of the petite bourgeoisie, and Bob Cratchit is a literate clerk and office worker, not an industrial laborer (223-24). Scrooge never actually comes faces to face with a poor person, beggar, or working-class member in his encounters in the text. And even at the story's end, Scrooge maintains his distance from the Cratchit family, having the largest turkey he can find "*sent* to the Cratchits; he does not deliver it in person—despite what several of the movie versions of *A Christmas Carol* may suggest" (Nissenbaum 225). In short, what *A Christmas Carol* offers its readers is a way to negotiate "the Christmas season so as to avoid the dual shoals of the guilt that might stem from not giving at all across class lines and the messiness (not to say futility) that would result from giving to every beggar who walked the streets or knocked on one's door" (Nissenbaum 226).

<sup>13</sup> Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* offers an interesting scene of Christmas charity that can perhaps be viewed as transitional, featuring neighborly giving that ultimately serves to benefit the domestic family. While the March family forgoes buying extravagant Christmas gifts and sacrifices their Christmas breakfast, their charitable giving to a "poor woman with a little new-born baby" plus six additional children is depicted as distinct from the intra-familial giving, such as the gift books Mrs. March gives to her daughters (21). Although Meg comments after their charitable visit "That's loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it," the neighborly giving primarily serves to allow the March family to feel richer in comparison (22). They are further rewarded when their charitable giving is noticed by a wealthy neighbor, who rewards their right feeling with a luxurious gift of candies, cakes, ice cream, and hothouse flowers (26).

demarcated the distinction between gift-giving within one's own family or social class and charitable giving that worked outside of class and familial boundaries.

In contrast, starting in the 1880s, regionalist writings from Jewett and Freeman present a neighborly Christmas ideal that counteracts features of the domestic Christmas through displays of extra-familial beneficence. By focusing attention on the neighborliness resulting from regional gift exchange, these stories demonstrate the power of gifts to create social bonds that go beyond the narrowly focused family unit. The neighborly Christmas narrative differs from the domestic Christmas in a number of key ways. Santa Claus is largely absent in these stories, showing that instead of concealing the connection between consumer activity and Christmas giving, the neighborly Christmas questions the need for filters between the marketplace and Christmas gifts. Notably, these stories illuminate the link between gifts and the market economy. Consumer activity itself becomes a type of altruism here—not just through generous gift-giving but also via the acts of shopping for or creating those gifts, acts which are apparent to, not hidden from, the recipients of the gift, and which are seen as adding to the gift's value. Through depictions of direct, person-to-person giving to people outside the domestic family unit and in different social classes, neighborly Christmas generosity interrogates the domestic Christmas's distinction between gifts and charity. In doing so, Freeman and Jewett remind readers of the social purpose of gift exchange. The neighborly Christmas shows that the health of the community and the individual depends on successful, empathetic gift-giving.

#### Sarah Orne Jewett's Neighborly Philosophy

One of the most prolific regionalist producers of Christmas works, Jewett published at least a dozen stories for children and adults in which Christmas is the dominant theme or at the very least the setting. Appearing in newspapers and periodicals such as *The Independent, Boston*

*Evening Transcript*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, Jewett's Christmas stories frequently unite thoughtful or moderate consumer activity, generosity that extends beyond the traditional family unit, and the primacy of social well-being or neighborliness. Jewett's Christmas stories depict an idealized regional community that values generosity, community, and consumption equally. Many stories make the benefits of generosity clear by benefiting the main character in some way—through material rewards, social reconciliation, or a return to physical health, for example. Jewett's regional stories often depict homemade gifts or gifts of service alongside commercially produced items given as gifts. All of these gifts clearly have monetary value and participate in the economic marketplace, flattening the distinction between gifts and commodities and questioning the notion that regional settings embody a pre-market ideal that is separate from the national economy. Jewett expands the boundaries of giving, uniting public and private generosity. Rather than evoking a strictly family-based, domestic Christmas, these stories broaden Christmas giving to include non-familial relations, showing Christmas consumer activity and generosity to be essential to forming community bonds. The close reading of three of Jewett's stories reveals her slowly building philosophy of neighborly kindness and extravagance.

The first of the three stories, "Jack's Merry Christmas," appeared in *The Independent* on December 15, 1881. One of Jewett's earliest published Christmas stories (only one story appears earlier: "Patty's Dull Christmas," which was also published in *The Independent* in 1875 and later collected in 1878 in *Play Days: A Book of Stories for Children*), "Jack's Merry Christmas" follows a simple edifying storyline that is common in Jewett's juvenile Christmas fiction. Jack is an orphan who lives with Josiah Patten, his wife, and her sister, Aunt Susan. The Pattens are elderly and childless, and although they provide for Jack's physical needs, they do not meet his needs for friendship and family. Jack's life is transformed when he takes to heart the Christmas

message delivered by his much-loved Sunday School teacher, Miss Duncan, who encourages Jack and the others in his class to renounce their selfish desires and focus on generosity. Jack devotes himself to Miss Duncan's mission, even going so far as to thaw the heart of the curmudgeonly, lame old maid, Becky Nash, through his unexpected generosity. He spends his own hard-earned money on gifts for his elderly caregivers despite the fact that they do not traditionally keep Christmas and are furthermore unable to care for Jack any longer. Ultimately, Jack is rewarded for his generosity by being welcomed into Miss Duncan's home at the story's end.

Miss Duncan's Christmas mission, which calls for the boys to "surprise" people on Christmas "by doing something to make them have a good time," shapes the idea of a generous, neighborly Christmas in a number of interesting ways. She encourages the boys to find a way to give gifts or provide services not only to "our fathers and mothers—whom I hope we shall give to anyway" but also to what she calls "outside people, whom we never thought of before at Christmas time" (2). In addition to the emphasis on unexpected giving and striving to anticipate what gifts or services would enable the recipient to "have a good time," which aligns with theoretical notions of the empathetic gift, Miss Duncan opens up the giving of Christmas gifts and services beyond the immediate family (who are assumed to be recipients of their children's generosity anyway) to "outside people" who are beyond the boys' typical daily consideration. As an orphan, Jack is himself an outside person, and he is rewarded for his own attentions to another social outsider, Becky Nash, by being welcomed into greater social participation with the community.

In the context of gift theory, homemade gifts, gifts of service, and charitable donations at Christmastime become "counter-gestures" (Simonds 88). However, this does not appear to be the



case for Jack, for whom chopping wood free of charge for old Becky Nash, gathering walnuts to give to his classmates, and spending his money on store-bought items for his caregivers all count as genuine gifts. The recipients of his gifts of labor and his store-purchased items seem equally moved by his care and generosity. This portrait of giving effortlessly mingles consumer objects and handmade or service gifts to demonstrate that when given out of a desire for empathetic understanding, both types of gifts have legitimate value. In addition, Jack's reward for his generous efforts is the ability to participate more fully in the social and economic spheres: Becky Nash slips Jack a five dollar bill after Jack's generosity alters her sullen disposition; the boys to whom Jack gives walnuts reciprocate by fetching him for an afternoon of "skylarking"; and an added benefit of going to live with Miss Duncan is her home's greater proximity to school and friends.

"Jack's Merry Christmas" introduces several tropes common to Jewett's Christmas stories: the focus on generosity versus selfish greed accompanied by the idea that one's generosity will be rewarded in turn; the notion of extending Christmas giving beyond the traditional family unit to "outsiders"; and the emphasis on social redemption as the ultimate value of Christmas generosity. While charity and generosity are traditional themes in domestic literature of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, Jewett's Christmas stories link generosity and participation in economic activity to a concept of neighborliness or social well-being. This mitigates arguments that a gift-driven Christmas and its necessary participation in consumer culture has alienating effects, instead contending that a generous spirit will both benefit the individual and aid in the building of local (and, by extension, to these stories' readers, national) community.

Jewett revisits these themes in another of her Christmas stories, this time aimed beyond a juvenile audience. “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve” was published in two parts in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in December 1890 and January 1891. The story focuses on the social redemption of Lydia Parkins, a stingy elderly widow who is both frugal and isolated, qualities Jewett works to associate with each other. Mrs. Parkins experiences a conversion from stinginess to a reluctant generosity brought on by fear for her life and recognition of her own isolation. Although Mrs. Parkins’s miserliness at the beginning of the story (she refuses to give money for the minister’s Christmas gift) makes her appear impoverished, Jewett notes that “there was nobody so well off in town except Colonel Drummond, so far as money went” (4). Mrs. Parkins’s transgressions against the community are compounded by the fact that she does not contribute to the local economy: rather than shop in town, she spends the day before Christmas driving over to Haybury, the larger nearby town, to buy a few provisions, put some money in the bank, and visit her cousin. Although this venture will save her money, as “goods were cheaper in Haybury,” Mrs. Parkins also worries that her cousin and her cousin’s children will “[hint] for presents” as they often do (4). Mrs. Parkins is eager to avoid the sense of reciprocal obligation that she anticipates gift-giving opening up: although she “was really much attached to her cousin...she thought that if she once began to give, they would always be expecting something” (4). Mrs. Parkins’s flaw is a lack of generosity, not only toward others, but to herself. The narrative implies that the result is not the universal denigration directed toward an Ebenezer Scrooge, but rather sympathy and compassion: “no truly compassionate heart could fail to pity the thin, anxious, forbidding little woman, who behaved as if she must always be on the defensive against a plundering and begging world” (5). Jewett paints Mrs. Parkins’s reluctance to engage in gift exchange as a key reason for her social isolation.

Mrs. Parkins's errand to Haybury is a dark mirror of the kind of pre-Christmas festivities a late nineteenth-century family had come to expect: she visits family but refuses to stay the night, knowing that to stay on Christmas Eve would require the giving of gifts and would "begin what promised to be the squandering of her carefully saved fortune"; she visits the bank, but rather than taking money out for Christmas purchases, she makes a substantial deposit; she brings a piece of salt pork to her cousin but nearly keeps it for herself. Mrs. Parkins feels "uncomfortable" witnessing Haybury's Christmas preparations, and "cheerful cousin Faber's happiness in her own pinched housekeeping was a rebuke" (6). But she has worked to convince herself that her frugality and her attempts to resist celebrating Christmas are virtues rather than dangerous failings.

Mrs. Parkins finally questions her stingy ways in the climactic scene at the end of part one. Caught in a sudden, violent snowstorm on her way back from Haybury, Mrs. Parkins cries out: "Oh! I'd give a thousand dollars to be safe under cover!" (7). A "vision of the brightly-lighted Haybury shops, and the merry customers that were hurrying in and out, and the gayety and contagious generosity of Christmas eve" come to Mrs. Parkins as she sits, helpless and bewildered by the storm (7). Her opposition to that contagious generosity and her current isolation combine, and Mrs. Parkins asks "what had she tried to do for God and man that gave her a right to think of love and succor now?" (8). Part one of the story ends with this scene: the widow, rich but alone on Christmas Eve, forced by her own frugality into a friendlessness that surely means death.

Part two, however, redeems Mrs. Parkins. She is saved from the storm by the Lanes, the minister's family she scorned earlier. The scene that follows offers an active revision of the domestic Christmas. Mrs. Parkins is placed in a seat of honor in the family's sitting room and

wrapped first in Mrs. Lane's red shawl, then given a warm dress to wear; a shining Christmas tree stands in the corner; a fire blazes as the family gathers to hear a short sermon on the Christmas story (which centers on the inn-keeper's lack of generosity) and to sing Christmas hymns (10-11). An outsider in this domestic scene, Mrs. Parkins does not threaten the integrity of the family, but instead seems to heighten the Lane family's ability to experience the spirit of Christmas by opening up new avenues of generosity to them beside their domestic unit.

The scene transforms Mrs. Parkins as well. The sermon and hymns, the "pretty home-made trifles" and the gathered family, and the "real presents" (that is, store-bought ones) which "meant no end of thought and management and secret self-denial" all demonstrate to Mrs. Parkins the dangerous, isolating effects of her parsimony. As the Lanes each find something among their presents to share with their unexpected guest, Mrs. Parkins feels "a new sense of friendliness and hopefulness" (11). She resolves to change her way of living: "She didn't know why the tears rushed to her eyes: 'I've got to learn to deny myself of being mean,' she thought, almost angrily" (12). Notably, Mrs. Parkins's awakening to neighborly generosity leaves her bereft and upset, perhaps signaling her incomplete transition from miserliness to munificence.

Although Mrs. Parkins's transformation is never fully complete (she still feels "secret pangs" at each moment of new generosity), she is at least outwardly changed following her storm experience, giving gifts and money to neighbors, relatives, and even paying for a surgery for the minister's son. However, it is interesting to imagine the original context in which "Mrs. Parkins's Christmas Eve" appeared. Part one, which introduces Mrs. Parkins, outlines her character, and ultimately strands her in the unexpected winter storm, appeared before the Christmas holiday, while part two, which centers on all the details of an ideal domestic Christmas in order to motivate Mrs. Parkins's conversion, appeared in the New Year. While it

was traditional as a family in the nineteenth century to meditate on Christmas stories like Dickens's that depict a trajectory of miserliness to generosity prior to Christmas, the fact that the serialization of Jewett's story leaves the family stranded with Mrs. Parkins in the snow prior to their own Christmas celebrations seems to add weight to Jewett's message of social redemption. Postponing the second part until the New Year, which even in the nineteenth century was recognized as a cultural moment for resolution and new beginnings, further supports the idea of carrying the notion of a life of social responsibility beyond the Christmas holiday.

Mrs. Parkins's conversion to generosity notably speaks to the purpose of Christmas in the community and the nation. Rather than reinforcing the importance of the traditional family unit, "Mrs. Parkins's Christmas Eve" uses consumer activity and the exchange of consumption objects to emphasize the value of community bonds outside the family structure. In other words, shopping for and giving gifts becomes a sort of cultural shorthand for building social connections in the community. If, as Nissenbaum argues, the domestic Christmas gift exchange in the nineteenth century "was a ritual gesture" intended to convey the notion that the family surpassed consumer capitalism in importance (173), Jewett's depiction of Mrs. Parkins's neighborly gifts combine economic use and domestic intimacy into a larger philosophy of social well-being or neighborliness.

Neighborliness is even more central to Jewett's 1894 Christmas story "A Neighbor's Landmark," subtitled "A Winter Story with a Christmas Ending." Published in *Century Magazine*, "A Neighbor's Landmark" revisits several themes from "Mrs. Parkins's Christmas Eve," including a thrifty, older protagonist and a climactic scene that combines isolation with a conversion from greed to generosity. But the story's more complex attitude toward consumerism and economic activity distinguishes it from "Mrs. Parkins's." Here, instead of equating gift

exchange with a healthy domestic setting, the story judges consumer culture based on its benefit for the collective. Jewett shows that a healthy, thriving economy must consider not individual financial well-being, but the benefit of financial transactions for the entire community.

The landmark the title refers to are two old-growth pines that stand on land belonging to Mr. Packer, who lives with his wife and daughter in a rural community that depends on farming and fishing for income. Packer's pines function as "landmarks and sentinels" on a "dangerous bit of coast," and village residents, who view the trees as communal property, prize them beyond their value to the local economy (6-7). Jewett's loving personification of the trees as "friends" and "great live things" which "felt their responsibility" to the village demonstrates that their social value outweighs their economic worth.<sup>14</sup> Because of this value, the trees embody the idea of neighborliness and social health in the story. The story revolves around Packer wrestling with his decision to sell the trees to Ferris, an unprincipled timber contractor.

Packer's initial decision to sell the trees to Ferris represents his betrayal of both familial and community bonds. He resists his wife and daughter because he believes their concerns are purely social, and he resents the idea of the community's claim on his individual property, arguing with his wife that "'if I ever do [cut the trees], 't is because I've been twitted into it, an' told they were everybody's trees but mine'" (5). Balancing his desire for individual control is his need to please others; although he "liked to be cross and autocratic, and to oppose people...there was hidden somewhere in his heart a warm spot of affectionateness and desire for approval" (12). Like Mrs. Parkins, Packer resists living as part of a collective. His determination to act independently isolates him from his wife and daughter and threatens to turn the villagers against

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<sup>14</sup> This personification and value Jewett ascribes to the Packer trees resembles Jewett's description of the pine Sylvia climbs in her well-known story "A White Heron." That landmark pine, which "made a landmark for sea and shore miles and miles away...like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth" is said to feel Sylvia's "determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch" and to protect her as she climbs (4, 5).

him. Packer's internal conflict between serving selfish individualism versus communal interests is finally resolved when he takes heroic measures to stop Ferris from cutting down the trees.

He is rewarded for his actions (made on social grounds rather than in consideration of his individual rights) with the "Christmas ending," a spontaneous party organized by his neighbors in thanks for his actions. This Christmas Eve surprise party notably revisits the social openness of the disorderly Christmas, bringing the village into the family home: the Packers' private home fills with uninvited guests, Packer descends to the cellar to fill "some pitchers from the best barrel of cider;" "guests were tramping to and fro overhead in the best room; there was a great noise of buzzing talk and laughter" (14). Christmas in "A Neighbor's Landmark" is unusual. There are no references to gift-giving or the preparation of special meals in honor of the day. The Packers appear to have no holiday traditions they take part in; they spend the day before Christmas planning errands and taking part in daily tasks. Only the "Christmas Ending" makes this a Christmas story, and that ending is one that extols not the domestic, family-centered Christmas, but a holiday based on celebrating social bonds within the community.<sup>15</sup>

It is tempting to read this story as a socialist intervention into American individuality. While Packer's desire to live in community with his neighbors leads to his denial of individual gain and his conversion to the social sphere, to describe "A Neighbor's Landmark" as anti-capitalist is too reductive. True, the profit-seeking Ferris is the text's villain: the community's petition to save the trees is less directed toward Packer as it is against the self-serving economic interests of Ferris. But financial concerns are not fundamentally evil: the Packer pines themselves represent the ideal coupling of monetary and social concerns. Their value is not only

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<sup>15</sup> In *Sarah Orne Jewett: Reconstructing Gender*, Margaret Roman examines "A Neighbor's Landmark" in the context of the Packers' troubled and "destructive" marriage, and describes the Christmas ending as "the ultimate irony" since Packer experiences "no birth, no change" (123-24). I argue that Packer's transformation is neighborly and social, rather than domestic; therefore the Christmas scene works to redeem Packer in all of his relationships, not just that with his wife.

sentimental but economic; as sentinels on the shore, they support one of the local industries, fishing. They also embody the longevity of the village, standing as iconic symbols of human ability to tame or conquer the land. They symbolize the capacity of a local economy to flourish even during difficult financial times.

While “Jack’s Merry Christmas” and “Mrs. Parkins’s Christmas Eve” commended the broadening of social boundaries to include those outside the immediate family via the exchange of money, gifts, and consumer goods, “A Neighbor’s Landmark” eliminates the commercial Christmas entirely, moving straight to the primacy of building social connections in the community. Christmas without the exchange of gifts is still Christmas, Jewett appears to be saying, since it glorifies the larger moral of social well-being or neighborliness. Unlike such well-known Jewett stories like “A White Heron,” in which a regional character must choose between the integrity of her rural environment and the promise of financial and domestic security, Jewett’s Christmas stories communicate a philosophy of neighborliness built upon scenes gift exchange firmly embedded in the economic realm, as gifts and services alike are valued based on their monetary worth. The domestic Christmas worked to hide the connection between Christmas gifts and the market because the supposed purpose of domestic Christmas gifts (to promote the primacy of family values and domestic well-being) masks the actual purpose of domestic Christmas gift exchange (to reinforce hierarchical divisions within the family and society). In the neighborly narrative, the relationship between gift and market is not masked because that relationship is not seen as corrupting the gift cycle as long as gifts are used to promote communal well-being. It is less that neighborliness redeems consumerism at Christmas than that neighborliness is the ultimate purpose of Christmas consumerism and exchange.



### Mary Wilkins Freeman, Community, and Failed Gifts

Another well-regarded regionalist author, Freeman wrote hundreds of short stories for adults and children, many of which were brought together in immensely popular collections. Freeman is known not only for skillfully portraying the traditions and daily life of Massachusetts villages but also the inner lives of the frustrated female residents of these villages.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, Freeman's exploration of neighborliness and social redemption in her Christmas stories is even more critical of failures of gift exchange to establish empathetic relationships. Freeman's New England communities are less idealized than Jewett's: while the values of generosity and community are still present, Freeman's stories frequently shed light not only on the characters who stand to benefit from neighborly generosity but also those who are further marginalized by a broken cycle of gift exchange. Like Jewett, Freeman uses her Christmas stories to explore the damaging effects of self-interested gifts, focusing on protagonists at odds with conventions or imprisoned by their outsider status.

The Christmas stories collected in *A New England Nun and Other Stories* focus on women who are marginalized by poverty and lack of familial support. They also each draw attention to the necessity of neighborly bonds, particularly for persons relegated to society's fringes. Christmas generosity enables these characters to locate their place in society and to broaden neighborly bonds in their communities. In "A Church Mouse" and "Christmas Jenny," Christmas comes in as a concluding scene, more of an afterthought symbolizing the way a character has been welcomed back into society than a catalyst for the action of the story. In "A

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse note in their introduction to Freeman in the anthology *American Women Regionalists* that Freeman's position as a second-wave regionalist author enabled her to build on the foundational work done by authors like Jewett and Rose Terry Cooke: "Freeman in writing her fiction could indicate her region with a few generic brush-strokes....Able to identify region and establish dialect with relatively little effort, Freeman could choose to focus her attention on narrative form" (303).

Stolen Christmas,” Christmas gifts (and, specifically, the lack of funds to buy gifts) perform a more central role in a character’s development.

“A Church Mouse” focuses on Hetty Fifield, who moves into the village church and functions as its sexton when she becomes homeless, as there is no poor house in her small town. Hetty’s reputation for being sharp-tongued and strong-willed keeps the villagers from welcoming her into their own homes, despite her direct requests for accommodation. Initially, some of Hetty’s domestic touches to the village church are welcomed, such as her superior cleaning skills and the “treasures of worsted-work” with which she decorates the meeting-house (416). However, when Hetty makes her private and personal presence visible in the church building, a place for public worship, the parishoners are reminded of Hetty’s poverty and isolation, facts they would prefer to ignore. Hetty’s little room in the church draws attention to the village’s lack of charity and neighborliness, calling to mind the village’s failure in its obligation to her, a failure of which the residents seem uncomfortably aware. Hetty’s village is filled with families who keep to their own “company,” a network of relatives and in-laws. Within this domestic framework and without the benefit of charitable organizations, the village has no place for an outsider like Hetty.<sup>17</sup>

Hetty is saved from homelessness by a resurgence of community feeling, specifically from other women. As the male authority figures who have served as vaguely ineffectual foils in the story band together to remove Hetty from the church, their wives unite to oppose their efforts. Having locked herself into the meeting-house, Hetty makes a tearful plea to be allowed to remain, asking the gathered townspeople to consider how she has “always had a dretful hard time,” and giving them a chance to offer her a small token of the charity they have withheld

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<sup>17</sup> In *Mary Wilkins Freeman: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Reichardt also notes the economic and social implications of Hetty’s plight, describing the story as an example of “the mental agony unrelenting poverty caused” (53-54).

(424). Moved by her speech, Deacon Gale's wife takes charge, supported by the other listening women: "Mrs. Gale's voice rang out clear and strong and irrepressible. 'Of course you can stay in the meetin'-house,' said she; 'I should laugh if you couldn't'" (424). Freeman uses the cooperative efforts of the women of the community to work against the village's conventional, domestic isolation, establishing the social advantage of collaborative, community friendships that extend beyond the family unit.

The Christmas ending of "A Church Mouse," further promotes the importance of community relationships developed in the rest of the story. Christmas Eve falls the day after Hetty's successful bid to stay in the church, having been moved into a room of her own formerly used as a closet for the parson to hang his hat, and she "had reached what to her was the flood-tide of peace and prosperity" (425). While previously ignored by most of the community, Hetty has now been the recipient of a number of presents: "Established in that small, lofty room, with her bed and her stove, with gifts of a rocking-chair and table, and a goodly store of food, with no one to molest or disturb her, she had nothing to wish for on earth" (425). She also has the promise of some of the Gales's Christmas dinner. Her minor comforts met, Freeman declares that "no happy girl could have a merrier Christmas than this old woman with her little measure full of gifts" (425). The gifts here are not only Hetty's new chair and table, but her security and comfort, nontangible measure obtained by the community's support. Inspired by "pure artless enthusiasm and grateful happiness," Hetty reciprocates by sharing the only gift she has: she rings the church bell early Christmas morning and wakes "the whole village to Christmas Day" (426). Christmas in this story, like Jewett's "A Neighbor's Landmark," illuminates the primacy of building community through generosity.

In “A Church Mouse,” Freeman ultimately uses the cooperative efforts of the women of the community to work against the village’s conventional, family-centered isolation. Families who keep to their own “company,” a network of relatives and in-laws, have no place for an outsider like Hetty. An astute examination of the limitations of charity in regional communities, “A Church Mouse” also illuminates the necessity of community bonds that reach outside of the family unit. A similar lesson comes from “Christmas Jenny,” another of the holiday stories collected in *A New England Nun*. The titular Jenny, like Hetty in “A Church Mouse,” is an outsider in her New England village. Jenny lives in an isolated cabin with a deaf and mute child she fosters and a rotating series of small woodland animals that she nurses back to health. Known as Christmas Jenny for the evergreen wreaths and garlands she sells in the village, Jenny also sells herbs, flowers, and vegetables during the summer months.

As in “A Church Mouse,” “Christmas Jenny” culminates with one woman defending the wellbeing of her less fortunate sister. Betsey Carey and her husband Jonas live between Jenny and the village. Their relationship with Jenny is simultaneously neighborly and familial. In two interactions that bookend the story, Jenny comes to Betsey’s rescue when Jonas succumbs to one of his “tempers.” While the scenes featuring Jonas’s tempers and Jenny’s wise response are played for humor, they also demonstrate the ideal neighborly relationship in the text: while Jonas and Betsey are a married couple, and therefore a traditional unit, only in their interactions with Jenny are they completely functional and happy.<sup>18</sup>

In a village filled with residents like the minister and the deacon who are suspicious and frightened of “everything out of the broad, common track,” unusual people like Christmas Jenny

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<sup>18</sup> Martha Satz describes “A Christmas Jenny” as illuminating “the existence of a separate female realm, one more loving, more nurturing, and potentially stronger than the brittle harshness produced by patriarchal values” (189). Although I agree with the descriptive terms Satz uses, I believe that the binaries examined here are not precisely female/male. Viewing “A Christmas Jenny” through the lens of the narratives of neighborly/domestic scenarios, in contrast, makes the story’s cultural innovation even more powerful.

struggle to find a place (173). Jenny's unusual home life leads to town gossip and suspicion, and the minister and a deacon pay an unannounced visit to her hut in the woods to investigate claims that she is starving animals and mistreating the young boy in her care, which Freeman describes this as a sort of "witch-hunt" (174). Betsey comes to her neighbor's defense, emphatically telling the deacon and minister that Jenny's care for the animals and the young boy "mounts to jest about as much as sendin' money to missionaries. I dunno but what bein' a missionary to robins an' starvin' chippies an' little deaf-an'-dumb children is just as good as some other kinds, an' that's what she is" (172). Betsey argues that Jenny's value lies not in her devotion to the "broad, common track" that is typically acceptable, but to her commitment to small things that fall outside of common concern.

Chastened by Betsey's admonition, the minister and deacon retreat, and vow to each other to "send [Jenny] up a little somethin' Christmas" (174). Like Hetty in "A Church Mouse," Jenny is the recipient of a number of unexpected but welcome gifts that represent the town's tacit support for her unusual lifestyle following their initial confrontation of her oddness and outsider status. A Christmas turkey and a new calico dress for Jenny, picture books, candy, and oranges for Willy, her ward, and a fine feast shared with the Careys make Christmas Jenny's rustic hut the site of a fine holiday celebration. The story ends with the sentimental image of young lovers down in the village noticing a light shining up on the mountainside: "it was Christmas Jenny's candle, but it was something more. Like all common things, it had, and was, its own poem, and that was—a Christmas star" (177). While the Biblical Christmas star is a religious reminder of Christ's birth, Jenny's candle is a symbol of the necessity of community and neighborly networks. As in "A Church Mouse," Freeman shows in "Christmas Jenny" the social advantage of collaborative, community friendships that extend beyond the family unit. Christmas gifts in

both stories represent the reciprocal building of these community bonds. Hetty is given the table and chair to furnish her small room and promised a Christmas dinner; she reciprocates by giving the gift of her service to the townspeople, ringing the bells to signal Christmas day. Jenny receives the dress, toys, and turkey, and she shares the bounty with her neighbors, the Careys.

The final Christmas story collected in *A New England Nun* takes a different approach to Freeman's theme of neighborly bonds at Christmastime. "A Stolen Christmas" pits the poor Marg'ret Poole against her rich, boastful neighbor, Mrs. Luther Ely. Marg'ret cares for her three young grandchildren, left motherless after her daughter's death, while their father searches for work in a distant city. Destitute but always ambitious, Marg'ret sees her neighbor Mrs. Ely as the representation of what her life could have been had she been only a little richer or more successful. Marg'ret's ambition is portrayed as reasonable; rather than coveting silk dresses and abundant carpets, she desires the more realistic achievement of the life of Mrs. Ely, who "had been all her life the one notch higher, which had seemed almost attainable" (326-27). However close Mrs. Ely's social status seems to Marg'ret's, it is ultimately unattainable, making Marg'ret's inability to achieve even her relatively humble ambitions all the more disappointing.

The women are in some ways very similar: both are widowed, and both have one daughter with children. However, Ely's daughter lives while Marg'ret's has died. Ely has kept her beauty into her old age, while Marg'ret "had lost every sign of youthful grace" (323). And Ely is financially secure, while Marg'ret struggles to make ends meet for herself and her grandchildren. Most important for the story is the fact that Ely is able to celebrate Christmas while Marg'ret lacks the financial means to do so. Marg'ret's moral compass is tested when she desperately steals a parcel of Christmas toys from the village store on Christmas Eve. For a week leading up to Christmas, Marg'ret had regularly visited the White family's store, a "very

emporium of beauty and richness” decorated for the season with evergreen garlands and tempting displays of “cheap toys,” to check the prices of the toys and candies (328). After her frantic attempts to find any extra work sewing or cleaning houses amount to nothing, Marg’ret is finally driven to steal a package filled with toys and candies she spots sitting unattended on the store’s counter.

Marg’ret is tormented by guilt after her theft. She attempts to make atonement first through an act of generosity directed toward Ely. Having just learned that her son-in-law has found profitable work and will be sending her \$20 a month (an astonishing sum), Marg’ret’s first act after a devastating fire destroys the Ely house is to use some of the money to buy new lace curtains for her neighbors. But this act of unexpected giving is not enough to settle her debt. Having lost the “defiant spirit” that originally inspired her to justify in her mind her theft from the Whites, she attempts twice to make amends in less obvious ways: first by offering to do work for Mrs. White without payment (an action White at first interprets as an impoverished woman’s plea to work for food or fuel), then by leaving money anonymously at the store to cover the cost of the stolen items. Finally she brings the items back to the store and confesses, where to her shock she learns from Mr. White that the package had been intended for her all along: “I’d seen you looking kind of wishful, you know, and I thought I’d make you a present of them. I left the bundle on the counter when I went to supper, and told Henry to tell you to take it, and I supposed he did” (337). Note the language Freeman uses: Mr. White intends to make the items “a present” rather than a charitable donation, reinforcing that this was meant to be an empathetic gift that builds neighborly bonds.

“A Stolen Christmas” differs from “A Church Mouse” and “Christmas Jenny” in a few key ways. The Christmas conclusions in “A Church Mouse” and “Christmas Jenny” paint

pictures of contentment prompted by the receipt of unexpected gifts and the promise of social fellowship. In “A Stolen Christmas,” the illicitly obtained gifts effect Marg’ret’s further social isolation and feelings of guilt and shame. However, the text makes it clear that had Marg’ret trusted in neighborly kindness and enabled the Whites to enact the cycle of gift exchange, her shame could have been prevented. Interestingly, the story emphasizes the giving of unexpected gifts outside the family as an essential part of Marg’ret’s penance for her transgression; only by using some of her money to replace her neighbor’s curtains can she begin to make amends for her theft. While the theme of avoiding envy is foremost in “A Stolen Christmas,” Freeman also uses the story to highlight the significance of broad social bonds through the depiction of giving gifts outside the domestic unit.

The two Christmas short stories collected by Mary Reichardt in *The Uncollected Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*, “Friend of My Heart” and “For the Love of One’s Self,” are excellent illustrations of Freeman’s questioning of the neighborly Christmas. On the surface, the stories share several features that link them to the collected stories in *A New England Nun*. Both feature isolated outsiders (in the case of these two stories, the outsiders are unmarried women) who find social redemption by the story’s end. Both stories also build on the notion of self-denial introduced in “A Stolen Christmas” and impart the moral that those who practice self-denial will be rewarded. Like Marg’ret in “A Stolen Christmas,” both Amanda Dearborn in “For the Love of One’s Self” and Elvira Meredith in “Friend of My Heart” are unhappy about their position in life. The two stories also present very different encounters of the domestic narrative. In “For the Love of One’s Self,” Amanda’s belief in her own undesirability almost makes her miss her opportunity for marital bliss, but the story concludes with the understanding that her future marriage to her factory foreman will indeed provide her with long-sought happiness. In “Friend



of My Heart” Freeman questions the tidy domestic narrative by illuminating the problems with the marriage plot in a community with surplus unmarried women and not terribly desirable bachelors.

“For the Love of One’s Self” tells the story of Amanda Dearborn, a young woman forced first to help her mother take in boarders to supplement the small pension left when Amanda’s father, and then to support herself with factory work after her mother’s death. Central to the story is a comedy of errors predicated on Amanda’s firm belief in her own unattractiveness. When her factory foreman Frank Ayres attempts to court Amanda by sending her a box of expensive chocolates as a Christmas token, Amanda convinces herself they must have been meant for another girl with the same surname. She returns them to the shop, but the next day, Frank sends a box again, insisting that he meant to send them to Amanda all along. The misunderstanding corrected, Frank and Amanda begin a shy courtship, with the promise that Frank intends to buy Amanda’s family home (which she lost following her mother’s death) and that Amanda soon will be able to experience the life of domestic happiness her own mother missed.

Parallel to the story of Frank and the chocolates runs another story of Christmas gifts that serves as a gauge of Amanda’s moral worth. Every Christmas, Amanda receives three gifts from three distant cousins, gifts which are characterized by their uselessness and undesirability; one annually sends an ironing-holder, one a knitted washcloth, and one a hemstitched duster. Amanda believes her cousins send the undesirable gifts not to foster a relationship with their young cousin, but “in the hope of a reward. They were to [Amanda’s] understanding nothing more than so many silent requests for benefits” (113). And while Amanda’s mother would often go without in order to send thoughtful and expensive gifts to these cousins, Amanda rebels, asking “Why should I drudge all my life and go without, in order to send Christmas presents to

these cousins of mother's whom I have not seen more than two or three times in my life, and who send me things which I don't want, like so many machines?" (113). Amanda wrestles with her desire to spend money on herself or to buy generous gifts for her cousins.

Notably, Amanda is convinced to give generously to her cousins by her receipt of Frank's Christmas chocolates. The unexpected sweetness of Frank's attention leads Amanda to wonder "how she could for a second have thought of depriving those poor cousins, those women who had had so little of the joys of life, of the Christmas gifts which she and her mother had always bestowed upon them (118). Cured of her selfishness, Amanda is ultimately rewarded with Frank's romantic attentions. The story ends with Amanda and Frank attending the town's Christmas tree, a community social event that enables, making plans for their future. Although the ultimate outcome for Amanda is the promise of domestic happiness, Freeman moves beyond the domestic Christmas narrative, showing the contagiousness of neighborly generosity as a benefit for not only the individual, but the larger community.

"For Love of One's Self" is one of Freeman's many stories that, as Reichardt notes, initially introduces and then subsequently interrupts or subverts a conventional romantic plotline in favor of examining the interior life of a central female character (*Uncollected Stories* xv). Amanda's battle over selfish desire and charitable extravagance ultimately reveals that the best decision is the one made not only "for love of one's self" but in the awareness that people must live not only for their individual desires but collectively. Amanda's empathetic recognition of her cousins' reduced circumstances and lonely lives just as easily describes her own narrow existence; therefore Amanda discovers that being generous to her cousins is an act of self-love as well.

Freeman explores the theme of self-sacrifice again in “Friend of My Heart,” which, like the well-known “A New England Nun,” features a strong central character who relinquishes her claims on a male figure for the benefit of a weaker, more conventional female character. “Friend of My Heart” builds the notion of self-denial introduced in “A Stolen Christmas” and imparts the moral that those who practice self-sacrifice will be rewarded. The story focuses on practical and efficient Catherine Dexter, who ultimately chooses to sacrifice her own chance to marry Lucius Converse, encouraging him to instead pursue her friend Elvira Meredith, who deeply dreads the outcast status spinsterhood would afford her. Rather than portraying the two women as competitors for an eligible, desirable bachelor, Freeman highlights their friendship and honors their neighborly relationship as the ultimate goal of generosity.

The story achieves much of its power by demonstrating the destructive effects of failed gifts. Like Amanda in “For Love of One’s Self,” Elvira is the recipient of unwanted gifts. In a scene stressing Elvira’s lack of self-worth due to her outsider status as an unmarried woman, Elvira and Catherine walk home from the community-focused Sunday School Christmas tree event. Elvira’s gifts from her Sunday School students include multiple blue head-ties, several pincushions and a worsted lamp-mat, each of which Elvira angrily throws in the snow as Catherine looks on, aghast. The problem is not simply that the quantity of domestic items exceeds Elvira’s need, but that they are failed gifts: ““Catherine, they *knew* I did not want these things! They *knew*, and they did not care! We have things we do not want because nobody cares”” (205). Elvira knows that the Sunday School gifts are given out of a sense of obligation, not care. Freeman highlights here the inability of Christmas gifts given by rote to fulfill the true function of gifts: to forge or build bonds between people. These gifts fail because, as Fennell

says, a “true gift embodies and perpetuates empathetic dialogue between giver and recipient,” opening up new pathways for communication and identification with another (93).

Catherine ultimately gives Elvira a true empathetic gift, one of the “gifts of life that matter,” as Elvira later explains to Catherine (206). Although the story opens with the exchange of more traditional Christmas gifts between the two women (Catherine presents Elvira with a poem titled “Friend of My Heart,” copied into an album; Elvira reciprocates with a “sweet little note of thanks, written on gilt-edged paper, and a beautifully embroidered black silk apron”), receiving an offer of marriage from Lucius was the true gift Elvira desired (197). Like Marg’ret’s gift to her neighbors in “A Stolen Christmas,” Catherine’s true gift to Elvira requires sacrifice. In this case, Catherine sacrifices the possibility of her own marriage to Lucius, ensuring instead that Elvira will net her former beau.

The moralizing conclusion portrays Catherine standing alone in her home after Lucius has left, gazing out the window. Although she feels lonely, she comforts herself, saying “Elvira has got the Christmas present she wants” in a voice of “utmost womanly sweetness, and yet a high courage” (211). Like Louisa Ellis in Freeman’s well-known story “A New England Nun,” Catherine feels uplifted despite having lost her own hope for marriage:

She did not even dream of the truth: that the gift of the Lord, the true Christmas gift, is, for some of his children—the more blessed and the nearer Him—self-renunciation. She did not know that, by giving, she had received a fuller measure than she had given. (211)

Catherine is comforted by the vision of Elvira, “that friend of her heart...standing before her, radiant, and blessing her” (211). Elvira’s blessing stands in for reciprocity, fulfilling the cycle of gift exchange. Notably, Freeman portrays Catherine’s divine status not by depicting Catherine

being blessed by God or communicating directly with heaven, but by reemphasizing the deep friendship between neighbors.

Both “For Love of One’s Self” and “Friend of My Heart” contrast scenes of failed material Christmas gifts with the successful, intangible gifts of friendship and romantic relationships. While on the surface the successful marriage plots in each of these stories seem to work in accord with the domestic narrative’s veneration of traditional family unit, these marriages are facilitated by individual sacrifice in the name of neighborly well-being. Amanda’s generous gifts to her cousins and Catherine’s benevolent refusal of Lucius reveal Freeman’s ultimate promotion of neighborly relationships even in seemingly domestic narratives.

One striking feature of all of Freeman’s Christmas stories is their less optimistic portrayal of the success of neighborliness in regional communities. While Jewett recognizes the problem an unchecked influx of consumer capital might pose for regional communities and their ability to hold onto their distinctive identities, the neighborly Christmas she depicts in her Christmas stories highlights the benefits of economic exchange, particularly in building community relationships. Freeman, on the other hand, is more wary of the ability of the exchange of consumer objects to forge relationships that can overcome barriers such as class, age, and gender. In part, this can be attributed to Freeman’s particularly acute focus on the damage caused to a community by failed gifts. But I would argue that Freeman also scrutinizes gifts that fail because that failure parallels the misuse of artistic gifts through regional and literary commodification.

To understand Freeman’s discomfort with the economic use of her gifts as a writer, I turn to gift theorist Lewis Hyde. In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Hyde examines gifts, by which he means both material objects and immaterial talents and inspirations,

in the context of the market economy. Hyde believes the gift economy and the market economy are oppositional; the market economy is deliberately impersonal, but the purpose of the gift economy is to establish and strengthen relationships. Hyde applies this notion of circulation, exchange, and empathetic understanding to his reading of the poetry of Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound. According to Hyde, Whitman used his poetic gift appropriately by not concerning himself with material earnings. In contrast, Pound misused his gift by focusing on the lack of economic support for artists and the unjust distribution of wealth. Hyde's examination of Whitman and Pound rests on his central argument that artistic inspiration is fundamentally gift-like. Because of this, both the artist and the resulting work itself become uneasy in a market economy, Hyde states: "the artist in the modern world must suffer a constant tension between the gift sphere to which his work pertains and the market society which is his context" (273).<sup>19</sup>

Freeman's depiction of the failure of gifts to promote neighborliness is compounded by her understanding that her very act of writing for a market was impoverishing her artistic gifts. Freeman was clearly aware she was producing literature to be consumed by a national audience. In September 1919, American literature professor and author Fred Lewis Pattee wrote to Freeman seeking biographical information in order to write an introduction for his edition of *A New England Nun and Other Stories*. In two letters of response, Freeman answers questions about her personal history, education, and literary influences with direct and at times self-deprecating candor.<sup>20</sup> Notably, Freeman clearly outlines in both letters to Pattee that financial necessity frequently dictated the terms and the genre of her writing. Citing her financial

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<sup>19</sup> Notably, Hyde describes the key way in which the gift and market economies can be reconciled to each other rather than "strongly opposed" is by being "a community that deals with strangers"—a reconciliation that I believe the neighborly Christmas works to implement (273).

<sup>20</sup> When Pattee asked what directed Freeman toward the short story, the genre that secured her fame in the 1880s and '90s, Freeman's reply is typical of her attitude toward her work: "I think the answer is very simple. The short story did not take so long to write, it was easier, and of course I was not sure of my own ability to write even the short story, much less a novel" (qtd. in Kendrick 382).

circumstances following the death of her father, Freeman states that she was inspired to write not by any “realistic rush” but because “pen and ink and paper involved slight capital, and were most obviously at hand” (385). Turning to her pen as a tradesman would to his trade, Freeman frames her writing in terms of work, noting that she “was forced to work for [her] mere living” (381).<sup>21</sup> Financial necessity not only guided Freeman toward her writer’s craft, but also dictated the style of writing she produced. The “local color” stories for which Freeman was famous were, she claimed, “not really the kind I myself like” and that she would prefer “more symbolism, more mysticism” in her writing (qtd. in Kendrick 382). However, Freeman was “forced to consider selling qualities” (382).<sup>22</sup> Ultimately Freeman’s portrayal of her life as a writer is one in which pragmatic financial necessity supersedes her own choices for her artistic gift.

This sentiment is no doubt an effect of the nineteenth-century inclination to consider women’s intellectual and literary contributions inferior or secondary to their domestic or practical concerns. As Mary Kelley argues, nineteenth-century women writers vacillated “between the countervalences of individual desire and familial obligation,” opposing values with which Freeman clearly struggled. (xvi-xvii). Clearly aware of the public perception of literary regionalism as sentimental, popular, and feminine, Freeman commits a small act of resistance against obligation by expressing desire in her letters to create the type of literature she admires—to allow her gift to circulate freely rather than be controlled by the impersonal market.

#### Neighborly Christmas as National Alternative

Each of these stories by Jewett and Freeman works as a corrective to violations of the cycle of gift exchange enacted by the dominant national narrative about Christmas. Jewett

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<sup>21</sup> Freeman also makes clear that her work was not at first very lucrative; at the beginning she “had earned very little,” and she specifically mentions \$50 she received for the publication of one of her first short stories (381).

<sup>22</sup> Freeman goes on to argue that she didn’t sacrifice the aesthetic qualities of her work simply out of a desire to succeed commercially, stating that “Of course I tried to make my work good along its own lines. I would not have written for money alone” (382).

articulates her philosophy of neighborliness as an optimistic response to the monetary annexation she saw urban vacationers exerting on her rural villages. This philosophy led Jewett to portray the potential transformative power of both economic and gift exchange at Christmastime in her Christmas stories. Freeman also portrays the “gifts of life that matter” in her stories: gifts that build neighborly relationships. Her equal focus on those who are excluded from relationships, social standing, or power despite their attempts at bond-building through gift exchange reveals the fundamental importance of empathetic gifts, informed by her concern that her regional stories were not only making consumable commodities of her Massachusetts communities, but of herself as the author of these stories. Freeman’s sense of herself as a commodity being consumed by an unsympathetic public and her representation of the negative impact of broken gift cycles on marginalized figures reveal the widespread implications of failed gifts.

In addition to probing the impact of failed gifts on community bonds, Jewett and Freeman offer additional alternatives to the domestic Christmas. They interrogate the domestic Christmas’s focus on the primacy of the family and neglect of the social function of gift exchange. The domestic Christmas’s private, family-centered rituals of giving disregard the gift cycle’s empathetic purpose by reinforcing hierarchical divisions and roles within the family and society. As Mary Douglas states in her foreword to Mauss’s *The Gift*, “[a] gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (vii). By focusing on gift exchange that repairs the social bonds within the community, Jewett and Freeman offer an alternative, “un-American” narrative of Christmas rooted in solidarity that encourages empathy for all persons.

Tempting as it may be to align the neighborly Christmas with dismissive assessments of literary regionalism that would describe both the neighborly Christmas and regionalism as isolated and idealized, these depictions of neighborliness in reality work on multiple levels to



address the domestic Christmas's abuses of gift exchange. Because of discomfort with the rise of consumer culture, the domestic Christmas uses figures like Santa Claus to protect a false sense of authenticity. As Nissenbaum notes, the popularity of these invented traditions show "how powerful was the need to keep the relationship between family life and a commercial economy hidden from view—to protect children (and adults, too) from understanding something troublesome about the world they were making" (319). The neighborly Christmas, in contrast, reveals the connection between gifts and the market. There is no shame in buying, giving, and enjoying material goods at Christmastime, these stories claim, as long as those goods are given in a spirit of empathy and in the service of neighborliness.

Additionally, the neighborly Christmas exposes the destructive self-interest at the root of distinctions between charity and gifts. Mauss's observations led him to conclude that the giving and receiving of gifts must be part of an unbroken cycle that promotes bonds among people. In his understanding of gift exchange, reciprocity is essential in order to preserve social ties. Charitable giving removes the recipient from participation in reciprocity, and therefore prevents their ability to partake of community. While the domestic Christmas differentiates between gifts and charity as a way to fortify class distinctions, the neighborly Christmas erases the line between charity and gift giving, encouraging readers to be empathetic and community-minded. The neighborly Christmas's focus on generosity that exceeds the boundaries of the family fulfills the requirement that gift exchange should work to build social and spiritual ties. By highlighting the essential relationship between the individual and the larger community at a time when the family reigned supreme, these stories demonstrate each author's commitment to an alternative narrative of national identity devoted to communal values rather than individual advancement.

## Chapter Two

### Competing Economies and Regional Commodification in Edith Wharton's *Summer*

While concerns about the potential negative impact of consumer culture on human relationships like those outlined in the last chapter abounded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the inverse belief also existed: that consumer culture would present unprecedented opportunities for consumers to forge new relationships, create new identities, and essentially buy new lives. Whether this optimistic belief in the ability of consumer objects to enable social mobility or build relationships across class divisions was supported in reality was another question. Edith Wharton explores this possibility in her 1917 novel *Summer*, a text that focuses on the short-lived romance between Charity, the lower-class ward of rural North Dormer's most prominent citizen, Lawyer Royall, and Lucius Harney, an educated and upper-class visitor to the region. Harney and Charity's doomed affair is depicted as failing not only because of their different class statuses, but because of the impasse between their different notions of exchange. Wharton portrays Charity as valuing gift economies that promote empathetic understanding and forming social bonds, while Harney functions as a member of an urban market economy. These differing economies not only ultimately divide Charity and Harney, but also reveal Wharton's seemingly unproblematized notion of separate economies which reinforces the idea of rural regions as peripheral and urban centers as dominant, raising questions about her complicity in the commodification of peripheral regions.

The novel traces Charity's experiences over the course of one summer as the arrival of Harney, an architect looking for inspiration among the abandoned historic homes near North Dormer, signals the potential for Charity's escape from her narrow-minded hometown and her troubling home life. Initially employed by Harney to help show him around the area (Charity's

knowledge of the Mountain families as well as the terrain around North Dormer gives her specialized knowledge that is useful to Harney), the two eventually begin an affair, resulting in Charity's pregnancy. Charity keeps her pregnancy a secret from Harney so that he can marry his upper-class fiancé, Annabel Balch. Simultaneously, *Summer* follows Charity's struggles at home with her predatory guardian, Royall, who attempts to seduce Charity himself—perhaps as corrective to stop his “sins” of debauchery involving local prostitutes and excessive drinking. In a climactic scene near the novel's end, Charity attempts to rejoin her birth family, but finds that she cannot return to her lower-class roots any more than she can access a higher class status. Royall rescues her from near her mother's grave and proposes marriage; Charity, sensing her lack of options, accepts. Rather than escape and upward mobility, by the novel's end, Charity remains trapped in North Dormer in a troubling marriage.

Charity's marginal status is multilayered. As a child, Royall and his wife (who has died by the summer in which the text takes place) brought Charity down from “the Mountain,” a term which refers to both the low-class, borderlands community outside North Dormer and the geographic outcropping that casts its shadow over the village both figuratively and literally. The cliff-like Mountain is tall enough to determine North Dormer's weather, and although it is more than a dozen miles from the town, it “seemed almost to cast its shadow over North Dormer” (101). So too the Mountain casts a shadow on Charity's life. The residents of the Mountain are a lawless group, impoverished and racially suspect. As the birth daughter of a Mountain woman who practiced prostitution and a criminal, Charity's lineage and status further enforces her outsider status. The townspeople remind Charity of her original home and the gratitude she owes to Royall for bringing her down from the Mountain, telling her “she ought to consider it a privilege that her lot had been cast in North Dormer” (101). Even Charity's name calls to mind

her debt to her foster parents, although the fact that she is never legally adopted again reinforces her outsider status.

Charity tries to perform the gratitude she is supposed to feel for being saved from “a bad place” that was a “shame to have come from,” gratitude that is couched in terms of religious obligation (101). Charity “looked up at the Mountain, thinking of these things, and tried as usual to be thankful” (101), a passage that imitates Psalms 121: “I lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence comes my help.” However, rather than a spiritually motivated gratitude or a sense of shame about her past, Charity identifies her true source of salvation as escape from North Dormer. In fantasizing about upward mobility, however, she is made even more painfully aware of her degraded birth status. While she is mindful that “compared to the place she had come from, North Dormer represented all the blessings of the most refined civilization,” she is equally conscious of “the vision of the glittering streets of Nettleton” (101) and finds herself longing for a better life with greater access to material goods and cultural capital.

Wharton examines two facets of consumer culture in her portrayal of Charity and Harney’s relationship: the clash between consumer culture’s market economy and the more benevolent gift economy, and the problematic necessity of personal public display to signal social standing within consumer culture. Both of these issues, the competing economies and the need for public display, negatively impact Charity’s ability to negotiate higher social standing or access beneficial relationships through consumer culture. While on one level Wharton critiques the market economy, painting its representative member Harney as unsympathetic and destructive, she also does not permit Charity to access or understand that economy as means to escape her constricting circumstances, instead suppressing her social mobility. Wharton’s positive portrayal of the gift economy and the empathetic bonds it encourages is limited to only

those members of the same social class. She consistently employs material objects and consumer goods to reinforce the delineations between classes, showing her devotion to social boundaries. Ultimately, Wharton undermines her own support for the empathetic gift economy and reveals her limited perspective on the dangers of class mobility.

The text's competing economies are evident from the first interactions Harney has with the rural residents of North Dormer, but they are most clearly revealed during the pivotal scene in which Charity and Harney visit the nearest city, Nettleton, for the Fourth of July. Their day in Nettleton is rife with consumer activity: Charity secretly procures a new hat for the occasion; they browse the windows of the mostly closed shops, ogling window displays featuring "hints of hidden riches" (164); later, they dine out after selecting from a number of crowded restaurants.<sup>1</sup> When the couple stops in a jeweler's store so Harney can have his watch repaired, Charity loses herself in a consumerist daydream as she gazes into the "glass counter where, on a background of dark blue velvet, pins, rings, and brooches glittered like the moon and stars. She had never seen jewellery so near by, and she longed to lift the glass lid and plunge her hand among the shining treasures" (165). This scene, like the rest of the Nettleton episode, is described in terms of dazzling excess.

Notably, Charity's moment of material longing is followed by one of the text's most significant moments in terms of economy: Harney buys a brooch for Charity. The giving of the brooch signals an unrealized complexity in Charity and Harney's relationship. However, rather than strengthening Harney and Charity's connection, the gift ultimately emphasizes their class differences. For Harney, the purchase of this gift for Charity introduces to their friendship the

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that the shops in Nettleton are primarily closed is significant. As Maureen Montgomery observes, opulent display windows offered one opportunity for lower-class spectators to visually consume the trappings of the upper-class, "encouraging potential customers to identify with the fashionable lifestyle of the people they read about on the society page" (123). The inaccessibility of the society lifestyle for Charity is compounded in the Nettleton scene by the closed shops, which bar Charity from social mobility both theoretically and physically.

language of commerce and exchange, as well as the idea of reciprocity. It also offers an opportunity for Harney to showcase his higher status, not only through his purchasing power but through his ability to distinguish the market value of the purchased item. Charity is poised between economies: she is on one hand drawn by the capitalist market's promise of upward mobility through consumer spending, but she is also pulled by the more empathetic gift economy, which focuses on the building of relationships. Initially, Harney's gift represents to Charity not a financial transaction, but a moment of symbolic exchange that signifies a shift in their relationship. Charity "gives herself" to Harney because, seen through the lens of the gift economy, the brooch he has given her marks a mutual personal commitment to each other. Because she sees his gift as an empathetic promise of an ongoing relationship, she begins a sexual relationship with Harney. However, Harney's limiting vision based on market values makes a commodity of not only the brooch, but Charity herself—and Charity's lower status and lack of cultural capital devalues her in Harney's eyes. Ultimately, Charity is forced to recognize the failure of the brooch to create empathetic bonds that cross class divisions. In a sense, Charity becomes a commodity when Harney gives her the gift without a sense of mutual empathy. Therefore, the gift of the brooch illuminates the contending economies in turn-of-the-century American and reveals the limitations of consumer goods when used as tools of social mobility.

Wharton's belief in the impermeability of class status is also emphasized through repeated scenes of public shaming in the text. The Nettleton scene is one such case: later that night, during the fireworks display, Harney abruptly kisses Charity, an apparently unplanned action that follows a day of consumer spending (Harney purchases not only the brooch, but hires transportation and buys meals for the couple). In addition, the thrill of the patriotic spectacle, the large mass of people, and the young couple's close proximity encourage their physical intimacy.

After this passionate kiss, Harney and Charity struggle through the crowd and find themselves confronted by Royall, who, inebriated and surrounded by prostitutes, accuses Charity of being a “bare-headed whore” (174). Although Charity knew of her guardian’s habit of visiting prostitutes prior to this encounter, this humiliating scene emphasizes the potential ramifications of Charity’s sexual transgressions and reminds Charity vividly of Royall’s previous attempts to seduce her.

The Nettleton scene introduces a mixture of patriotic spectacle, consumer goods, and public display which leads to a scene of public shaming, a combination that occurs again in the text during North Dormer’s Old Home Week, a nostalgic celebration where the town welcomes back former residents. Like Nettleton’s Fourth of July, which is a spectacular performance not only of patriotic loyalty but of the town’s purchasing power, North Dormer’s Old Home Week is an exhibition of the community’s resources—including, it appears, its young women. The celebration promises to provide an opportunity for public attention in a community otherwise lacking in opportunities for social exposure.<sup>2</sup> Rather than affording Charity a chance to legitimize her relationship with Harney, she is once again shamed when, confronted with the sight of Harney with his urban girlfriend Annabel Balch, Charity faints on stage, calling attention to her illegitimate pregnancy.

The combination of patriotic nostalgia, consumer culture, and public display in these crucial scenes suggest not only the problems stemming from the text’s competing economies, but Wharton’s belief in the more fundamental dangers of attempting to rise in social class. In fact, the only successful instance of upward mobility in the text is Charity’s movement from her impoverished birth family on the Mountain into the middle-class via her informal adoption by Lawyer Royall and his wife. By essentially rescuing her from a life among the criminals and

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<sup>2</sup> Jennie Kassanoff also notes that Old Home Week was created in part to help the dying economies of small towns such as the fictional North Dormer. Kassanoff particularly illuminates the financial benefit of constructing a sense of heritage and community that might entice wealthy visitors to support the town’s economy.

outcasts on the Mountain, Royall prevents Charity from taking the status of her lower-class birth parents, although, as I have noted, the shadow of her ancestry looms large over Charity throughout the text. Several attributes of this class movement should be noted. Charity does not instigate the social mobility herself—rather, she is a passive recipient of another’s charity. The movement comes not from buying oneself a new identity via material goods, but through an altruistic gesture. The change occurs when Charity is a child, so the values and social expectations of the middle-class home in which she is raised are firmly imbedded by the time the action of the text takes place. As a result, Charity is later unable to return to her mountain roots, finding her birth family’s life as incomprehensible as that of the upper-class Harney. Ultimately, the text suggests that material objects appearing to offer the possibility of social climbing only rarely bridge the divide between classes. In most cases, rather than creating empathetic connections between people regardless of their class background, material goods reinforce the divisions between them.

### Critical Interpretations

Although there have been a number of intriguing readings of Wharton’s texts in connection with consumer culture, very few critics have examined consumer culture in connection with *Summer*, and none have investigated the contrast between gift and market economies in *Summer*.<sup>3</sup> Meredith Goldsmith’s reading illuminates the significance of Charity’s “efforts to appropriate a middle-class identity through consumer culture,” efforts that are frustrated by “a series of antagonistic homosocial relationships” (110). Gary Totten situates Charity’s formation of subjectivity in *Summer* in relation to both consumer culture and racial

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<sup>3</sup> Critics seem to find Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* particularly ripe for consumer culture readings, as the majority of articles and book chapters that focus on these two texts in connection to consumer goods or consumption attest. My focus on regional commodification and geographic inequality in connection with *Summer*, however, takes consumer culture readings of Wharton in a different direction.



identity, examining “Charity’s struggle to reconcile her class, gender, and racial identities with the expectations and effects of a rising consumer culture” (61).<sup>4</sup> While both Goldsmith and Totten astutely reveal the various social factors complicating Charity’s attempts to access a higher class status through her consumer practices, I believe Charity’s understanding of gift exchange adds a layer of nuance to the formation of relationships in the novel. I argue that Wharton’s portrayal of differing economies in the text reveals her own discomfort not only with the dehumanizing effects of consumer exchange (as Totten argues) but also with the threat to fixed class status consumer culture posed.

The attention several critics have paid to *Summer*’s nostalgic patriotism as it pertains to Wharton’s perception of American national identity offers additional context for understanding the text’s opposing economies. For Elizabeth Ammons, *Summer*’s setting, both temporally and geographically, is a “temporary escape” from the terrible war conditions Wharton was experiencing as she volunteered in France (*Argument* 130). Ammons specifically locates an “intense Americanness” (131) in Harney and Charity’s trip to Nettleton, calling the evocative description of their shopping, dining, and spectatorship “a superb piece of nostalgic writing” (130). On the other hand, several critics see *Summer*’s patriotic spectacles as critical of what Wharton saw as failures of American democracy.<sup>5</sup> William Leach describes *Summer* as a critical allegory, wherein Wharton plays with romantic and realist literary conventions to critique “the ethical entanglements and obligations of human relationships” (147). The brooch-buying scene

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to Totten, a number of recent critics have examined Wharton’s engagement with early twentieth century discussions of eugenics and race. See especially Jennie Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*. Dale M. Bauer also has outlined Wharton’s antipathy to eugenics-era arguments, suggesting that *Summer* complicates the racial ideology of the time period.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Emilie F. Mindrup describes *Summer* as a “propaganda novel” designed to shake America out of its neutrality during World War I, and Kathleen Pfeiffer describes Charity’s “uniquely American failure” as suggestive of “Wharton’s own deep pessimism about America” during the war (144).

may be read as indicative of the extent to which Americans let themselves be distracted by consumerist pursuits at time when history required their more serious engagement with helping Europe during the Great War. In this light, then, the scenes of nostalgia within the text (including the decadent Fourth of July festivities and North Dormer's Old Home Week celebration) are not simply nostalgia for a non-existent past, but also evidence of the desensitizing effects of modern American celebrations and capitalism. Morgan argues that Wharton was distressed that Americans could content themselves with spectacles and shopping and thereby avoid their duty to their European friends.

While reading for Wharton's critique of national ideologies offers a number of evocative interpretations of *Summer*, a majority of criticism of *Summer* has focused on the novel's treatment of issues of female subjectivity, often in connection with sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Critical assessments that focus on gender often note the economic elements at work in relationships between men and women in the text; indeed, for Wharton, the exchange of commodities in a capitalist consumer culture and the exchange of women in a patriarchal economy are one and the same.<sup>7</sup> The clearest way Wharton explores these themes is through the giving of gifts and money, transactions that highlight the different economies guiding the characters' actions and motivations. Wharton associated the materialism bred of modern capitalism with decadent ruin and with the decay of human relationships, linking materialism with the rise of objectification and, ultimately, the destruction of human connection (Waid and Colquitt 548). On one level, the

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Karen Weingarten focuses on the politics of regulating female reproduction in *Summer*, contrasting the lawlessness of the Mountain to the regulated rules of North Dormer. Kathleen Pfeiffer describes *Summer* as particularly subversive due to its "frank treatment of women's sexual desire" and "its thinly-veiled allusions to incestuous desire" (142).

<sup>7</sup> As Montgomery notes, much of Wharton's writing can be seen as responding to the narrowly limiting conversation consumer culture itself shaped regarding gender roles: "In some respects...her fiction constitutes a counterdiscourse that challenges the meanings given to femininity and gender relations by the news media and by consumer capitalism in general" (15).

exchange of gifts in *Summer* illuminates the simple inequality between the sexes in the early twentieth century. Men give gifts to women; women are obligated to give something of themselves in return for the object gifted, a reciprocal exchange that underlines the unevenness of male/female relationships.<sup>8</sup> The competing economies that are central to the text appear to fall along gendered lines: the consumer culture based on reciprocal exchange and obligation within a capitalist market, embodied primarily by the upper-class male Harney, and the idealized regional economy of empathy and relationships, which Charity seeks.

However, while *Summer*'s opposing economies align roughly with gender, they also engage issues of class, race or ethnicity, and access to cultural capital. The text's presentation of Harney as villainous is not simply a critique of the masculine, as Wharton's careful emphasis of the differences between her male characters, Harney and Royall, reveals.<sup>9</sup> The upper-class Harney's actions signify the younger, urban generation's willingness to embrace the changing economic system in the United States, a country that was quickly becoming a consumer culture wherein an American's first obligation was no longer to be a citizen, but to be a consumer. In contrast, Royall, as a geographically isolated member of an older generation as well as an educated and relatively prosperous lawyer, embodies both a position of privilege and resistance to the nascent consumerism. The distinctions between Harney and Royall's giving of gifts in the novel reveals the threat consumer culture posed to personal relationships. Through the exchange of gifts and the search for empathetic understanding, *Summer* exposes the pervasive ability of

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Haytock discusses Charity as emblematic of the central problem facing single women in turn-of-the-century America: having money or lacking financial security. This dichotomy, says Haytock, much more so than the question of sexual freedom versus repression or "chaste or fallen" women, defines Wharton's heroines, and "it is this distinction that decides their fate" (73).

<sup>9</sup> Hildegard Hoeller argues that Wharton's economies wrestle not only with issues of gender, but also definitions of the literary movement of which she was a part. Hoeller notes that Wharton's male characters who "[adhere] to the rules of 'sentimental economies'...[pay] a high price—that of artistic failure" (25). I follow Hoeller in making an argument based on gender divisions, but while she focuses on the limitations of literary realism's exclusion of sentiment, my own examination centers on the economic divisions introduced by literary regionalism.

this market economy of consumerism to infect all interactions, creating business transactions even in the most private exchanges.

Wharton's differentiation between Harney and Royall points toward another category of demarcation essential to an economic examination of the text: geographic inequality. Geographic inequality takes into consideration not only class distinctions, but the lack of access to cultural and social centers experienced by rural Americans. The text's competing economies reveal the impact the invasive corporate market economy has on a rural community that, due to isolation and lack of capital, operates on a more archaic, clan-based system of interactions. Specifically, *Summer*'s scenes of intense nostalgia and moments of attempted social climbing illustrate the near impossibility of class mobility in regional settings. One way the unlikelihood of social mobility is brought to the surface in the text is by encounters between the upper-class, urban Harney and the lower- and middle-class, regional residents of North Dormer, particularly through differences in the ways these characters use material objects and exchange gifts. Harney is clearly a member of the market economy not only because of his class status and gender, but because of his expectation that the rural region of North Dormer will offer up its goods for his use, including the older homes whose architectural designs he studies and Charity's youth and sexuality. Harney's commodification of the region marks him as an unsympathetic tourist exploiting the rural objects and inhabitants.

Regional commodification is also depicted through Charity's forays into the world of consumer culture with its promise of social mobility. Charity, who is socially marginalized because of her outsider status as Royall's lower-class ward, is also in the precarious position of lacking effective parental (and particularly maternal) guidance due to the loss of her foster mother, leaving her to flounder for appropriate social cues and determine codes of conduct on

her own. Into this space where normally mothers or female teachers would guide suitable choices, Charity instead takes her behavioral and identity cues from consumer culture, influenced by its promise of social mobility. Even in and around rural North Dorset Charity is put in contact with a dizzying array of previously unavailable goods, and these scenes of consumption highlight the apparent ability of material objects, and the public spaces in which they are displayed, to enable the shaping of a new identity or to promote upward mobility. The public display of consumerism not only highlights how a woman's physical presence was subjected to constant scrutiny, but also the way that scrutiny became more public during this time period, as women's spheres broadened to include more public spaces such as department stores, workplaces, restaurants, and public parks and streets. However, scenes of public display in *Summer* also emphasize the way a woman's appearance can be misread in these public spaces, and how consumer activity and attempts at social mobility facilitate those misreadings.

#### Wharton and Literary Regionalism

The role geographic inequality plays in the text's opposing economies makes it clear that *Summer* must be read in the context of Wharton's relationship to literary regionalism. Wharton's complicated relationship with regionalist writing did not prohibit her from becoming complicit in regional commodification. Critics see Wharton participating in a number of different genres: as a realist author in the vein of Henry James; as a naturalist like Frank Norris depicting the brutal realities of urban life; as an uneasy modernist, resistant to a number of the innovations associated with high modernism but nonetheless engaging in similar questions of culture associated with literary modernism. Donna M. Campbell outlines the "plethora of discursive modes and genres, including Jamesian realism, the novel of manners, local color, and naturalism," among which Wharton could choose to operate, noting the potential hazards associated with each (263).

Wharton's attempts to distance herself from modes that would emphasize her junior status (identifying her writing as psychological realism, for example, tended to form the impression of Wharton as Henry James's younger, female, and therefore lesser apprentice) show a writer keenly aware of the need to manage and market her image as well as her writing itself.

Wharton understood that being associated with less well-regarded literary movements would devalue the public's perception of her writing. Therefore, it is not surprising that Wharton was particularly attuned to the problem of distancing herself from local color's "authoresses." In part, Wharton's resistance to being seen as a regional authoress enters into the turn-of-the-century devaluing of women's writing; James Lane Allen's 1897 essay "Two Principles in American Fiction" reflects this perception. Calling for a movement away from the refined and tactful smallness of what he calls the "feminine principle," best seen in local color fiction, Lane promotes instead the rough "massiveness" of the masculine principle (436). The masculine principle, Lane argues, will assist in promoting cultural nationalism and will bring American literature more prominently to the forefront of the world (436). Wharton strove to distance herself from the feminine principle in her mode of production, adopting both what Katherine Joslin calls "the 'objective' tone and jargon of the male scientific discourse of her day" (39) and what Amy Kaplan describes as an "ethos of professionalism" that works against the traditional women's domestic sphere (74).

As Tom Lutz notes, Wharton has not traditionally been considered a regionalist author, either by the regionalist writers who followed her or by critics analyzing literary regionalism (122). Scholars who do regard Wharton as a regionalist tend to fall into two camps: those who believe New York to be her region of interest, focusing on her city-set novels as an example of what Judith Fryer calls "urban pastorals"; and those who follow the more traditional view of

regionalism as being concerned with marginalized or rural areas, and who therefore concentrate on *Ethan Frome* and *Summer* as Wharton's regionalist contributions.<sup>10</sup> I believe both Wharton's New York novels and her Western Massachusetts works operate within regionalist modes (I expand on urban regionalist texts in the following chapter concentrating on the works of Anzia Yeziarska); my focus here is Wharton's second Berkshires novel because of its multilayered engagement with questions of literary regionalism, class and community boundaries, and consumer culture.

In her autobiography *A Backward Glance*, Wharton explains her motivation to depict the Berkshires in her writing, declaring that she had long "wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett" (293). Wharton elaborates on her confidence in her ability to truly depict the "savage tragedies" of the Western Massachusetts Berkshires region in her "Author's Introduction" added to the 1922 edition of *Ethan Frome*:

I had the uneasy sense that the New England of fiction bore little—except a vague botanical and dialectical—resemblance to the harsh and beautiful land as I had seen it. Even the abundant enumeration of sweet-fern, asters and mountain laurel, and the conscientious reproduction of the vernacular, left me with the feeling that the outcropping granite had in both cases been overlooked. (viii)

Wharton here distinguishes her holistic depiction of the region's true character from the rote replication of the rural vernacular and landscape performed by regionalist authoresses. Her use of

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<sup>10</sup> Those who regard Wharton an urban regionalist include Jean Carol Griffith, who features Wharton in her examination of transitional regionalists, but does so noting Wharton's own resistance to the category of local color. Griffith argues that Wharton's urban novels portray a region embedded in social and cultural codes central to regionalism's concerns (16).

the term “reproduction” echoes the criticism directed at local colorists like Jewett and Freeman discussed in Chapter One: that regionalist authors merely recorded their surroundings rather than engaged in literary artistry. Wharton might resemble regionalists in her decision to write about far-flung rural areas, but there, she clearly indicates, the resemblance ends.

Even when writing about outlying locales as she does in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, Wharton worked directly against those seeking to identify her as the successor to the local color tradition by discussing her writing as distinct from the work of writers like Jewett and Freeman. Wharton’s opposition to the sunnily optimistic “rose-and-lavender pages” of local colorists is a strategic move by a writer seeking to establish her authority. In part, as Josephine Donovan asserts, distancing herself from local colorists allows Wharton to prove her own status as an author of the preferred type, by rejecting “their view as feminine and ‘unrealistic’ in order to legitimate her masculine view as the serious, adult one” (48). But it also a matter of controlling the potential commodification of her craft and herself; as Kaplan outlines:

To become a woman novelist involved the further risk of being devoured as well as rejected, of being trivialized and absorbed into the category of the forbidden yet the consumable. If the upper-class lady was treated as a conspicuous commodity—a unique objet d’art, the sentimentalist produced inconspicuous commodities—mass-produced novels. (71)

Kaplan astutely identifies the danger the woman novelist faces: of being identified as a product to be devoured, used up, and potentially undervalued. Paradoxically, in her writing about regional locales Wharton is culpable of perpetuating the kind of devouring consumption she strove to avoid becoming the object of in her career. She herself becomes a commodifier of regions.



While this consumption is present in *Ethan Frome*, Wharton's first Berkshires novel, the author's own regional commodification becomes more evident in the later *Summer*. One notable difference is that *Ethan Frome* features a frame narrative of sorts, as the main events of the story are relayed by an urban engineer who is only a temporary resident of rural Starkfield, Massachusetts. In *Summer*, the outsider narrator is absent. Giving readers direct access to Charity's inner thoughts may relate to Wharton's desire to capture more authentically the gritty realities of the New England region she portrays. However, removing the frame narrator figure makes Wharton herself the urban outsider framing the story. Wharton's attempts to critique Harney's influence on the region and, therefore, the impact of the market economy and consumer culture on an isolated regional community are undercut by her own market-driven use of regional identities. Like Harney, Wharton seeks to improve upon, monetize, and exploit the rural region and its inhabitants. And Wharton's emphasis throughout *Summer* on the dangers of attempting to climb socially point toward her clear commitment to boundaries between classes. Ultimately, Wharton's own resistance to being labeled "regionalist" undermines the potential for an economy of empathy and reinforces the market economy through her complicity with hierarchical divisions in literature and in culture.

#### The Market Economy and the Perils of the Public

As a member of the consumer class and representative of the market economy who occupies a rural area briefly, Harney brings economic and cultural capital to the region while expecting to profit from the region's untapped treasures. In this way, Harney's role in the text reflects one of the primary transformations wrought by the rise of consumer culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like Harney, consumer culture teaches people to be dissatisfied, creating new needs and desires. Not only did consumer culture's escalation increase

the range of goods available for the common citizen, but it also transformed the way social status was conveyed. Remarkable expansions in industrialism and transportation led to the comparative ease of accessing new goods and raw materials from around the country and the world. The wide availability of new and fashionable goods meant that people previously content with perfectly functional objects, from heirloom furnishings to well-worn work clothing, began to notice how these objects were inadequate, both innately and in their ability to signal social status.

Consumers attached social value to material objects; having the right clothing and the proper home furnishings, as well as being able to dine out in the best restaurants and take in the finest forms of public entertainment signaled to the watching public one's social standing.

This trend is reflected in the greater sense of status Charity felt the brooch conveyed to her as she walked through a hotel restaurant—a public space where normally Charity would feel out of place. Harney and Charity stop to both dine and to escape the heat, but Charity's initial impression of "inhospitable splendour" is only mediated by her confidence in her own attractive apparel and her new brooch (166). Standing in the dressing-room filled with dazzling "looking-glass and lustrous surfaces," surrounded by "showy-looking girls" with "immense plumed hats," Charity is intimidated. When she "took courage to bathe her hot face...and to straighten her own hat-brim" she sees the "glow of her face under her cherry-coloured hat, and the curve of her young shoulders through the transparent muslin," recognizing both her effectiveness and value (165-66). Buoyed by her appearance, Charity pins the brooch on, and is able to walk through the elegant restaurant "with her head high, as if she had always strolled through tessellated halls beside young men in flannels" (166).

But despite the power of the brooch, Charity continues to feel uncomfortable in the public, social spaces of consumer culture, such as shops, hotels, and restaurants. The Nettleton

scene is punctuated by descriptions of Charity finding her settings unintelligible and overwhelming, from the “clanging of trolleys, the incessant popping of torpedoes, the jingle of street-organs, the bawling of megaphone men and the loud murmur of increasing crowds” on the streets to the “glittering” movie theater where the dazzling images and the faces of the audience “merged in her brain in swimming circles” (167).

Charity’s discomfort in Nettleton reflects the fact that appearing in public was not a simple issue for women of the Gilded Age. As the number of etiquette guides addressing the social standards of public behavior attest, the changing daily life in America due to the rising market economy of a consumer social also impacted the rules of social conduct. Where young women previously would have been seen in the family’s drawing room, a relatively safe and manageable space, the transformation of the modern city and the resulting changes to social decorum led to a host of associated issues. Many authors urge young women to guard against public behavior that could subject them to misinterpretation. One typical example from 1903 includes the admonition for young women to never speak loudly “either in the street, or park, or concert room, or, in fact, in any place where there are strangers near you” (Klickmann 92). The danger of speaking with exuberance or force is that a young lady might inadvertently be “attracting notice,” thus aligning her with the “vulgar young women whose sole desire is to call attention to themselves, and it is not always possible for the casual passer-by to distinguish between the two” (Klickmann 92). One of America’s best-known etiquette authors, Emily Post, describes avoiding attention-seeking public behavior as “one of the fundamental rules of good breeding” and works to align public attention with private exposure: “Shun conspicuous manners, conspicuous clothes, a loud voice, staring at people, knocking into them, talking across anyone—in a word do not attract attention to yourself. . . . You are knocking down the walls of

your house when you do” (29). Here and elsewhere Post notes that visible public behavior not only has the power to shape a public reaction but also could have continued social repercussions.

The dominant discourse guiding social behavior during the time period unmistakably emphasizes modest, discreet conduct for young women who must appear in public. However, as Thorstein Veblen notes in 1899, the retailing revolution of the late nineteenth century made clear that a certain amount of attention-seeking public display was necessary within the system of consumerism. For one, the more readily available material goods enabled middle-class and even working-class shoppers to duplicate or at least simulate the attire of the wealthy, a phenomenon Veblen described as “emulative spending” (110). But simply purchasing new clothes and material goods is not enough; as Veblen states, it is necessary to display the newly acquired objects to demonstrate to a watching public one’s social standing:

The only practicable means of impressing one’s pecuniary ability on these unsympathetic observers of one’s everyday life is an unremitting demonstration of ability to pay. In the modern community there is also a more frequent attendance at large gatherings of people to whom one’s everyday life is unknown; in such places as churches, theaters, ballrooms, hotels, parks, shops, and the like. In order to impress these transient observers...the signature of one’s pecuniary strength should be written in characters which he who runs may read. (60-61)

Signifying social position relies here on two factors: the display of one’s financial capacities in an immediately visible way (so, not only via clothing but also through the exhibition of other consumption objects such as the food and beverages one eats or drinks or the mode of transportation one can enlist) and displaying these capacities in a well-attended public space.

This spectacle of public display of financial faculties becomes the stage on which consumers work to act out the new public positions and social identities theoretically available to them.

However, there are other roadblocks on the path to freer social mobility, including the traditions of social distinction embedded in Western culture. The terms I am using here refer to Pierre Bourdieu's model of social organization, most fully developed in *Distinction*. Bourdieu's theory, in brief, is that in social settings people compete for and draw upon different types of assets in order to obtain status, or "symbolic capital." Bourdieu divides these assets into social, economic, and cultural capital, each with distinctive qualities. Economic capital is characterized by financial resources; social capital by relationships, networks, and affiliations. Cultural capital, the subject of the greatest analysis in *Distinction*, is made up of skills, tastes, and practices that are embodied in everyday knowledge, institutionalized through academic degrees, and objectified in cultural objects. Cultural capital becomes inscribed on individual behavior and in institutional traditions in a way that mystifies its connection to positions of power. Moments of consumer activity in *Summer* underscore the importance of Bourdieu's theories in studies of consumerism, as activities in the field of consumption reveal the embodied knowledge and disposition that inform the inscribed behaviors of the cultural elite and that make social mobility more challenging. Additionally, the early twentieth century marks the shift toward the breakdown of hierarchical divisions between high and low culture, which promised (or perhaps threatened) to radically transform the way consumption objects signify status, as the boundaries between status levels become less fixed and the access to formerly out-of-bounds consumption objects becomes more readily available—at least in theory.

#### Failed Promise of Social Mobility

Regional inhabitants, and particularly those of the lower or working classes like Charity, stand to benefit from this breakdown in distinction and from the greater availability of material goods that suggest an opportunity to signify as a member of a different social class. Wharton clearly positions Charity as someone influenced by the manufactured discontent of consumer culture, such as when Charity conflates her self-dissatisfaction with her town's lack of cultural success. The opening chapter establishes that a trip Charity took with her church group to the larger regional city Nettleton introduces not only new experiences, as she "for the first and only time, experienced railway-travel, looked into shops with plate-glass fronts, tasted cocoanut pie, sat in a theatre," but also the idea of dissatisfaction (100). North Dormer's lack of opportunities to gain cultural capital becomes a specific target for Charity's more general dissatisfaction. After returning from Nettleton, Charity "pitilessly took [North Dormer's] measure" and found it wanting, "left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities. It had no shops, no theatres, no lectures, no 'business block'; only a church...and a library..." (101). In other words, North Dormer lacks the opportunity for the type of large, public gatherings necessary for conveying one's social standing to others. As a young woman trapped in a pseudo-home with a predatory guardian as a father figure and with very few prospects for escape, the promise of potential upward mobility must have seemed her only potential salvation, and consumer culture the key to that mobility.

However, for Charity, the public display of consumerism necessary for social mobility is not only overwhelming, but actually detrimental: rather than showcasing the trappings of her success and therefore her greater social clout, these spectacles of display call attention to her liminal, lower-class status and render obvious her failed attempts at class passing. Wharton explores the downside of publicity with many of her heroines. Undine Spragg of *The Custom of*

*the Country* enjoys nothing more than “publicity, promiscuity—the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous crowded lunches at fashionable restaurants” her husband, Ralph, discovers to his dismay (769). But while the irrepressible Undine’s social climbing ambitions bring her enjoyment, even during “reckless evenings in haunts where she thrilled with simple glee at the thought of what she must so obviously be ‘taken for’” (732), Charity finds being mistaken for a prostitute alarming and disturbing, perhaps because it is a very real alternative for her. As a lower-class young woman, Charity’s position is more tenuous than Undine’s, and perhaps closer to that of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, whose attempts to publicly display and essentially advertise her feminine wares during the *tableaux vivants* scene are answered by Trenor’s attempted rape in the succeeding scene.

#### Reciprocity and Gift Exchange

Charity’s failure to advance socially through public display is compounded by the ineffectiveness of material goods to allow her to bridge social divisions. A dominant reason material goods do not enable Charity to climb socially is due to the different economic beliefs held by Charity and Harney. Throughout *Summer*, Harney’s interactions with Charity reveal the subjugation inherent in the dominant capitalist consumer culture, illustrating that the economy of exchange and obligation itself mirrors the entrapment of women in an unequal system and the commodification of rural areas by urban American society.<sup>11</sup> Harney’s engagements with others are typified by the language of commerce and capitalism, of obligation and reciprocity. For example, while Charity believes that Harney feels love for her in a way he does not for his fiancé, Annabel Balch, he is unwilling to prioritize feelings of love over his sense of Annabel’s

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<sup>11</sup> Ammons points to this commodification in her analysis of *Summer*, stating that “the American dream of personal liberty does not apply to women, whose reality... is slavery; Wharton’s heroines are owned by men” (127). While I agree with Ammons’ perspective on the limitations of Charity’s individual freedom, I would argue that Wharton does not have a monolithic assessment of her masculine characters.

“prior claim” to him (213). He portrays his relationship with Annabel as an obligation, echoing the contractual terminology of business relationships.

In contrast, Royall’s association with money and with the market economy is much more fraught, as he simultaneously embodies two worlds through his position as the most cultured and educated member of an isolated community. His relationship with Charity reveals this complexity, and shows him to be potentially a representative of the other economy at work in *Summer*—the economy of empathy. While the consumer culture is founded on the concept of individual possession and ownership of money, objects, and people, the economy of empathy stems from a different understanding of exchange, one that values communal identification and social bonds.

The debate surrounding reciprocity and exchange is at the core of studies into gift giving. To what extent does the receipt of a gift obligate the receiver to reciprocate? And if the giving of gifts opens a cycle of exchange, what is the motive behind gift giving? These questions also point to one of the main issues guiding gift theory, according to Mark Osteen: “to distinguish gift exchanges from market exchanges, and thereby to discriminate between gifts and commodities” (“Gift” 229). The discourse surrounding gift studies sets gifts and commodities, gift economies and market economies, in direct opposition (Osteen, “Gift” 229). In a gift economy, the gift comes to represent the personal relationship between the giver and recipient; while in a consumer culture, the gift is a commodity with monetary and economic value only, an impersonal marker of a business transaction, and in many cases a symbol of power. For an object to be truly part of the gift economy, Osteen says, this “drive for power” must not be present, but should instead be replaced by “an immaterial aura of connection to other humans...” (“Gift” 244).



This “aura of connection” is further examined by Lee Anne Fennell, who looks into the ways gift giving (specifically the exchange of personal gifts between individuals) differs from the standard notion of reciprocal exchange in a consumer culture. She argues for a new way of discussing and understanding gift giving that separates the practice from market exchange (85). For Fennell, modern gift exchange works in a number of ways to re-envision reciprocity. The giver’s active engagement with the process of selecting or creating a gift opens up a relationship with the recipient in which the giver must try to empathize with the recipient’s inclinations. Ideally, this exchange of gifts works to remove the barriers between people, creating non-hierarchical relationships “based upon empathy rather than expectation of return” (Osteen, “Questions” 8). It would seem, then, that one of the clearest distinctions between an economy of consumerism and a gift economy is the way a gift performs in each. In consumer culture, a gift is rarely a “gift” free from expectation, but instead demarcates a hierarchical power relationship. However, in a gift economy, “a true gift embodies and perpetuates empathetic dialogue between giver and recipient, facilitating and documenting each party’s imaginative participation in the life of the other” (Fennell 93). The gift becomes representative of a relationship, and opens up new pathways for communication and identification with another.

However, as a number of critics, including Marcel Mauss, have noted, this vision of gift giving as an empathetic dialogue that forges relationships and creates social bonds is rarely successful and not universal. According to Fennell, there are a number of ways that the individual giving of gifts can “fail.” She suggests

that in the idealized gift situation, this communication can be conceived as an empathetic dialogue between donor and recipient that can deepen and sustain the parties’ relationship.... Through the operation of this empathetic dialogue, a

gift can gain ‘sentimental value’ above and beyond the market value of the underlying commodity. However, lack of empathetic imagination on the part of either party can cause the gift to fail. (Fennell 86)

Thus, in Harney’s giving of the brooch *both* parties needed to be equally involved in imbuing the gift with sentimental value. Charity’s problem is that in receiving the gift, she assumes too much; she gives the brooch a meaning Harney never attached to it.

Part of this misunderstanding comes from the uneven power dynamics at work in Harney and Charity’s relationship stemming not only from their differing views of gifts, but from their disparate class backgrounds and geographic origins. Charity is frequently reminded by Harney that she does not recognize the market value of objects. Harney points out the value of a book in the library when he and Charity first meet: “picking up the volume he had laid on the desk he handed it to her. ‘By the way, a little air and sun would do this good; it’s rather valuable’” (105). Harney appears to have an aesthetic sensibility that is more refined than Charity’s. He “pause[s] enchanted before certain neglected and paintless houses” that escape Charity’s notice as significant. His appreciation of objects seems to stem from a sense of authenticity as well; about the coffee Charity initially dislikes at the French café in Nettleton Harney remarks, “‘It’s the real thing, you know’” (167). The coffee’s “realness” has little to do with its appeal to the person drinking it, but instead represents the beverage’s relationship with European settings, which Harney sees as refined and sophisticated. Unfortunately, Harney’s appreciation of the aesthetic is limited to an object’s ability to signal sophistication, not to the emotional connections an object could potentially forge.

Harney's knowledge of an object's value is crystallized in the scene where he buys Charity the brooch. While Charity looks over the "shining treasures" in the case, Harney asks which she likes best, and Charity responds:

‘I don't know....’ She pointed to a gold lily-of-the-valley with white flowers. ‘Don't you think the blue pin's better?’ he suggested, and immediately she saw that the lily-of-the-valley was mere trumpery compared to the small round stone, blue as a mountain lake, with little sparks of light all round it. She coloured at her want of discrimination. (165)

Charity's original selection is a brooch with natural elements that no doubt appeal to her, as she is frequently portrayed as having a special relationship with nature (165). In addition, lilies are traditionally a sign of purity, so her choice might be intended to indicate her virtuous status. Harney, however, corrects her choice. The blue pin Harney selects is "better" in that it could command a higher market value; the "trumpery" of the lily brooch indicates its inferior monetary worth. Harney's taste, but lack of manners, betrays the extent to which he is imbricated in a consumerist mode of relating.

When Harney buys the blue pin for Charity, she accepts the gift with "a shy stammer," and worries that Harney thinks she tried to "extract" the gift from him (165). Initially the gift operates for Charity within both the gift and market economies. Charity sees the gift Harney gives her as legitimizing their relationship in the eyes of the public: once she pins the brooch on, she is able to walk through an elegant restaurant "as if she had always strolled through tessellated halls beside young men in flannels" (166). In this way, the brooch is a potential sign of the higher status Charity could achieve in her relationship with Harney, linking her to the type of fashionable young man who actually belongs in a fine establishment. But this potential

significance of the brooch contrasts to its other symbolic meaning, as one of the empathetic objects that Fennell states “serve as ‘markers’ or ‘tie-signs’ that link the giver and the recipient to each other and provide evidence about their relationship” (90-91). The brooch becomes this type of “marker” when Charity pins it on the day after she is publicly disgraced by Royall: “She would not have dared to wear it openly at North Dormer, but now she fastened it on her bosom as if it were a talisman to protect her in her flight” (178). Charity also refers to the brooch’s protective function when she reclaims it from Dr. Merkle at the end of the novel. The doctor demands four times the original amount Charity owed to guarantee the brooch’s return, and Charity considers not paying the debt. Ultimately, Charity decides that she cannot “leave her only treasure” since she wants “it for her baby: she meant it, in some mysterious way, to be a link between Harney’s child and its unknown father” (242). By this point, the brooch’s monetary value is irrelevant to Charity as its symbolic value is ultimately the most important.

However, the gift of the brooch serves a different function for Harney. The brooch is, first of all, not a true gift. One of the stipulations of distancing a gift from commodity status is erasing traces of the marketplace from the gift. Actions like removing the price tag from a gift item or ceremonially wrapping the gift attempt to mask a gift’s former status as a commodity. A true gift needs to be illiquid, or unable to be quickly or easily converted into cash, since the commutable nature of money usually prevents it from operating empathetically in a gift economy.<sup>12</sup> Harney does not remove the traces of the marketplace from the brooch; it is not wrapped, nor is its value or place of purchase in any way concealed. In addition, Harney’s preferences override Charity’s; rather than purchasing the lily pin Charity first selected, an act that would support her status as an equal in their relationship, Harney exerts his authority as one

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<sup>12</sup> As I noted in Chapter One, in the domestic Christmas narrative, Santa Claus functions as one such cultural filter, serving to mask a gift’s marketplace origins. By ascribing a gift’s source to a kindly elf rather than a department store, parents preserved the sense of a gift’s “trueness” at Christmastime.

who recognizes value and worth. Later, Charity reimagines the exchange in empathetic terms, recalling “their choosing the blue brooch together” (214). For Harney, however, the brooch is representative of his operation within the consumer culture and his expectation of a reciprocal transaction.

The failed gift simultaneously intensifies and contributes to Charity’s public shaming. Shortly after the gift of the brooch, Charity and Harney experience their first passionate kiss during the fireworks display. This scene is immediately followed by the confrontation near the lake where Royall calls Charity a whore (174). In such company and carrying on as she does with Harney, Charity senses her own virtue as questionable, such that she feels compelled to explain to Harney her real reason for wanting to leave Royall’s home. As she sees it, Royall desires to make Charity “like those other girls...so’s ’t he wouldn’t have to go out...” (183). Discomfited, Harney soon stops listening to Charity’s words, instead demanding that she kiss him the way she did the previous night. Following this scene, Charity and Harney begin using the abandoned house for regular sexual encounters.

This plot sequence underscores the murky territory Charity has entered in accepting Harney’s gift. In her mind, the gift indicates a new level of intimacy in their relationship, not only physically, but emotionally. However, Harney’s vision of the relationship is clearly informed by the market economy, notions of possession and reciprocity. When Charity attempts to flee to the Mountain after she is shamed by Royall in Nettleton, she meets Harney on the road. Harney already assumes his ownership: his response when Charity states her intention to leave North Dormer is to gravely respond ““Going away—from me, Charity?”” ““From everybody,”” Charity responds. Harney believes no one’s opinion or relationship should matter to Charity

except his own. Additionally, here as frequently elsewhere in the text, Harney is described as not listening to Charity:

As she spoke she became aware of a change in his face. He was no longer listening to her, he was only looking at her, with the passionate absorbed expression she had seen in his eyes after they had kissed on the stand at Nettleton. He was the new Harney again...utterly careless of what she was thinking or feeling. (181)

Charity's shared confidence that she is leaving to escape from Royall's attempts to have a sexual relationship with her also sparks a similar reaction from Harney: "Once more, as she spoke, she became aware that he was no longer listening" (183). Perhaps assuming that Royall has already spoiled Charity's purity, Harney responds not with chivalry, but by demanding that she kiss him again, "like last night" (183). By repeatedly refusing Charity the right to speak, Harney effectively limits her ability to signify as a full person in their relationship. Seeing Charity as an independent person would spoil his fantasy of her as a sexual object to be possessed. His desire for Charity has now been revealed to himself for what it is in very unglamorous terms, and thus the mountain house is an appropriately squalid environment for the "architect" to carrying on the relationship. In his mind, he owes her no better.

Harney's response demonstrates that a gift given specifically to establish a circuit of reciprocity in a relationship effectively devalues the relationship. Harney's vision of establishing relations requires Charity to surrender the only commodity he sees as valuable: her youthful body. And while for Charity her sexual awakening is initially liberating, it does not serve the same purpose for Harney. "In an ideal relationship," Fennell argues, "reciprocal gifts will provide vehicles for an ongoing empathetic dialogue between the parties. When gifts are not

given, are given inappropriately, or are not reciprocated, it may mean that one party's investment in the relationship is inappropriate or missing" (96). Whatever emotional resources Harney does have he chooses to invest in the upper-class Annabel, to whom he is engaged. In his mind, Charity, a poor girl from an indigent mountain community, is not worth his emotional investment. When Charity writes to Harney, encouraging him to do what is right by Annabel, Harney takes her at her word. He describes her "understanding" of his prior commitment as "generosity," and makes clear that he is unwilling to deny Annabel's claim on him, which is clearly in terms of social status and not love or affection (213).

Harney's detachment and Charity's failure to rise in status are reinforced during Old Home Week. Preparations for the festivities are directed by the town's most culturally privileged resident who is also Harney's cousin, Miss Hatchard, who orchestrates the efforts of the local girls in preparing for the event. A visitor to Miss Hatchard's home is "treated to a glimpse of the group of girls deep in their pretty preparations," including sewing draperies, assembling garlands, and putting to decorative use the various material objects procured from larger communities which together form "a gay confusion of flags, turkey-red, blue and white paper muslin, harvest sheaves and illuminated scrolls" (184). Charity and other local girls are on display even before the celebration, as Miss Hatchard urges them not to move so that the observing visitor can better take in the tableau of their preparations. The "North Dorner maidenhood" is aware of their visible presence: while the girls were at first unclear about their role in the planning, they had "soon become interested in the amusing details of their task, and excited by the notice they received" (185-86). However, as Maureen Montgomery notes, the opportunity for women to participate in the types of activities associated with the spectacle of consumer culture brings not only the possibility of greater freedom and attention, but also

provides “further opportunities for domination and control” (11). The surveillance that comes with visibility in public spaces amplifies the prospect of women being judged and misjudged for their appearance, manners, and behavior.

Charity is drawn to the festivities because of this promise of notice, taking care with her appearance, including having a new dress made for the event that she hopes will “outshine the rest” of the girls’ dresses when she takes the stage for the ‘exercises’” (188). The dress itself becomes a spectacle of consumer activity symbolic of Charity’s sexual transgressions; Charity’s seamstress friend Ally has placed the dress “in virgin whiteness” on the bed accompanied by a white veil, a scene Charity mentally curses her for, thinking “it was stupid of Ally to have paraded all those white things on her bed, exactly as Hattie Targatt’s wedding dress from Springfield had been spread out for the neighbours to see when she married Tom Fry” (192). As an added blow, the dress is accompanied by a pair of second-hand shoes that Charity recognizes as having belonged at one time to her rival (and Harney’s fiancé), Annabel. These material goods, which Charity intends to use as a symbol of her fittingness for Harney and the higher society he represents, instead underscore what Charity has not managed to achieve: securing a husband without sacrificing her virtue.

The veil of Charity’s self-deception is lifted when, while on stage with the other North Dormer girls, she scans the audience during Royall’s speech, searching for Harney’s face. When she discovers that Harney is there with Annabel, she suddenly sees “the bare reality of her situation:”

Behind the frail screen of her lover’s caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people—with other women—his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in



which every man's life is entangled....She had always dimly guessed him to be in touch with important people, involved in complicated relations—but she felt it all to be so far beyond her understanding that the whole subject hung like a luminous mist on the farthest verge of her thoughts. (197)

Harney's betrayal is cast as a series of business entanglements, relations in the marketplace that cause him to “[detach] from her, [draw] back into the unknown” (197). Harney's upper-class position in society and his operation in the market economy render him unknowable and unattainable to Charity, although she sees clearly that his gift was not the opening of the empathetic dialogue she believed it to be. Charity “had given him all she had—but what was it compared to the other gifts life held for him? She understood now the case of girls like herself to whom this kind of thing happened. They gave all they had, but their all was not enough: it could not buy more than a few moments” (198). Notably, Charity combines the language of the gift economy and the market economy here—the “other gifts” life holds for Harney have greater value and can “buy” more of Harney's time. The currency of a sexual experience with Charity is not enough to “purchase” Harney's fidelity to class, to which he has become even more committed, in a consumerist society.

Although Charity ultimately values empathy and relationships above commodity culture, she understands the standards by which market worth is determined. This passage makes clear that Charity has learned to view herself in terms of the market economy, and sees that she is unable to “buy” more of Harney's time and affection due to her social position and her lack of cultural currency. Charity also becomes aware of her value as a commodity when she learns “what she was worth when Lucius Harney, looking at her for the first time, had lost the thread of his speech, and leaned reddening on the edge of her desk” (127). Charity's market value is based

on her ability to exert the only power she has over a man—the power of her sexuality and femininity. Charity therefore splurges on a dress for Old Home Week, wanting through her fine appearance “to let North Dormer see that she was worthy of Harney’s admiration” (192). North Dormer shrinks in her estimation not only because it lacks the pecuniary resources to build shops, theatres, and trolleys, but because the lack of these features also points to a deficit in “all the forces that link life to life in modern communities” (101). North Dormer’s fund of social capital is low, making it difficult for Charity to find the empathetic understanding of true friendship and love, “what might be the sweetness of dependence” (107). But Harney’s failed gift ultimately reveals to Charity the inability of material objects in a market economy to create bonds or enable social mobility—in other words, the failure of cultural capital to cross class divisions.

Wharton’s uneasiness with romance across class divisions may contribute to the final pairing between Charity and Royall. Initially Charity’s relationship with her guardian is shaped by an uneven sense of obligation (her very name prompts readers to frame her in terms of her “debt” to Royall). The townspeople of North Dormer often remind Charity that she owes much to Royall, who “rescued” her from a life in squalor on the Mountain. Miss Hatchard, for example, tells Charity, ““My child, you must never cease to remember that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the mountain”” (101). To Miss Hatchard, Royall “brought” Charity into his home in much the same way that one purchases an item during a shopping excursion. Despite her own empathetic disposition, Charity is aware of the rules of reciprocity and the language of commerce; she worries that the discovery of her relationship with Harney might result in an increased debt to her foster father: “...in spite of the latitude which North Dormer

accorded to courting couples she had always felt that, on the day when she showed too open a preference, Mr. Royall might, as she phrased it, make her ‘pay for it’” (127).

Charity’s awareness of the need for human companionship leads to her decision not to attend boarding school. Although she craves a life outside North Dormer with more opportunities and greater engagement with other people, Charity recognizes that leaving her foster father alone would further isolate him:

He and she, face to face in that sad house, had sounded the depths of isolation; and though she felt no particular affection for him, and not the slightest gratitude, she pitied him because she was conscious that he was superior to the people about him, and that she was the only being between him and solitude. (108-09)

Charity’s thoughts of saving Royall from isolation are motivated not by affection or gratitude, but pity; by making herself conscious of Royall’s feelings, she is in fact acting out the definition of empathy. However, it is Royall’s emotional vulnerability that ultimately illuminates the differences between the dual economies in the text. Royall’s education and relative financial security place him in a position of power and privilege over many other North Dormer residents. He resists the new values of a purely consumerist culture which Harney represents, and appears determined to help Charity defy her commodification, both by Harney and by the larger society, although the way in which he goes about this resistance is problematic. In part, Royall’s attempts to build empathetic understanding are marred because of his problematic treatment of women in the text.

Most critics view the match between Royall and Charity as repellent and incestuous. Ammons, for example, explains that while Royall “needs [Charity] and sincerely wants to help her” his benevolence does not redeem his fatal flaw of lust or their incestuous marriage (137).

The references to incest typically refer either to Charity and Royall's marriage (which, I would point out, is not consummated, and therefore potentially absolved of the charge of incest) or to the scene prior to Harney's arrival in town where Royall comes to Charity's bedroom door seeking intimacy. While some readers may contend that Royall is looking for a return after he has effectively "purchased" Charity by marrying her, he could be seen more simply as "a mortally lonely man" (137) and by his frank admission, he is simply looking for Charity to be more empathetically imaginative. This second reading is supported by Royall's consistent attempts to resist the language of possession and commodification that marks the market economy. He does not see Charity as indebted to him, but rather the other way around. After his second proposal, he argues that Charity is continuing to hold him in liability: "Mr. Royall rose from his seat. 'See here, Charity Royall: I had a shameful thought once, and you've made me pay for it. Isn't that score pretty near wiped out?'" (156). He avoids the language of ownership, telling Charity "'You're right: I've no claim on you—why should you look at a broken man like me? You want the other fellow...and I don't blame you. You picked out the best when you seen it...'" (156). Royall's interactions with Charity regularly work to unseat her ideas of being in his debt, and rather focus on her greater value and worth in his estimation. He values Charity in a way Harney does not.

Royall's further distinction from Harney and from the market economy can be seen in a careful examination of the gifts he gives Charity. On more than one occasion, Royall gives Charity money, which in gift theory is seen as a failed gift, since it does not create the necessary layers of imaginative interaction in its selection or its giving. According to Fennell, "[money] would be deeply offensive as a gift between romantic partners, as it unavoidably evokes the anonymous and indifferent exchange involved in prostitution" (92-93). And it is true that more

than once in the novel, Royall not only gives Charity money, but does so in a way that stresses money's lubricating force in a market economy and suggests that in a consumer culture, Charity, as Royall's ward, has the same status as a prostitute. However, while gift theory maintains that money is always a failed gift, it is clear that Royall is attempting to use the gift of cash to make Charity's life better and to build an empathetic understanding between them. In a sense, Royall's monetary gifts bridge the gift and the market economies.

The first mention of Royall giving Charity money comes after the famously frugal Royall begins taking in a modest income from Harney:

...he had been prompt in accepting Harney's offer to hire the buggy at a dollar and a half a day; and his satisfaction with the bargain had manifested itself, unexpectedly enough, at the end of the first week, by his tossing a ten-dollar bill into Charity's lap as she sat one day retrimming her old hat. 'Here—go get yourself a Sunday bonnet that'll make all the other girls mad,' he said, looking at her with a sheepish twinkle in his deep-set eyes; and she immediately guessed that the unwonted present—the only gift of money she had ever received from him—represented Harney's first payment. (132)

Royall's gift is "unwonted" or unexpected (although the nearness of the term to "unwanted" seems intentional), one of the elements of a true gift. However, Charity is immediately able to trace the gift back to its origins in the economy—although it is significant that she links the cash not to Royall, but to Harney. Royall's gift here is complex; while the action of "tossing" the money into Charity's lap underscores the way such a monetary gift could be equated with the payment of a prostitute, the fact that Royall intends Charity to purchase an item of clothing for

herself that would elevate her social position (and furthermore trusts Charity's judgment in picking out the best bonnet herself) points to this gift as an attempt at empathetic imagination.

Royall's second gift of money comes after he and Charity are married, and again this gift highlights Royall's desire for Charity to better herself socially:

They went downstairs to the dining-room for breakfast, and after breakfast he told her he had some insurance business to attend to. 'I guess while I'm doing it you'd better step out and buy yourself whatever you need.' He smiled, and added with an embarrassed laugh: 'You know I always wanted you to beat all the other girls.' He drew something from his pocket, and pushed it across the table to her; and she saw that he had given her two twenty-dollar bills. 'If it ain't enough there's more where that come from—I want you to beat 'em all hollow,' he repeated. (240)

On one level, readers can say that Royall passes his monetary gift to Charity as though conducting a business transaction. However, this "payment" comes after a night the newly married couple spent sleeping separately. Thus, Royall is trying to suffuse the money with an emotional significance it cannot carry (in the same way Charity imbues the gift of the brooch with a meaning it cannot hold). Perhaps Royall encourages Charity to use the money to set herself apart from other girls because he values her, a perspective that is augmented by his decision to not demand his sexual rights as a husband. While Royall does not remove the traces of the market from his gift, he does work to empathize with Charity's desire to "beat" the other girls, thus actively engaging with the recipient's inclinations. And Charity seems able to accept, to a limited extent, Royall's attempts at empathy, noting that she knows he will be good to her.

Charity's idea of Royall's potential goodness, despite his flaws, builds here upon an earlier scene that centers on Royall's only non-monetary gift to Charity in the text: the Crimson

Rambler plant he brings in response to Charity's decision to stay home from boarding school. The gift is unexpected, fulfilling at least one requirement for a true gift: "It was the following week that he brought her up the Crimson Rambler and its fan from Hepburn. He had never given her anything before" (109). The next paragraph ambiguously discusses "the next outstanding incident of her life" without making clear what the initial outstanding incident was—the decision not to attend school, or the gift from Royall? This ambiguity is somewhat resolved later when it is clear that Royall's gift had great value for Charity, as she equates her emotional response to his mountaintop rescue to the earlier gift of the Crimson Rambler: "it occurred to her for the first time that to reach the top of the Mountain so early he must have left North Dormer at the coldest hour of the night, and have traveled steadily but for the halt at Hamblin; and she felt a softness at her heart which no act of his had ever produced since he had brought her the Crimson Rambler because she had given up boarding-school to stay with him" (232). The emotional response triggered by these gifts reveals the potential empathetic connection gifts can create when both parties are willing to invest emotionally.

The distinction between the older generation of men like Royall who still invest in social and community bonds and the younger generation, represented by Harney, who are so firmly committed to the market economy that they convert all relationships to business transactions showcases the geographic divisions in the text. Royall may have given Charity gifts out of a sense of empathy, driven by an idea of *noblesse oblige*, or due to his sense of mortal loneliness and isolation. Either way, it is clear he intends his gifts to create an "aura of connection" with Charity. In contrast, Harney is quick to measure the market value of his own class status and is not willing to squander emotional resources on investments that do not offer a fair return. Harney may have splurged on a brooch, but, on balance, the purchase was not overly expensive for him.

Harney is more frugal, however, with his emotional resources, fittingly reflected in the squalid condition of their love nest and his refusal to consider Charity as an equal partner in their relationship. Harney saves himself for true investment with a woman who can offer him more materially and socially.

The distinctions between Royall and Harney raise disturbing questions about Wharton's views on the mixing of classes and delineate, in a realistic way, the manner in which class influences relationships. Charity's growth into maturity forces her to recognize that the consumerist values of the new economy put a very low value on her offering. Men looking for a good time find it hard to quantify and attribute dignity to poor girls. It is as if Wharton here demonstrates that while all women need to be cautious when receiving gifts, poor girls who receive gifts from men of a higher class status need to be especially wary, as such gifts may not emanate from any sense of mutual empathy.

By the novel's end, Charity, pregnant with Harney's child, consents almost abstractedly to marry Royall. She is unwilling to write to Harney with the news of their child, realizing that to do so would force him to break his engagement with Annabel, a pairing that is likened to a business partnership. The question of mutual empathy between Royall and Charity is left unanswered; Charity's last act in the text is to reclaim the brooch as a symbol of her unborn child's legitimacy, using Royall's money to pay the debt to Dr. Merkle. While Charity redirects Royall's gift from buying clothing to regaining the brooch, she does so in a way that reframes the brooch as a marker of social bonds—between her unborn child and its absent father. By using Royall's money to buy back the brooch, it is possible that she invites Royall into the complicated family she is building for her unborn child. In this sense, Charity, Hester Prynne-like, takes the



symbols of community in which she cannot participate and re-invests them with a new meaning, which she determines in her own terms.

### Chapter Three

#### The Modernist Aesthetic and the Immigrant: Anzia Yeziarska's Communities of Countrymen

In her 1915 account of how she came to settlement work, nurse and social worker Lillian D. Wald remembers being called to New York's East Side in the late nineteenth century to minister to a "sick woman in a squalid rear tenement" (1). Her encounter with this woman and her family, crowded into a filthy two-room apartment with boarders they had taken on to help pay their rent, convinced Wald to take up residence and to establish a nursing service in the East Side, a venture which eventually led to her founding the famous Henry Street Settlement. Settlement houses like Henry Street strove to uplift the lower-class immigrants residing in the neighborhood, providing not only social services but education and domestic training. However, the hierarchical division between the philanthropists and the immigrants who received the settlement houses' services was clear from the start. Wald notes that "it seemed certain that conditions such as these were allowed because people did not *know*, and for me there was a challenge to know and to tell" how to avoid the unclean, unsanitary conditions she witnessed (8). Although Wald later describes her initial belief that immigrants simply required an education in the right way to live as "naïve" and founded on her "inexperience," the impetus behind the settlement movement's educational programs remained rooted in the notion that "if people knew" how to properly maintain a domestic space to American standards, "such horrors would cease to exist" (Wald 8).

The educational programs and domestic training offered by settlement houses encouraged the belief that immigrants were either childlike and in need of guidance into maturity or fundamentally corrupt and in need of moral education. A clear example of this belief comes from the introduction to domestic advisor Mabel Hyde Kittredge's *Housekeeping Notes*, her 1911

guide to furnishing and keeping house in a tenement. Presented as “a series of lessons prepared for use in The Association of Practical Housekeeping Centers of New York,” Kittredge’s guide and the Housekeeping Center itself were intended “to instruct the people of the tenements in the art of healthful housekeeping” by way of lessons “in cleaning, hygiene, and cooking” alongside “instruction in all matters connected with the rearing of children, personal health, and the most economical use of limited means” (Kittredge 1). According to Kittredge and to other domestic advisors of the time period, “sanitation and beauty...lie within reach of the laborer’s income” (1). All that was required was proper training, not a higher income.

Note the key words “sanitation” and “beauty.” Kittredge’s statement grows out of linked ideas of visual attractiveness and public health that were connected to racial and ethnic stereotypes of the time period. As James T. Bennett and Thomas J. DiLorenzo note, the Progressive Era saw a standardization of public health interventions which “finally brought under control many communicable diseases such as cholera and yellow fever” and “resulted in a substantial reduction in mortality rates in America” (9). But though the initial focus may have been on reducing mortality and improving quality of life, the public health movement quickly began promoting normative images of cleanliness and purity that suggested connections between whiteness and sanitation. For example, in 1913, Richard Barry attributed New York City’s sanitation and health problems to European immigrants, blaming abhorrent conditions on the “slovenly hordes of European immigrants” which “had been shoveled” into a city ill-equipped to deal with an influx of immigrants (32). As Daniel Eli Burnstein states in *Next to Godliness: Confronting Dirt and Despair in Progressive Era New York City*, “many reformers...believed that numerous immigrants had not yet generated the internal restraints and consciousness necessary to maintain individual and civic well-being in a free society” (130). As the new

science of public health gained footing, so did popular calls in women's magazines and other journals and newspapers for cleanliness and sanitation, often directed toward immigrant mothers.

In addition to instructing immigrants on the health benefits of cleanliness, social reformers offered what Jenna Weissman Joselit calls an education in taste (*Getting Comfortable* 23). For example, in her 1905 article "The Gospel of Simplicity as Applied to Tenement Homes," Bertha H. Smith's description of and praise for the model flat Kittredge prepared for the East Side Nurses' Settlement is clearly grounded in notions of taste. Smith quotes Kittredge's explanation for her model home: to help immigrants "choose between that which is in good taste and the tawdry" to prevent the inadvertent adoption of "our barbarities instead of our better things" (Kittredge, qtd. in Smith 84). According to Kittredge, only this education in taste will enable the immigrant's "real freedom" from the "tyranny of things" (84). Note the shift in focus from the sanitation, health, and well-being of tenement-dwellers to the social and cultural ramifications of their aesthetic choices, including "things," or consumer items.

The "Gospel of Simplicity" Smith refers to was an aesthetic reform movement that extended far beyond the settlement house mission. Domestic advisors worked to convince all women, not just lower-class immigrant women, of the importance of simplicity in home design, Sarah A. Leavitt notes.<sup>1</sup> Simple interior spaces came to be viewed as the panacea for a number of social and cultural ills before the turn of the century. Leavitt states that the push for simplicity in home decoration began in the late nineteenth century, but that by the early twentieth century the simplicity impulse came to be worded in terms of modernity. In domestic advice parlance, "the term 'modern' was a code word for 'simple' and 'uncluttered,' for 'taste' and 'good character'" (Leavitt 98). Domestic advice manuals, model home interiors, advertisements, and store displays

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<sup>1</sup> Leavitt's excellent cultural history of domestic advice, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, offers a meticulous examination of the educational, aspirational, and often disciplinary effects of decades of domestic advice writing.

touted the superiority of the modern aesthetic to women of all classes still devoted to the cluttered Victorian decorating style.<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel of Simplicity was in full effect in the model tenement. In a systematic attempt to construct what Gwendolyn Wright calls an “architecture of visible health,” the model flat featured plain papered or painted walls in bright white or sunny yellow, open shelves, and bare wood floors (119). Smith describes Kittredge’s model four-room flat, composed of a living room, dining room, kitchen, and bedroom, as creating “a semblance of order . . . out of the chaos of crowded conditions” (90). Instead of “the tawdry gold-decked and beflowered” dishes sold by “the pushcart man,” Kittredge’s flat features “cheap blue and white” dishes that are “ever so much honester in style” (Smith 88). Implicit in the description of the model tenement’s superiority is a harsh critique of the interiors of most tenements and the aesthetic impulse of tenement dwellers. In the model flat, Smith says,

There is no scrimping in quality. That is not economy. Everything is good of its kind. The furniture, though simple, is durable. The muslin curtains cost as much as cheap lace, but are more a part of the scheme of simplicity and good taste carried out by the plain wall paper, the white paint and single tone of wood furnishings and floor. (87)

The “good, honest, straight lines” of Mission-style furnishings mingle in Smith’s description with economic and health considerations to create the idealized tenement apartment (89).

The rhetoric of simplicity was effective. Immigrants eager to adopt American ways saw the simple, clean-lined, modernist aesthetic as a way to convey their American status and their

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<sup>2</sup> This message is also promoted by Edith Wharton, who argues that sensitivity to one’s surroundings is essential for well-being in her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Written with Boston architect Ogden Codman, *The Decoration of Houses* popularized the late nineteenth-century revival of simple, classical aesthetics and anticipates Modernism’s focus on function over form in its emphasis on houses designed for “comfort and convenience” (18).

“taste” and “good character” simultaneously. Cluttered domestic spaces came to evoke not only the decorating choices of the Victorian era but the “tawdry decorating style” of the lower class: Leavitt argues that native-born Americans “saw the preponderance of objects and ornament as a class differentiation as well as an ethnic difference” and that the domestic manuals of the early twentieth century articulate the “social superiority that could be gained through simple decoration” (122).<sup>3</sup> However, as many Jewish immigrant authors have detailed, assimilation often meant the loss of religious traditions and the rich, cultural life of the immigrant community. As with other immigrant groups, the aesthetic of simplicity contrasted sharply with visible markers of Jewish culture, not only in domestic spaces but in clothing, food, and other consumables.

Anzia Yeziarska’s work is rife with tensions between the modernist aesthetic and ethnic identity. As a Russian-Polish Jewish immigrant woman, Yeziarska’s representations of female characters negotiating subjectivity in the Jewish immigrant communities of New York’s East Side during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engage with the aesthetics debate in unexpected ways. Yeziarska tracks her heroines’ quests for subjectivity, independence, and love while simultaneously questioning the limitations traditional ethnic community, consumer capitalism, and the assimilationist agenda imposed on the attainment of these goals. While some of Yeziarska’s characters explore the ability of material goods to enable the attainment of an ideal, American middle-class status, they are all ultimately disappointed by the realization of this status, since it requires at least a partial rejection of ethnic identity. In her novels *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), *Bread Givers* (1925), and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927), Yeziarska depicts Jewish immigrant characters who struggle with the impact of their desire to partake of material

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<sup>3</sup> Leavitt also makes note of the important role the settlement house movement and domestic training played in acculturating the immigrant to American ways. See *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*, especially Chapter 3, “Americanization, Model Homes, and Lace Curtains.”

abundance. These characters recognize the individual benefit of fine clothing and well-made home furnishings, but also contrast that potential benefit with the underlying inequalities tied to race, ethnicity, class, and gender in American democracy and capitalism.

Sara Smolinsky of *Bread Givers*, Sonya Vronsky of *Salome of the Tenements*, and Adele Lindner of *Arrogant Beggar* see the modernist aesthetic as a potential panacea for a variety of woes associated with grinding poverty and the traditional Jewish family structure, including oppressive paternal figures, filthy domestic spaces, and the lack of inspiring beauty. However, each of these characters also comes to realize the high cost of completely assimilating: the potential loss of cultural identity as a whole. Yeziarska uses her heroines' engagement with the modernist aesthetic, which they seek out in their dress, their furnishings, and their homes, to initially echo and ultimately subvert the paternalistic settlement movement rhetoric of domestic advice. Rather than abandoning the aesthetic of simplicity entirely, Yeziarska repurposes the aesthetic as a way to enable a new community-based ethnic identity. Through the figure of the *landsleute*, or countryman, a word used in *Bread Givers* to describe the mutual recognition among Jews from the old country, Yeziarska ameliorates the potentially alienating effects of material goods and the acquisition of taste (*BG* 277). Through these texts, Yeziarska depicts the potential for modernist commodities and spaces to be used not as an assimilationist tactic but as a way to reimagine a communal Jewish identity in the new world.

#### Critical perspectives on Yeziarska

Reading Yeziarska's fiction as actively resisting the homogenizing effects of assimilation through the inventive use of consumer goods not only sheds new light on the novels themselves—it also resolves troubling inconsistencies in her reputation as a writer and forces us to question long-sanctioned critical arguments about immigrant narratives and their urban, ethnic

communities. Popular in the 1920s, rapidly falling out of favor in the 1930s, and slowly reemerging in critical discussions since her rediscovery in the 1970s, Yeziarska's short stories and novels invariably focus on the experiences of Jewish immigrants in the New World. Because Yeziarska drew from her own life experiences to inform her fictional creations, there is a long tradition of reading Yeziarska's work solely within the genre of immigrant literature, a tradition that frequently conflates an author's individual experience as an immigrant with the experiences of her literary creations.<sup>4</sup> Yeziarska's own careful attention to creating and managing her public image as the "Sweatshop Cinderella," an impulse that developed in connection with her rise to fame in the portion of her life she spent in Hollywood, obscures details of and distinctions between Yeziarska's life and her work. For example, Yeziarska had a tendency to erase the decade from her life in which her first marriage was annulled and her second produced a child she eventually relinquished to her estranged husband's care, which contributed to the public's vision of her as a younger woman who had risen directly from the ghetto's poverty to Hollywood fame.

This self-fashioning served clear ends for Yeziarska: Mary V. Dearborn notes Yeziarska's need, both professionally and personally, to "sell herself to the American public" as she gained recognition in the early 1920s, which included colliding with the "Sweatshop Cinderella" narrative the Hollywood publicity machine promoted (109). Dearborn identifies an

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<sup>4</sup> In some instances, the critical conflation of Yeziarska's life and her work is blatant. For example, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography* lists not *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* as Yeziarska's autobiography, but the novel *Bread Givers* (484). In her introduction to the Persea reissue of *Bread Givers*, Alice Kessler-Harris states that all of Yeziarska's books published "between 1920 and 1932 are in some sense autobiographical, but none more so than *Bread Givers*" (xxi). In other cases, the conflation is less obvious, and more insidious, such as in Joyce Carol Oates' essay in *Literature and the Urban Experience*, where she describes Yeziarska's writing as "autobiographical and emotional," characterized by "relatively unsophisticated prose" (15). *Bread Givers*, Oates argues, is "thoroughly convincing as a document of Yeziarska's own emotional experience as the daughter of an extremely religious man" (15). In other words, Yeziarska's authority comes not from her mastery of her craft, but from her first-hand experiences: her writing "has an authenticity lacking in the fiction of most 'naturalistic' writers because it is imagined, as theirs is not, from the inside" (Oates 15).



array of factors that influenced Yeziarska's invented identity, including the rise of public relations and the need for publicity "dummies" in Hollywood (118). Lisa Botshon also examines Yeziarska's Hollywood experience to reveal the ambivalence and inconsistency lurking beneath the surface of the publicity-driven image of the Jewish immigrant. Like Dearborn, Botshon highlights Yeziarska's self-creation, noting her "participation in her own reinvention" as the representative Jewish immigrant figure for middle-class American readers and moviegoers ("Marketing" 203). Dearborn and Botshon's critiques illuminate the fact that focusing solely on the parallels between Yeziarska's life (her actual life or the version she promoted) and her texts creates a reductive, narrow perception of Yeziarska's craft.

Dearborn and Botshon are not alone in offering alternative readings of Yeziarska that move beyond those of critics who label her work as mimetic realism rather than skillful craft. Katherine Stubbs notes how Yeziarska's "fascination with the American class system and its signifiers" led to a "strategic construction of her own life story as a rags-to-riches narrative" which "attests to her awareness of American ideologies of class mobility," and, I would argue, not only an awareness of these ideologies, but an attempt to manipulate them through her writing (157-58). Thomas J. Ferraro similarly criticizes scholarly assessments that have focused on Yeziarska's immigrant identity as an example of "authentic otherness removed by ethnicity, gender, and class from 'the dominant culture'" (548). In this way, Ferraro argues, critical responses to Yeziarska's writing, even critical responses that seek to praise, have "been almost entirely a function of the cult of East Side authenticity that enveloped her in the 1920s and continues to frame our portrait of her" (548). Her critical reception positions her not as an author "whose work compels our scrutiny but as an ethnic literary personality whose personal encounter with America is the better story," and the story that had dominated her critical and cultural

reception (550). I follow these critics in recognizing the limitations of perceiving Yeziarska's literary merits solely in terms of her authenticity as an immigrant. By ignoring her deliberate engagement with self-fashioning, numerous critics have impoverished Yeziarska's complex literary depictions of immigrants negotiating subjectivities.

In marketing herself as the representative rags-to-riches "Sweatshop Cinderella," and in subsequent critical examinations that similarly focus on her ethnic outsider status, Yeziarska's legacy of authentic Jewishness has made her an exemplary type rather than a master of her craft or a social critic. However, a number of recent critics have worked to broaden the scholarly landscape by focusing on Yeziarska's gender or class rather than simply her immigrant background. For example, Botshon states that reading Yeziarska as an immigrant author of an immigrant narrative forces reading the text through the paradigm of assimilation, or of shedding the old-world identity for a new American identity. Reading Yeziarska as feminist, in contrast, ascribes her more agency; feminists expect to transform society rather than be transformed themselves, Botshon argues ("New Woman" 236). But while feminist criticism encourages readings of Yeziarska that open up to the possibility of assessments that move beyond assimilation, Botshon also notes that there are issues of marginalization other than gender at stake in her texts: "Crucially, the rebellion Yeziarska depicts is not merely against the patriarchal or the domestic—hallmarks of white New Woman fiction—but a battle between an immigrant woman and mainstream American culture itself, played out over class and ethnic culture" ("New Woman" 254). Botshon joins Stubbs and Ferraro in noting the multivalent identity categories and social conditions that influence the subjectivity of Yeziarska's characters.

While I agree that Yeziarska's work explores the boundary between her urban, ethnic region and that of mainstream white American culture, I believe the use of words like "battle" or

“clash” to describe encounters between the two ignores the more fluid process of identity formation Yeziarska frequently depicts in her texts. Yeziarska’s central characters are neither specifically “ethnic” nor “dominant,” but rather constantly navigating subject positions that promise more hybrid subjectivities. But the nature of hybridity is not unproblematic. For example, both Nancy Von Rosk and Martin Japtok identify Yeziarska’s heroines as negotiating subjectivities between old-world communalism and American individualism, but both also indicate that there is no stable middle ground on which these characters can rest. For Japtok, the result of Sara’s struggle between the opposing forces of ethnic tradition and American individualism in *Bread Givers* is an “inescapable” and uneasy hybridity that simultaneously desires and criticizes ethnic community (19). Von Rosk finds the same uneasiness, stating that while Sara “must break away from her traditional Eastern European patriarchal home, she learns that American culture’s freedom from the past and ethnic tradition does not necessarily result in an unproblematic female identity” (299). I build on Japtok and Von Rosk by exploring Yeziarska’s nuanced exploration of the potential that consumer culture offers the ethnic minority. Yeziarska ultimately portrays complete assimilation as both unattainable and undesirable, focusing instead on finding alternative pathways for ethnic distinction, which she shows as suffering in the face of mainstream culture.

#### Urban Regionalism

I suggest that rather than focusing on her texts as immigrant narratives or autobiography, reading them as examples of urban regionalism sheds light on Yeziarska’s exploration of ethnic identity and consumer culture in her texts. Examining Yeziarska’s ethnic group as a type of regional community allows us to question the binary of assimilated native versus differentiated foreigner that often emerges in examination of immigrant narratives. Yeziarska uses a modernist

aesthetic not to craft a customary account of a racial or ethnic outsider achieving success through incorporation, but to explore fluid communities that offer alternatives both to self-centered American individualism and oppressive Old World patriarchy.

While regional literature is traditionally seen as representing the geographically marginal or peripheral and therefore rural, in contrast to the more central, universal literature of the city, a number of critics of regional literature have highlighted problems with this definition. Two entries in the recent *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America* tackle the concept of urban regionalism. David Fine, in “Los Angeles as a Literary Region,” sees immigrant fiction (both of Yeziarska’s time period and more recent immigrant texts by Asian and Latin American immigrants) in urban settings as a particularly acute examination of regional issues. Fine describes “[i]mmigrant (and migrant) fiction” as “the literature of crossings, of uprooting and transplantation,” noting that if “regions confer identity, the identity of the immigrant is never fixed, but always floating between two realms. One is both inside and outside the region” (399). I would argue that there are actually more realms than Fine discusses, and multiple ways of conferring identity. James Kyung-Jin Lee’s “The City as Region” also focuses on issues of boundaries with which urban areas grapple, noting that “American writers and other culture-makers...have repeatedly conceived of the American city as both real and rhetorical space of social dissolution and danger” (Lee 138). Both Lee and Fine focus on the issues of belonging to a social group or floating between groups (Lee uses Georg Simmel’s idea of the “stranger” to illustrate this categorical flexibility and unfixed social identity) which urban centers particularly emphasize.

The issue of belonging versus being an outsider is central to studies of regionalism, and I believe this concept illustrates the importance of viewing regionalism as not only an account of

isolated geographic spaces, but also socially marginalized groups or communities. As Stephanie Foote states, regional literature “was less a coherent genre than a remarkably coherent system of ordering and presenting places and characters who were, when measured against a standard middle-class identity, distinctly foreign” (*Regional Fictions* 14). In the same volume as Fine and Lee, Foote elaborates further on the anxiety “foreignness” spurred at the turn of the century: “Nation-building, immigration, and imperialism demanded mechanisms for making sense of foreigners, or for assimilating new kinds of people within a narrative of American identity” (“Cultural Work” 30). Regional literature offered one such mechanism, as regional authors presented local details and regional figures and dialects for public consumption. However, rather than assisting in assimilating new groups into mainstream national identity, regional portrayals of foreign, unfamiliar communities often served to highlight and fetishize differences.

Yeziarska’s aesthetic reimagining and communities of countrymen present an option for viewing difference as both potentially empowering and as a possible basis for discrimination, consistent with the regionalist project’s fixation on strangers versus natives. In addition, regional literature shares its marginalized status as a genre with immigrant and working-class literature. As I noted in the introduction, Raymond Williams calls the act of ascribing the “regional” moniker to only some literature as “an expression of centralized cultural dominance” (60). “Regional” literatures are assumed to be marginal and insignificant because of this attribution. Other descriptors used to modify literature, such as “immigrant” or “working-class,” frequently serve the same limiting purpose as “regional,” that of “assigning certain novels to a deliberately limited area; indicating their limited status by this kind of ‘narrowness’ or by their limiting

priority of ‘social’ over ‘general human’ experience” (Williams 63).<sup>5</sup> Class, in Williams’ estimation, illuminates the paradox at the heart of considerations of regionalism’s local focus:

A class can indeed be seen as a region: a social area inhabited by people of a certain kind, living in certain ways....But a Marxist sense of class, while indeed and inevitably recognizing social regions of this kind, carries the inescapable and finally constitutive sense of class as a formation of social relationships within a whole social order, and thus of alternative and typically conflicting (in any case inevitably *relating*) formations. (64)

To consider class in isolation from the influence of other classes, or regions apart from other geographies, or ethnicities separate from other ethnic backgrounds, is to miss the interrelated quality of social formation.

I follow Raymond Williams’ consideration of working-class novels as regional novels (novels “of a district, of an industry, of an enclosed class”) in my examination of Yeziarska’s immigrant novels as regional. Yeziarska’s novels are “*about* the representation of difference” through the depiction of “local customs, local accents, and local communities” within a larger metropolitan area. By representing difference, regional literature presents a “powerful method of understanding not just the ‘place’ where certain people lived but also the ‘place’ they inhabited in a social hierarchy” (Foote 11). I do not intend to conflate regionalism with other categories (working-class literature, immigrant narratives, etc.) but rather to illustrate how “regions” can refer to social and culture spaces of identity in addition to geographic spaces. Yeziarska makes it

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<sup>5</sup> Williams is clear about the distinctions between working-class literature and regionalism, including the important fact that little long-form fiction was written by working-class authors—novels about the working class tended to be composed by outsiders “touring” the conditions of the working class in part because the novel’s forms offered few points of entry for working-class writers (63). Notably, Yeziarska, like many regionalist and working-class authors, began her writing career with short stories.

clear that her heroines' differences (of gender, class, and ethnicity) multiply inscribe their limited spaces within the social order.

Beyond these considerations, Yeziarska's works should also be considered regionalist in the sense that they depict localized communities within larger urban areas. Her lower East Side immigrant neighborhoods have clearly delineated boundaries (both physical and intangible) that demarcate who and what is considered part of the regional community. In addition, Yeziarska frequently depicts a series of departures and returns in her texts to emphasize the ways in which ethnic identity is linked to geographic space. Her heroines each move outside the clearly defined boundaries of the Lower East Side to venture into Anglo-American dominated areas of the city or towns outside New York. These departures reinforce characters' senses of belonging to an ethnic community of a particular region rather than belonging to the larger, dominant American society. However, it is worth noting that when Yeziarska's heroines are physically in their ethnic regions, this sense of belonging never appears quite as clear as it does when they are outside. In part, this sense of feeling a "stranger" both within and outside one's immigrant region illuminates the "exclusionary and disciplining" nature of community Miranda Joseph has examined. Joseph notes that many evocations of community rest on the Habermasian notion of consensus and homogeneity as the model of the successful community. "Identity-political movements...have depended on fantasies of community, on stories of traumatic origins and organic unities, presuming always already common essence, experience, oppression, political needs and goals" (Joseph xxii). In Yeziarska, this presumption of shared origins removes the possibility of internal dissent or difference within ethnic communities. Because of this limiting notion of community that persists at both the national and the ethnic community level, Sara,

Sonya, and Adele cannot feel at home in either the national community or their immigrant community as they now stand.

One way Yeziarska explores the boundaries of her urban regional communities is through her characters' use of consumer goods. In many instances, urban geography and consumer items are linked: a number of recent critics have identified the importance of urban space and consumer culture to the manufacture of identity within Yeziarska's texts. Both Von Rosk and Tyrone R. Simpson II identify the interplay of consumer goods and urban space in Sara Smolinsky's efforts to acquire an American identity in *Bread Givers*. Both critics also narrowly characterize Sara as choosing between either consumer society's promise of homogenizing freedom or oppressive patriarchal tradition. In contrast, I argue that Yeziarska demonstrates the potential for urban consumer goods and the modernist aesthetic to provide a space for nurturing or reinventing immigrant communities rather than simply destroying or engulfing them. Her characters interact with consumer culture and consumer goods as a way to strive for American identities while also reinforcing or reimagining the boundaries of their ethnic communities. Yeziarska's characters ultimately use consumer objects and the modernist aesthetic in destabilizing or divergent ways in order to create a new community of countrymen (and, as we see in *Salome of the Tenements* and *Arrogant Beggar*, a community with the potential to reach beyond countrymen). Whereas secondary figures in Yeziarska's novels use consumer goods in traditional ways—to climb socially, to pass ethnically, or to reinforce patriarchal power structures—Yeziarska's heroines imagine alternative practices for consumer objects and the modernist aesthetic that transcend traditional customs and offer new possibilities for ethnic subjectivity.

#### Jewish Communities and Consumer Culture



Yeziarska's ethnic characters incorporate consumer culture into their communities in numerous and varied ways. Ferraro, for example, notes the problems with the standard idea that Sara's father, Reb Smolinsky, is an emblem of old-world patriarchy divorced from capitalism. Instead, Ferraro argues that Reb seizes numerous opportunities to "capitalize on Jewish patriarchy" (556) by exploiting his wife and daughters as commodities, thus serving "the reproduction of women's oppression even as that oppression has supported capitalism" (571).<sup>6</sup> Japtok also recognizes that Sara resents her father's materialism but comes to recognize it "as a defense mechanism against oppression and poverty" (18). Yeziarska's own "mania for clothes" is certainly prevalent throughout her fiction (Henriksen 23), and critics are right to recognize that "clothing played a pivotal role in the Americanization movement" (Okonkwo 131).<sup>7</sup> Stubbs argues that Yeziarska, like Abraham Cahan and Mary Antin, frequently incorporates ready-made garments into her texts as a symbol of an "almost magical transformative power, its aura of instant respectability" (157).

Yeziarska's fiction explores the impact of consumer goods beyond clothing as well. For Simpson, *Bread Givers* traces "its protagonist's anguished voyage from working-class immigrant girlhood to white American femininity" via "the way station of commodity culture" (94).

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<sup>6</sup> Although Ferraro's argument offers an articulate and nuanced portrayal of consumer culture's impact on and employment by ethnic communities, I take issue with his interpretation of the Smolinsky family's attempt to establish a profitable grocery business in New Jersey. Ferraro pinpoints Sara's defiance of her father after the purchase of the grocery store not as "rebellious against Judaism or even patriarchy" so much as "dissenting from a particular form of accommodation, a particular strategy of adaptation, that Jews and their fellow immigrants in large numbers have begun to seek" (559). Instead, Sara "sacrifices her investment in the family firm and its nearly guaranteed prospects to take a risk on another form of upward mobility...*revising* her American dream in light of what family enterprise has taught her" (Ferraro 559). I disagree with this, as I believe Yeziarska works to depict Reb Smolinsky's business efforts as reckless and negligent—not at all "nearly guaranteed" to succeed but rather doomed to failure.

<sup>7</sup> A sizable percentage of the criticism on Yeziarska focuses on the role of clothing and fashion for the immigrant woman. See especially: Meredith Goldsmith, "Dressing, Passing, and Americanizing: Anzia Yeziarska's Sartorial Fictions," (1997); Katherine Stubbs "Reading Material: Contextualizing Clothing in the Work of Anzia Yeziarska," (1998); Christopher N. Okonkwo, "Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress: Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*," (2000); Nancy Von Rosk, "'Go, Make Yourself for a Person': Urbanity and the Construction of an American Identity in the Novels of Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yeziarska," (2001).

Similarly, Von Rosk identifies Yeziarska's exploration of "the Eastern European Jewish immigrant's adaptation to American's consumer culture" as depicting "the tensions and contradictions of immigrant life as a more communal culture of scarcity gives way to an individually oriented culture of material abundance" in *Bread Givers* (295). Like Japtok, Von Rosk tracks Sara Smolinsky's development along a trajectory from communal ethnic identity to the American cult of the individual via use of consumer goods. However, I argue that Yeziarska's texts also push back against the symbolic potential of consumer objects, instead associating clothing and other goods "with the disheartening fixity of an exploitative American economic system" or, in *Salome of the Tenements*, "as a vehicle to engage in a fascinating attempt to transgress and transcend forms of economic and social hierarchy" (Stubbs 157).

As in Wharton's *Summer*, consumer culture in Yeziarska's novels appears to offer opportunities for negotiating new class status, but also consistently works to reinforce the boundaries between classes and ethnic identities. Yeziarska's heroines are not alone in feeling torn between the mass culture of consumer goods and the values inherited from their ethnic communities. Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century viewed consumerism as the primary way to quickly form an American identity. Buying American goods and dressing in American-style clothing indicated their commitment to their new country, and Jewish immigrants signaled this desire "with the passion of individuals intent on self-transformation," as Barbara Schreier notes (50). A number of critics examine the issue of Jewish identity and the celebration or suppression of distinction between ethnic or religious Jews and WASP culture.<sup>8</sup> Andrew Heinze explains that since a majority of Jewish immigrants planned on remaining in America (in contrast to other immigrant groups who saw their time in the U.S. as "a means to an end"—

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (1981) and *American Jewish Identity Politics* (2008); Susan A. Glenn and Naomi B. Sokoloff, *Boundaries of Jewish Identity* (2010); and Pamela S. Nadell, *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader* (2003).

specifically raising money to send or bring back to the old country), they sought out American consumer goods, particularly clothing, as a way of declaring their commitment to their new country.<sup>9</sup>

Jewish immigrants largely embraced the possibility of using consumer goods to enable social mobility and acculturation, encouraged by the “democratic symbolism of mass marketed luxuries” made available by Jewish-owned department stores and made visible by Jewish-run movie palaces (Heinze 5-6). However, Jewish immigrants’ eager desire for American clothing and other material goods was not only due to their innate desire to signal their Americanness; they were also responding to the demand from native-born Americans for assimilating immigrants to capitulate to dominant cultural traits and to hide any sign of their foreign background. And not all Jewish immigrants responded wholeheartedly to the mandate that they relinquish their ethnic and religious distinctions.

In his examination of the cooperative affiliation between Jewish elites and more privileged Afro-Americans in New York between 1910 and 1930, David Levering Lewis notes the distinctions between the assimilation-driven efforts of more affluent, earlier German-Jewish immigrant groups and that of later, post-1880 Russian-Jewish immigrants. The German-Jewish elite saw the denial and suppression of ethnic difference as the key to absorptive assimilation (Lewis 18). For later Jewish immigrants, the inverse could be true. The “uncontrolled migration” of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe jeopardized the potential success of influential, assimilated German-Jewish groups’ social and political programs, threatening instead “in turn divisive and strident cultural and political nationalism among the unabsorbed, increasingly

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<sup>9</sup> Heinze bases this observation in part on Robert Park and Herbert Miller’s 1926 sociological survey of different immigrant personality types. Park and Miller describe the Jewish immigrant group as “allrightniks” who “adopted American habits, particularly habits of consumption, so thoroughly as to blend into the group of cosmopolitan Jews who had attained a high degree of cultural assimilation” (Heinze 42).

despised newcomers” (17-18). Although consumerism among Jewish immigrants was often used to enable Americanization, participation in consumer culture could also promote a sense of difference between their ethnic communities and dominant culture instead of enabling the kind of leveling uniformity devoid of empowerment that marketers of consumer goods promoted and critics like Thorstein Veblen feared.

#### Consumer Culture and the Modernist Aesthetic in Yeziarska’s Texts

Yeziarska employs consumer engagement with the modernist aesthetic in two ways in her text. The first is through her heroines who idealize and seek out the clean simplicity of modernism in their domestic spaces, clothing, and commercial endeavors. But Yeziarska also shows the way the modernist aesthetic pervades the language of the settlement movement. Each of her main characters eventually rejects the paternalistic culture of philanthropy and its narrative of assimilation and standardization, but retains the modernist aesthetic as a way to support a new ethnic community ideal. By using communal labor and collective goods to enhance the common lot, Yeziarska’s heroines work to offer an alternative to both patriarchal oppression and capitalist uniformity.

Yeziarska’s heroines fixate on the modernist aesthetic of “plain beautifulness” that they initially associate with their ability to pass into Anglo-American society. In *Bread Givers*, Yeziarska introduces the immigrant belief in consumer culture’s ability to enable assimilation initially through the figure of Sara’s older sister. Mashah, the second daughter and the family beauty, fully buys into the potential of emulative spending. A bunch of pink paper roses she purchases “for only ten cents, from a pushcart on Hester Street” which she pins to her hat transforms Mashah in her mind: “Like a lady from Fifth Avenue I look...just like the picture on the magazine cover” (*BG* 2-3). Mashah’s other purchases, such as a toothbrush, a separate towel

for her face, and her own bar of soap, are labeled as “new rich” ideas, clearly designed to imitate Anglo-American shopping habits and the Progressive notion of hygiene. Although Sara’s narrative voice describes Mashah as “empty-head,” more concerned with her self-interest than looking for work that will benefit the family (*BG* 6), the entire family begins following in Mashah’s footsteps once they begin making money from taking in boarders. Sara, her parents, and her sisters buy regular towels, toothbrushes, and toothpowder, moving from basic sanitary items to more consumer goods, until “more and more we wanted more things, and really needed more things the more we got them” (*BG* 29). Yeziarska astutely pinpoints the cycle of greater desire consumer culture sets in motion.

When Sara later attends a predominantly white, Anglo college, she finally finds “the beauty for which [she] had always longed” (211). Sara longs to “lose [herself] body and soul in the serenity of this new world” so that “the hunger and the turmoil of [her] ghetto years would drop away from [her], and [she], too, would know the beauty of stillness and peace” (*BG* 211). Yeziarska brings together the two themes of the modernist aesthetic, beauty and cleanliness, in Sara’s enraptured reaction to the college community. Although Sara had “seen cheap, fancy style, Five- and Ten-Cent Store finery,” she had never before seen such simple, clean beauty as these college girls have (*BG* 212). Sara recognizes the cultural value of the students’ “simple skirts and sweaters, the...neat finished quietness of their tailored suits,” which combines with their “spick-and-span cleanliness” as though “the dirty battle of life had never yet been on them” (*BG* 212). Sara not only intrinsically admires the modernist aesthetic, but recognizes its power to elevate its practitioners.

Sara achieves a version of her dream of simple beauty after graduation, made attainable when she wins a college essay competition that comes with a thousand-dollar prize. Returning to

New York, Sara revels in the luxury of her new leather satchel and kid gloves as she travels in style in a Pullman car, dining on an American-style meal of chops, spinach, and salad (*BG* 237). She outfits herself in a simple blue serge suit of “plain quietness” that represents “what a teacher ought to wear” (*BG* 239). Sara’s new riches also make it possible for her finally to rent her dream apartment, a “sunny, airy room” that she furnishes simply, in contrast to the “crowded dirt from where I came” (*BG* 240-41). Sara’s “beautiful and empty” (*BG* 277) one-room flat, accented with the strong, simple shapes of “shining pots and pans” and “bright dishes” (*BG* 241), provides a clean, serene retreat from the ghetto noise and dirt and echoes the rhetoric of modernist simplicity.

Sara wants to flee the family home not only because of its squalor, but because of the narrowly defined path for her set out by her domineering father. The title, *Bread Givers*, is a direct translation of the Yiddish *broit gibbers*, “the women who make both physical and metaphorical ‘bread’ for the home” (Wilentz 34). Sara, her mother, and her three older sisters each struggle with their role as bread giver under the often oppressive rule of their father and husband, Reb Smolinsky, a Talmudic scholar who believes that “only through man can a woman enter heaven” (*BG* 137). Sara watches in horror as her father, through his competing devotion to his scholarship and his gross materialism, takes advantage of her long-suffering mother. Sara expresses her anger with her father’s willingness to “[live] on the blood of his wife and children” and encourages her mother to “arrest” her father “for not supporting [her]” (*BG* 130, 265). Note that Sara’s charge against her father is based on traditional American family structures, where the working husband supports his wife and children, as opposed to the Jewish family structure that honors (and financially supports) male scholars.

The threat Reb Smolinsky poses to his family is compounded by the matchmaking business he starts, through which he forces each of Sara's sisters into unhappy marriages. Sara's three sisters represent her potential future should she allow her father to shape her life to his vision of ongoing Jewish culture in the New World. Reb Smolinsky drives away the artistic but poor suitors of both the family beauty, Mashah, and the romantic, Fania, pushing instead marriages to wealthy strangers who turn out to be frauds. Sara's father also arranges for his long-suffering eldest daughter, Bessie, to marry the grotesque widower, Zalmon the fishmonger. Although Zalmon claims that he will "make" Bessie "for a lady with nothing to do but stay home and cook for me and clean the house and look after the children," his claims are as illusory as Mashah's husband's borrowed diamonds (*BG* 93). While Reb Smolinsky's matchmaking business is an opportunity for him to earn money, *Yeziarska* depicts his financial gains not as benefitting the family, but harming them.

Trapped by loneliness, arduous labor, and continued poverty, Sara's sisters struggle after their marriages to maintain the domestic façade even as they feel "chain[ed] to this misery" (*BG* 148). Sara visits her sister Mashah, who has transformed her apartment through "her love for beauty":

With her own hands she had patched up the broken plaster on the walls and painted them a golden yellow. The rotten boards of the window sill and the shelves were hidden by white oilcloth and held in place by shining brass tacks. The stove was painted silver. White curtains of the cheapest cheesecloth were on the one window, but hung with that grace that Mashah put into anything she touched....behind the silvered stove...the scoured pots and pans from the Five- and Ten-Cent Store hung in orderly rows from behind the polished brass hooks.

And even her bits of wood from the broken boxes were laid in such an even orderly pile that not a splinter shone on her spotless floor. (*BG* 146)

Mashah's kitchen resembles Kittredge's Model Flat, which Smith describes as featuring painted walls, "for paint can be washed and kept clean. Paper and plain plaster cannot" (Smith 88). Even Mashah's wall color, a "golden yellow," is inspired by Kittredge, who suggests that because "tenement flats are apt to be dark, yellow paint is advised for all rooms" (Kittredge 10). Ample shelving holds "neatly labeled" jars and nails to hang up items like aprons and bags; the "supply of utensils is complete to the last detail...everything the home cook needs" close at hand (Smith 89). Classes in the Model Flat teach the economy of reusing items like "flour sacks and worn out sheets," similar to the cheap cheesecloth Mashah tacks to the window (Smith 90). Mashah's apartment embodies the ideals of the gospel of simplicity.

But Yeziarska highlights how Mashah's devotion to the economy and cleanliness of domestic advice has taken its toll on her. Sara finds Mashah worn down by the "bloody toil it had cost to turn the dirt of poverty into [her] little palace of shining cleanliness":

Beauty was in that house. But it had come out of Mashah's face. The sunny colour of her walls had taken the colour out of her cheeks. The shine of her pots and pans had taken the lustre out of her hair. And the soda with which she had scrubbed the floor so clean, and laundered her rags to white, had burned in and eaten the beauty out of her hands. (*BG* 147)

While domestic advice writers like Kittredge and gospel of simplicity advocates like Smith argue that devotion to simplicity will offer housewives greater freedom, health, and happiness, Mashah has been drained of life and health by the constant work required to transform the filth of poverty into simple beauty.



The rhetoric of modernist simplicity also appears in *Salome of the Tenements*, particularly through Sonya's deep-seated craving for simple beauty in her surroundings and her attire. Sonya, like Sara, is a willful, passionate young woman whose most ardent desire is to escape from the Lower East side ghetto. Sonya hopes to achieve a life of beauty and comfort through marriage to John Manning, a wealthy gentile philanthropist whom she interviews for a column she writes in the *Ghetto News*. Initially, Sonya pursues Manning because he embodies the idea of beauty she craves, and appears to offer her the possibility of upward mobility. On their first meeting, she is wholly absorbed by "the cultured elegance of his attire":

Not a detail of his well-dressed figure escaped her. His finished grooming stood out all the more vividly in this background of horrid poverty. A master tailor had cut his loose Scotch tweeds. His pale brown pongee shirt was lighter and finer than a woman's waist. The rich hidden quietness of his silk tie; even his shoes had a hand-made quality to them! she thought. (*SotT* 2)

Noteworthy in Yeziarska's description of Manning's clothing is her depiction of Manning's tie: "hidden quietness" hints at Sonya's longing not only for beauty but, like Sara, for peaceful solitude away from ostentatiousness. Sonya also equates this simple aesthetic with hygiene. After their meeting, Sonya exclaims to herself that she has found her "deliverer" from "darkness and dirt": "Already I'm released from the blackness of this poverty. Air, space, the mountain-tops of life are already mine!" (*SotT* 5). Later, Sonya muses that until "she met Manning all the people she had ever known had been steeped in noise. Silence was like a color to which they had been blind. Now she perceived that silence was eloquent and colorful, a refinement possible only to superior people" (*SotT* 85). This fantasy of clean, serene separation augments Sonya's dreams of beauty and escape from poverty.

Sonya recognizes that part of the problem with the ghetto is its lack of discernment—its poverty is not symbolized by lack, but by tawdry excess. For example, as Sonya shops for a hat in her immigrant neighborhood, she expresses her frustration at having “to wade through so much junk to get to something simple” (*SotT* 14). Yeziarska works throughout the text to contrast the clean spaces and beautiful attire of Manning and his social set to the impoverished and chaotic backdrop of the Jewish ghetto. Sonya imagines that “[t]he beauty, the culture of the ages is in him. To have him is to possess all—the deepest, the finest of all America. He is my bridge to civilization!” (*SotT* 99). By pursuing Manning, Sonya believes she can quickly achieve acculturation.

Sonya’s desire for beautiful clothing is linked to her idea of aesthetic authenticity. Sonya imagines that attractive objects will allow her to reveal something essential to and true about her personality. When a saleswoman at Abramson’s, “the only one-price store on Essex Street” (*SotT* 14), mockingly encourages Sonya to seek out the Fifth Avenue designer Jacques Hollins, who designs clothes based on the individual as opposed to the tawdry ready-made stuff Sonya finds repellant, Sonya exclaims “I always knew there must be clothes artists that could make me look like myself” (*SotT* 16). Once she has a new dress designed just for her by Hollins, she “knew the intoxication of being well dressed—release from the itching shoddiness of ready-mades—the blotting out of her personality in garments cut by the gross. Never before had her clothes been an expression of herself—she an expression of her clothes. It was like being free from the flesh of her body, released from the fetters of earth” (*SotT* 33). The artistry of fine clothing allows Sonya to achieve what she thinks of as true subjectivity, combined with a transcendent freedom from bodily and earthly concerns.

Sonya has the same aesthetic expectation not only for her clothing, but for her surroundings. As she works to make over her rooms to impress Manning on her borrowed hundred dollars, she decries the “ready-made shoddiness” of installment furniture programs (*SotT* 57). The sham of their “red plush over wood shavings, faked mahogany varnished with glue” cannot compare to what Sonya desires: “*real art*—delicate colors—soft hangings to set off me—myself” (*SotT* 57). Notably, the ready-made furniture Sonya decries is also condemned by domestic advice writers. Advisors like Smith criticize plush furniture not only due to its ability to harbor germs and filth, but because it stands in contrast to the “good, honest, straight lines” of the modernist aesthetic (85). Note the use of the word “honest,” which corresponds with Sonya’s belief in the ability of fine goods and furniture to reveal her true self. However, Yeziarska works to reveal that not honesty but dishonesty is behind the impoverished immigrant’s acquisition of such modernist goods.

Sonya’s rigorous plan to seduce Manning requires a number of minor deceptions featuring consumer objects such as new clothing and a new suite of furniture for her shabby rented rooms. Sonya unwittingly exposes the fraudulence of the Model Flat when she redecorates her apartments to impress Manning. Sonya presents her apartments as though they were representative of what a lower-class worker could achieve on a budget instead of the product of a hasty loan from Honest Abe. When Manning praises her space as pleasant and simple, Sonya demurs, ““Poor people are forced to be simple”” (*SotT* 73). Manning naively agrees that beauty costs nothing, and claims to desire “no artifice to veil the grim lines of poverty” (*SotT* 74). Manning’s praise echoes the words of philanthropist Kittredge and simplicity advocate Smith. Smith claims that it is “thought” and “not money that makes comfort or beauty or artistic effect in a house” (83). Kittredge also notes that creating an aesthetically pleasing space is not about

“how *much* money is spent as of *how* it is spent” (Kittredge, qtd. in Smith 84). Yeziarska subtly reveals exactly how much money and artifice has been employed to create what is, essentially, a stunning theatre set designed to mask Sonya’s poverty and highlight her beauty.

Like Sara and Sonya, *Arrogant Beggar*’s Adele recognizes the cultural value of certain kinds of material goods and views the attainment of these cultural objects as the path to a better kind of life. The novel opens with Adele’s passionate desire to pursue what she believes will be the “first *real* way out of [her] black life,” a spot in Mrs. Hellman’s newly opened Home for Working Girls (7). The home promises Adele the “sunshine and goodness of the other world” including “[l]ight, air, space, enough room to hang up [her] clothes...the space to move around” (8). Like Sara and Sonya, Adele links the crowded conditions of the immigrant neighborhood to a lack of both freedom and beauty. Adele’s initial interview at the Home enforces the contrast between the modernist aesthetic and the cluttered ghetto:

The office to which I was shown was as perfect as the picture in the paper. White Swiss curtains. Plain brown rug on the hardwood floor. The couch with cushions to match. My! What a difference from Mrs. Greenberg’s parlour! Her lace curtains! The clutter of ornaments on the mantelpiece! The pink paper flowers in their five-and-ten-cent crystal vases! After that ugliness, what a relief it was just to breathe the quiet air of this uncrowded room! (10).

Adele echoes the language of the modernist aesthetic as she compares the crowded, tawdry living space of her Jewish landlady, Mrs. Greenberg, to the office in the charitable home, which is characterized by simplicity and cleanliness. The office is not only superior because of its aesthetic appeal, but because it embodies the commodity conventions of the upper class. Similarly, Adele senses the cultural advantage of Mrs. Hellman, the home’s founder, based on

her material surroundings. When Adele first visits the Hellman home, she sees “the inside of the other world”: the “rugs, statues, paintings” and other simple, expensive decorations Adele sees are “things of art” (45-46). “How much finer, more sensitive the Hellmans must be than plain people—they with so much beauty around them every day of their lives,” she concludes (46). Like the advocates of the gospel of simplicity, Adele links the modernist aesthetic to a higher class status.

Adele, like Yeziarska’s other heroines, craves entry into the fine world of the upper class. She pursues Mrs. Hellman’s son, the text’s aristocratic Anglo-Saxon figure, who appears to offer the possibility of marrying into the life of aesthetic and material distinction. Like Sonya, Adele recognizes the need to fashion herself in the appropriate modernist image to “make [herself] look a little better” for Arthur Hellman: “I fussed with the few clothes I had, wondering which was most suitable. I tried on the tan blouse, then my blue. When I saw the cheap fancy styles of the girls, I decided on my plain black dress. The Hellmans must see at first sight that I was different from all the girls” (*AB* 29). Adele’s description of her dress choice echoes the rhetoric of simplicity. Her idea of appearing different to stand out from the rest of the girls is based on copying the simple, clean dress of the upper class—Adele will stand out because she does not resemble the members of her own class.

Sara, Sonya, and Adele each believe that accessing the modernist aesthetic will somehow allow her to pass into higher society. Each finds the dominant culture not opened to her, even when she puts on the trappings of modernist simplicity. For example, Sara finds that the fashions of her college classmates represent a life of economic and social privilege, which Yeziarska makes clear is not entirely attainable to outsiders. Sara’s devotion to her studies only deepens her sense of alienation; Kessler-Harris notes that the process of Americanization “cut women off

from their culture and their past. It brought the fearful recognition that they were adrift in the world” (xxxii). For Sara, this feeling of being adrift from her community is exacerbated by the exclusive and racist attitudes of her American coworkers, teachers, and classmates. They ridicule her at her ironing job, and the teacher at night school ignores her inquisitive questioning. Most painfully, the students at the college where she has worked so hard to win acceptance simply do not register her existence: “[I was] like a lost ghost. I was nothing and nobody....Even in college, I had not escaped from the ghetto” (219-20).

Sonya, too, remains an outsider in Manning’s home and society even after her marriage. Manning’s ancestral home is a forbidding space that feels more like a museum than a house to Sonya. Notably, Yeziarska describes Manning’s townhome as evocative of the cluttered Victorian style: “thick, rich carpets” cover the floors, while “mirrors, paintings and colored tapestries” conceal every inch of the walls; rooms are described as “somber,” “majestic,” “antiquated,” and “oppressive” (*SotT* 112-13). Sonya finds this space “solid, cold, impersonal” and filled with the “heaviness of weighing-down possessions” (*SotT* 112). The people in Manning’s social set are similarly imposing when Sonya and Manning host a reception in honor of their recent marriage. “Morbidly curious” to catch a glimpse of the “Ghetto prodigy,” the society members approach Sonya as one might an exotic animal in the zoo (*SotT* 121). In fact, when Sonya overhears a conversation where two society women liken her to a dressed-up monkey, she realizes the impassability of the divide between classes.

Similarly, although Adele initially believes that the Home will offer a pathway to Americanization, she is ultimately exposed to the profound duplicity of the upper-class philanthropists. Adele’s drive to succeed in the charity house and become successfully Americanized is described as being “a fire inside of me” (*AB* 42). The uplift program is

originally an “oasis” to her; she sees it as being a “lighthouse” to all immigrants so that they might find their way (43). But rather than learning new skills and gaining new material possessions that would pave the way to a higher class status, the residents in the Home for Working Girls are taught to “do without” and stay in their place. The rich, upper-class women on the Home’s board justify the inequity between their fine meals and rich clothing and the careful control they exert over the Home’s immigrant residents through their belief that it would be “utterly disastrous for [the girls] to get wrong notions of superiority” (AB 62). Extra money for dining out or taking in entertainment, superfluous clothing that is seen as unnecessary to a lower-class girl, and other niceties, such as the permanent Adele’s roommate Minnie wants to spend her wages on, are carefully controlled. Mrs. Hellman, the charity director, and the other upper-class women on the board recognize the dangers that material goods could pose to the social order.

Her time working as an underpaid maid for Mrs. Hellman reveals that the domestic labor she is learning to perform will offer little chance for Adele or other immigrant girls to break out of their lower-class status. While Mrs. Hellman, impressed by Adele’s performance in the Home’s “training school for domestic service” (AB 37), dreams of making her “a leader among [her] people,” her vision of leadership confines Adele to her own social class and ethnic group (AB 46). When Adele enters the domestic training program, the parcel of clothing she receives from Mrs. Hellman reinforces Adele’s lower-class status. Adele is initially thrilled with her package of second-hand, cast-off clothing—so moved that she “threw [her] arms around [Mrs. Hellman] and kissed her” (AB 47). But when she witnesses Mrs. Hellman wiping off the spot on her cheek where Adele kissed her, Adele realizes that Mrs. Hellman and the other members of the charitable home have no intention of making the immigrant girls like them. As she walks

back to the Home, Adele catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror in a shop window: “Though I had on a more becoming hat and suit than I had ever worn in my life, yet I could not hold my head as high as before” (AB 48). Mrs. Hellman wants to teach Adele how to use the latest advances in domestic science to instruct other women how to “bring into their homes this self-sacrificing attitude toward life” (AB 46). The charity program encourages working girls to gain “a higher vision of their obligation to be patriotic and useful women” wherein patriotism equals complicity with the nationalist agenda (AB 35). Clearly, Mrs. Hellman’s vision of assimilated immigrants links their subjectivity to continued domestic drudgery, not social freedom. Like Wharton’s inherent class exclusivity in *Summer*, Mrs. Hellman’s plan for the betterment of these newer (and more socially problematic) immigrants limits their potential for accessing higher class status.

In addition to being excluded by aristocratic society, Sara, Sonya, and Adele each struggle with the rejection of heritage the modernist aesthetic seems to demand. For example, Sara’s family in *Bread Givers* continues to feel torn between the plentiful ready-made goods of their new country and the objects they associate with the Old World even after they experience greater economic security. Sara’s mother’s dreamy recollection of her good life before immigration is an excellent example. She recounts to her daughters how she “once had it so plenty in [her] father’s house,” listing abundant food, her lavish dowry, and her former beauty in an inverse of the American myth of the land of milk and honey. In Mrs. Smolinsky’s memories, the old country, not America, is filled with riches not only plentiful but of high quality. As she tells her daughters about her hand-crocheted rainbow tablecloth, she laments that ““There ain’t in America such beautiful things like we had at home”” (BG 33). When Mashah protests that if she had money enough, she could buy something just as grand on Fifth Avenue, her mother replies



“Yes, buy!...In America, rich people can only buy, and buy things made by machines. Even Rockefeller’s daughter got only store-bought, ready-made things for her dowry. There was a feeling in my tablecloth—” (*BG* 33). The “store-bought, ready made things,” most likely embodiments of the modernist aesthetic, are devalued here in favor of old world objects. Here Yeziarska subtly reverses the social implications of the gospel of simplicity here, associating the abundance of the old country and the showy colorfulness of the tablecloth with greater aesthetic value while degrading the simple objects available to American consumers. The American goods might be profuse, and may be available to all if you have the money to purchase them, but they lack the individual beauty and significance of the old-world goods.

Yeziarska continues to question the implications of buying into the American modernist aesthetic by troubling Sara’s attempts at assimilation in a number of ways. For one, Sara’s newfound simple richness is depicted as incompatible with her ethnic background, dramatized in the scene depicting her visit to her dying mother. Her mother praises her fine new clothes, saying she “shine[s] like a princess” and likening their reunion to Jacob seeing his son Joseph, who he thought was dead (*BG* 244). Sara feels immense guilt for privileging her studies over her family (*BG* 245). After her mother’s death, Sara joins her sisters in mourning, but refuses to tear her serge suit “according to the Biblical law and ages of tradition” (*BG* 255). The gathered crowd of mourners condemns her break from tradition, but do so by calling her the *Americanerin*, clearly delineating the incompatibility of Sara’s acculturation and her Jewish roots (*BG* 255).

This incompatibility is evident in *Salome of the Tenements* as well, as Sonya’s marriage to Manning and collusion with his philanthropic efforts eventually come to require a denial or suppression of her ethnic difference. Manning’s home and his peers represent the deceptive façade of high society. Sonya describes the upper-class women of Manning’s social set as “a

dressed-up parlor of make-believes” who “do tricks with themselves all day long,” and contrasts herself as an embodiment of unfettered truth (*SotT* 37). Sonya’s suspicion that Manning is incapable of truly understanding her and her people is confirmed when, confronted with the letter from Honest Abe that links Manning’s name with Sonya’s debt, he rails that ““It must be paid instantly. My name in the hands of *that Jew!*”” (*SotT* 151). Manning’s anti-Semitic outburst corroborates the assimilationist need to suppress her ethnic difference. Her association with the stereotypical figure of the Jewish moneylender ultimately condemns her in Manning’s eyes, and also reveals to Sonya in plain terms his prejudice against Jews.

In addition, Sonya’s marriage reveals the gulf between Manning’s philanthropy and a true intermingling of classes and ethnicities. Initially Sonya believes that the born-rich Manning “came down to the East Side to preach democracy” and to “rub sleeves with beggars and nobodies” (*SotT* 30). Early in their relationship, Manning imagines Sonya’s potency as an antidote to his figurative sterility and particularly thinks what revelations her spiritedness could bring to his philanthropic work: “This woman would be a divine force for righting all social wrongs. Their combined personalities would prove a titanic power that would show the world how the problems of races and classes, the rich and the poor, educated and uneducated, could be solved” (*SotT* 38). Later, Manning applies the same logic to their romantic relationship, saying ““Are we not the mingling of the races? The oriental mystery and the Anglo-Saxon clarity that will pioneer a new race of men?”” (*SotT* 108). But the divide between their ethnic differences (Sonya is described as hot-headed, fiery, and intensely passionate; Manning as cold, aloof, and reserved) cannot be bridged by philanthropic efforts or material disguise.

Unlike *Bread Givers*, where the rhetoric of philanthropy is implicit, in *Salome of the Tenements* Yeziarska makes clear that Sonya has a personal history with efforts to uplift

immigrants. Among the “wrongs and injustices she had suffered” at the hands of charity, Sonya recalls:

The dark days when the friendly visitor of the charity office called. The gifts of cast-off clothes from kind rich ladies. The free dispensaries, the working-girls’ homes. All the institutions erected to help the poor. She had gone through them. She had known the bitter, biting, galling shame of them. (*SotT* 43)

Despite her personal experience with the negative effects of philanthropy, Sonya seems to believe Manning’s charitable work will be different and that it will address what she believes is the underlying need for beauty in the ghetto. In her infatuation with Manning, Sonya imagines an alternative philanthropy that addresses the humanity of the lower class: “She saw herself the center of all eyes....Hushed voices whispered her name—‘There she goes, Mrs. John Manning, who gives away millions to the poor!’ Through her luck the whole Ghetto is saved” (*SotT* 13). Additionally, Sonya embodies her ideal of charitable giving that addresses the need for aesthetic uplift in the scene in which she purchases expensive roses to help stage her apartment before Manning visits. As she walks home, a throng of ghetto children who are “crazy for roses” tear at the flowers in her arms. Laughing, Sonya throws them the roses, saving one intact for a particular young girl whose eyes convey her “need for beauty, the famine for bright color.” Sonya addresses her as a “kindred spirit,” saying “[y]ou look to me like you know yourself on beauty” (*SotT* 72).

Note the way Sonya links a knowledge of beauty to a knowledge of self. Yeziarska formulates Sonya’s desire for beauty as a quest to achieve the authenticity of her true self. However, in contrast, she frames the efforts of various charitable organizations focused on social uplift as duplicitous lies which suppress the humanity of lower-class immigrants like Sonya.

Rather than enabling Sonya to access an aesthetic ideal that will facilitate her self-actualization, pursuing social uplift via the modernist aesthetic linked to charitable giving reinforces Sonya's lack of social standing and ethnic difference. Sonya ultimately realizes that her attempts to perform a higher class status require effacing her ethnic identity and becoming complicit with the oppressions of philanthropy.

Sonya declares herself to be the representative and spokesperson for the immigrants in an attempt to demonstrate to Manning that the simple beauty of the modernist aesthetic should be available even to those who do not work to erase signs of ethnic distinction. She beseeches Manning to “look only on them all! I am they and all these people are me. I feel what they feel. I want what they want. All they want is a little bit of love, a little bit of beauty. Dearest, all we've got to think out is how to change your millions into love and beauty” (*SotT* 133). In response, Manning chides her not to be “so over-emotional” and declares that in order to “accomplish anything, you have to work on the plane of reason” (*SotT* 133). In addition to highlighting the personality differences that Yeziarska describes as dividing not only Manning and Sonya specifically, but their races in general, this exchange reveals what Sonya sees as the central flaw facing charity: it does not address the core humanity of the impoverished peoples it professes to aid. Instead, the teachers and social workers at Manning's settlement project encourage the poorer community to be “thankful for cheapness,” in what Sonya calls a “faked, futile home economy” (*SotT* 135). Sonya comes to see Manning's entire philanthropic mission as a web of deception, which impacts her perspective of their relationship. Did Manning love her, or did he only want to “make [her] part of [his] social experiment—part of [his] Christian reform?” (*SotT* 149). Ultimately, Sonya finds that Manning's philanthropic settlement project not only doesn't speak to her craving for a life of beauty, but actively suppresses true individual expression.

Like Sonya, *Arrogant Beggar*'s Adele finds that her romantic endeavors amplify the fraudulence of uplift promoted by the charity home and further inscribe her ethnic distinction. Adele falls for the charms of Mrs. Hellman's son, Arthur, the kindly but flawed Anglo-American suitor, similar to Sara's college professor and Sonya's John Manning. Like Manning, Arthur is initially attracted by Adele's racial difference. However, Adele eventually sees Arthur's interest in her as another way for him to assuage his guilt over his life of privilege. This realization also makes the disparity between their social classes more apparent. Adele understands that material goods will never enable her to rise in social status, and she tells Arthur that she would "never feel your equal even though I was, because I'd be smothered by your possessions. Your house, your cars, your servants, all the power that your money gives you over me" (*AB* 117). Notably, it is not only their different economic classes that form a barrier between them, but their lack of a shared history: "The whole world is made to order for you. You've never had to go through the dirt of fighting for your life. Your ancestors did the fighting for you" (*AB* 112).

Ultimately, each of Yeziarska's heroines destabilizes the modernist aesthetic's homogenizing agenda by exploring the possibility for consumer culture to promote a space for ethnic difference. In *Bread Givers*, Sara finally achieves personal and financial success as a teacher. But her feelings of alienation both at home and in the larger world demonstrate that she requires a space that acknowledges ethnic difference as well as the need for aesthetic beauty. To address this need, Yeziarska introduces the figure of the *landsleute*, one who will allow Sara to bridge her American independence and her Jewish roots. As a *teacherin*, Sara "didn't feel as [she] had supposed this superior creature felt," but instead feels that the achievement of her goal has left her "so silent, so empty" (*BG* 269). Sara meets and falls in love with Hugo Seelig, her school principal, an immigrant who retains his Jewish culture while acculturating to America.

Sara sees Seelig as one who “had kept that living thing, that flame, that I used to worship as a child” without “the aloof dignity of a superior. He was just plain human” (*BG* 270). Seelig is characterized by generosity and reconciliation, the ability to bring a “big spirit” to a room full of dirty children (*BG* 270). In addition, Seelig shares Sara’s aesthetic sense; when he praises the “clean emptiness” of her living space, he validates and intensifies the “understandin[g]” she feels in his presence and releases her from her “long loneliness” (*BG* 277). When Sara and Seelig discover that they come from the same area in the old country, their blood bond as *landsleute* is confirmed.

The concept of *landsleute* is key to Yeziarska’s idea of Jewish community, as it signifies an equal understanding and respect based on the acknowledgment of another’s humanity and worth. As her countryman who is yet acculturated to America, Seelig enables Sara’s uneasy reconciliation with her father following her mother’s death. However, the novel ends with images of entrapment and suffocation; Sara’s reconciliation with her father is still problematic. Having agreed to Seelig’s suggestion that they welcome Reb Smolinsky into their home, Sara “felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me” (*BG* 297). Although scholars have read this weight as representing Sara’s resistance to her ethnic identity, I believe it instead represents Reb Smolinsky’s problematic idea of homogenous community. Sara’s controlling father and his insistence on traditional Jewish gender roles show his similarity to the narrative of assimilation; both Reb Smolinsky’s notion of Jewish community and the assimilationist rhetoric’s notion of national community demonstrate the “conservative, disciplining, and exclusionary effectivity of the invocation of community” (Joseph xviii). Community in *Bread Givers* is still a suffocating institution, not a promising alternative.

In contrast, Yeziarska explores the idea of a bond among countrymen that allows immigrants to negotiate new community boundaries within the New World in *Salome of the Tenements*. Rather than finding her match in Manning, a character who embodies her opposite, Sonya ultimately locates her romantic counterpart in Hollins, the tailor who made the dress she used to seduce Hollins. Like Seelig in *Bread Givers*, Hollins shares Sonya's background, as he is a Russian Jewish immigrant who changed his name from Jaky Solomon after studying in Paris to become a fashion designer for the Fifth Avenue elite. Hollins also embodies a kind of true generosity that Manning and his philanthropy lack. When Sonya attends her original dress fitting, Hollins takes care to provide her with the necessary undergarments and other accessories, a gesture of "big-hearted giving" which "marked Hollins as being above the oppressive charity she had known as a child" (*SotT* 27). Hollins's knowledge that Sonya would need these items paves the way for a truthful understanding between them, rather than the deceptive masquerade Sonya creates for Manning. The contrast between Hollins's delicate, understated generosity and the judgmental charity of the settlement houses represents true "democracy of beauty" to Sonya (*SotT* 27). Hollins is also depicted as seeing through the façade of Manning's philanthropic work; Hollins "could not bear to think of this live creature in the colorless atmosphere of philanthropy" (*SotT* 40).

The heritage Sonya shares with Hollins makes him approachable: Sonya uses her knowledge of his former Jewish identity to gain entrance to his design studio, instructing his assistant to "Tell Mr. Hollins an old friend of Jaky Solomon is here" (*SotT* 21). In part, Hollins seems drawn to Sonya because her ethnicity confirms his true past which he has attempted to cloak with a French American moniker. She represents a genuine tie to a history he tried to mask. But Sonya and Hollins not only share a Russian Jewish ancestry—upon their first meeting,

Sonya notes that “in every fiber of her being she felt a kinship with him—a divine understanding of beauty!” (*SotT* 22). Hollins, too, feels that kinship: “Here was inspiration, stimulus—an ardor for beauty that he had not believed anyone but himself possessed” (*SotT* 23). Yeziarska frames their bond as both ethnic and aesthetic.

Through Sonya’s partnership with Hollins, the novel’s *landsleute* figure, Yeziarska delineates the true path to the kind of beauty Sonya desires: honest individual expression with roots in ethnic difference rather than the homogenizing effects of assimilation. Sonya claims that “unless I can express myself, unless I can be in the open what I am” she cannot find beauty. So she leaves Manning’s house, determined to seek out beauty and truth by working her way up in the design world, hoping to become a designer like Hollins. Her natural talent ultimately reunites her with Hollins, where “her work flowed like a song...now she was herself—a thing unbound—straightening out her limbs like a sapling in the sun. Now everything she did pulsed with reality” (*SotT* 174). With Manning, “she had been a torn and twisted thing, reaching out to false gods...and everything she touched turned into a lie” (*SotT* 174). Sonya achieves success in her relationship with Hollins and as a dressmaker because it allows her to be her “own free self” (*SotT* 179). As a successful designer in a “beautiful comradeship” with Hollins, she is ultimately able to achieve the beautiful, authentic life she failed to find with Manning (*SotT* 177).

She is also creates a corrective to Manning’s failed philanthropy. The penultimate chapter describes Sonya’s wild dream: to open a not-for-profit shop providing beautiful clothing to the residents of the Jewish Ghetto. Yeziarska describes Hollins’s and Sonya’s personal and professional partnership as the pinnacle of aesthetic inspiration, ethnic companionship, and self-actualization. The “veils of make-believe” that separated Sonya from Manning have been lifted; with Hollins, her “work flowed like a song” and “she was herself—a thing unbound...everything



she did pulsed with reality” (*SotT* 174-75). Within this ideal relationship with fellow immigrant, Sonya dreams of being able to create beauty not just for the rich, but for the “millions on the East Side dying for a little loveliness” (*SotT* 177). Her plans to open “a little shop on Grand Street” that will supply beauty “that is not for profit” with Hollins counteracts the dehumanizing effects of Manning’s philanthropy, while also advancing a minimalist aesthetic in clothing (*SotT* 178).

While this revised settlement scheme of Sonya’s might seem to tidily wrap up Yeziarska’s vision of consumer goods enabling ethnic difference, the novel ends on a more ambiguous note: not with Sonya’s dreams of “a shop of the beautiful” serving the beauty-starved immigrant community, but with a chapter titled “Revelation” that outlines Manning’s disturbing attempted rape of his former wife. While Sonya’s description of guilt about her impending marriage to Hollins and her ongoing questions about whether she loves Hollins or Manning cast a shadow over the happy alignment between herself and Hollins, I believe that Yeziarska intends to broaden her established theme of a community of countrymen in this last chapter, not dissolve it. The bond between Sonya and Hollins is esteemed because it is honest and genuine. Hollins does not see Sonya as an exotic temptress or an inscrutable child, but as a *landsleute*. In the final chapter, Sonya sees Manning not as a cold puritan, separated from her by race and class, but as a kind of *landsleute*, who shares her humanity. Manning’s desperate passion reveals to her that “they were to each other not gentleman and East Side girl—not man and woman, but human beings driven by bitter experience to one moment’s realization of life” (*SotT* 182).

Although Sonya is temporarily disturbed by the emotions she felt during this encounter with Manning, she finally concludes that those emotions are triggered not by romantic love, but from the mutual recognition of each other’s humanity. In a sense, Sonya is recognizing the potential for collaborative collectives that move beyond strict ethnic community boundaries that

critics like Joseph articulate.<sup>10</sup> While Sonya ultimately finds fulfillment only when she remains among her countrymen and works to bring her mission of beauty to their lives, Yeziarska is careful not to completely dissolve the ties between her central character and the dominant, Anglo-Saxon culture represented by Manning. In this way, she shows her characters negotiating a space for ethnic difference through the use of consumer goods that offers an alternative pathway for acculturation.

Yeziarska's communities of countrymen model as alternative to both homogeneous assimilation and oppressive traditional ethnic community reaches its most radical conclusion in *Arrogant Beggar*. Turning down her "liberator prince" leaves Adele, like Sonya, financially adrift and homeless. She returns to the Lower East Side and takes a dishwashing job to survive. Here she meets Muhmenkeh, a fellow worker, who offers Adele a place to sleep because she resembles the granddaughter in Poland whom Muhmenkeh hopes to bring to America. Muhmenkeh's recognition of Adele as fellow countryman introduces Adele to an alternative to both the charitable "uplift" organizations and the lonely life of poverty. As "a godmother, grandmother of lost ones" (*AB* 105), Muhmenkeh rebuilds a bond based on the Jewish family and the larger ethnic community. Muhmenkeh is the center of a neighborhood network of exchange: neighbors sharing food, childcare, clothing, medical care, and other goods and services. This informal organization of caring countrymen stands in contrast to the rules-based charity home—neighbors give what they have and get in return what they need without any power differential or attempts to enforce behavioral changes.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph works to show the ways in which community is "complicit with capitalism and also that communities are, through capitalism, complicit with each other" in order to "enable an understanding of the relationship between sites of value that otherwise seem to be discontinuous" (xxxiii). These relationships "may seem a loss of an imagined space of authenticity and opposition," Joseph acknowledges, but may also "[open] up space to imagine collectivities unimaginable form within the repressive space of community" (xxxiii).

After Muhmenkeh's death, Adele vows to "start something with Muhmenkeh's spirit in it" (AB 125). Giving away a pair of Muhmenkeh's shoes to a woman in need prompts a vision of her friend feeding a flock of neighborhood children at a makeshift *Purim* feast (AB 124–5) and inspires Adele to create "in the heart of the tenements, where everything is so ugly and alike" an aesthetic and social alternative that embodies Muhmenkeh's generous spirit (AB 125). The result is a public cafeteria and community center Adele builds in Muhmenkeh's basement apartment. The aesthetic transformation of the cluttered basement flat follows the modernist aesthetic. Adele scrapes away grime and old paint to reveal real walnut woodwork, removes layers of fading wallpaper before painting the walls a warm golden brown, and makes old cheesecloth into bright yellow curtains to bring "light, colour....sunshine" to the space (AB 125-26). But instead of creating a model flat in which to ape the behavior and ethics of the upper class, Adele transforms her domestic training into a way to nurture a space for ethnic difference. Adele serves Jewish food based on an "open cash bowl" system that relies on the generous payment of some diners to allow others to eat for free (AB 129). This communal alternative to charitable uplift organizations provides an unconventional ethnic community for everyone, regardless of class—doctors dine beside workers, artists next to families. Yeziarska develops the *landsleute* bond into an alternative to both contemporary consumer capitalism and charitable organizations.

Muhmenkeh's Coffee Shop also leads Adele, like Sara and Sonya, to a romantic relationship with a like-minded countryman. Through the coffee shop, Adele reunites with fellow immigrant Jean Rachmansky, a piano prodigy she initially met when he was one of Arthur's charitable projects. Rachmansky flees Arthur's patronage for the same reason Adele fled the charity home: Arthur exerted the control his wealth and class afforded him by insisting Rachmansky channel his musical genius into performance, not composition. Muhmenkeh's

Coffee Shop affords Jean the closeness to his “own people” (AB 149) that he needs to create his “original composition[s]” (AB 74). Adele has created the kind of network of countrymen that offers a safe space in which to nurture the artistic genius that Sonya longs for in *Salome of the Tenements*. In addition, through Jean, who is a countryman but notably not Jewish, Adele broadens the scope of communal community.

Yeziarska makes the wide-reaching implications of the new model of aesthetically pleasing communal communities explicit at the end of *Arrogant Beggar*, as Adele welcomes a new immigrant directly into her alternative ethnic community, bypassing the way-stations of both poverty and charitable uplift. Adele and Jean end the novel married and waiting on the dock to receive Muhmenkeh’s granddaughter, Shenah Gittel, the latest Jewish immigrant to join their family. Adele views Shenah as her continued link to her community of countrymen; she “will be our hostage to fortune,” Adele tells Jean, to “keep us from forgetting the rest of the world in each other” (AB 151). Shenah ties Adele and Jean to their immigrant past, but that tie is seen as hopeful and future-focused, as opposed to the oppression of generations of history that weighs on Sara at the end of *Bread Givers*.

In part, *Arrogant Beggar*’s more optimistic conclusion is linked to its fulfillment of Yeziarska’s *landsleute* community. This community builds relationships that are communal, and uses material goods in ways that challenge American capitalism, old world patriarchy, and charitable hypocrisy. By proposing that consumer goods and commercial endeavors can be used to signify ethnic difference instead of assimilationist uniformity, Yeziarska fashions an ethnic identity that refuses to capitulate to standardization. In addition, by breaking from repressive, patriarchal ethnic models, Yeziarska’s characters work to imagine new collectivities that escape the potential controlling function of traditional communities. In her earlier novels, Yeziarska’s

unsettled conclusions question the ability of the communal *landsleute* model to succeed in America, leaving the problem of representing ethnic difference via material goods unsettled. Although Sara had found in Seeling a romantic partner who shares her ethnic identity, she had not found a way to reframe her relationships with her family or her community to fit that communal, collective ideal. Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements* is a step closer to that ideal—she has created the idea for a collective alternative to both charity and capitalistic consumer culture that will bring beauty into the lives of immigrants and others. In addition, in the novel's final scene, Sonya realizes the more wide-ranging potential of this *landsleute* alternative by recognizing the humanity of someone outside her class and race. With Muhmenkah's Coffee Shop, Adele has found a way to nurture beauty, build community, and make a viable living outside the perimeters of consumer capitalism. Adele's decisions to serve ethnic foods, display ethnic art, and encourage the creation of original ethnic compositions in her aesthetically pleasing cafe further reject the charity's veiled agenda of standardization. She has ultimately created a real space for ethnic difference, using her domestic training to fashion an alternative to the assimilationist agenda that nonetheless embraces the modernist aesthetic.

Yeziarska's three novels of the 1920s show her developing philosophy of ethnic communal values founded in the strategic use of modernist consumer goods. Each of her heroines initially attempts to use consumer objects to access the dominant U.S. culture: as a way to access a higher social standing, a more comfortable life, or an American identity. Each also ultimately realizes that many doors are closed to immigrants regardless of what they buy or wear. In addition, Sara, Sonya, and Adele each balk against the standardization assimilation would require of them. Yeziarska uses the *landsleute* figure to outline her hope for an alternative ethnic community that can still participate in the good life without sacrificing difference. Through their

use of consumer objects and creation of alternative communal businesses, Yeziarska's heroines demonstrate the potential for consumerism to signify distinction instead of homogeneity.

## Chapter Four

### Icons of Permanence: Cosmological Authentication in *The Professor's House*

At the center of Willa Cather's 1925 novel *The Professor's House* lies a battle between competing cultural values. Godfrey St. Peter, the titular professor, clings to a personal philosophy of selection that values timeless permanence in the face of modernist change and disorder. St. Peter's ideals are echoed in the figure of Tom Outland, his protégé, who is characterized by his special devotion to a semi-mythic American past that he uses to establish a cultural status rooted in ideas of civilization and stability. Outland represents an American ideal for St. Peter, and Outland's death at the turn into modernity signals to the professor the bankrupt nature of contemporary American life. Modern culture's corruption is manifested through numerous secondary characters in the text, most clearly in Louis Marsellus, St. Peter's Jewish businessman son-in-law; embodying an effeminate "oriental" exoticness, using economic and social currency instead of the cultural authority he cannot access, and embracing generosity rather than exclusive selectivity, Marsellus represents a multilayered threat to St. Peter. True American culture, St. Peter believes, should belong to those like Outland who exemplify the ideas of masculinity and cultural authority.

Consumable objects are used throughout the text to mark the position of characters in a cultural hierarchy. Specifically, objects are used as tools of what anthropologist Annette Weiner calls "cosmological authentication," or the ability of a seemingly static object to lend credibility, authenticity, or power to its holder due to its spiritual/religious/cosmological associations (6). *The Professor's House* demonstrates the power possessions have to symbolize a connection to the past and to create status and power within the present. As such, St. Peter (and, to a limited extent, Outland) uses objects to support a nativist national identity. The ability of marginalized

characters like Marsellus to take over the ownership of consumption objects previously marked as out-of-bounds threatens the authority of St. Peter's personal and national narrative. While Outland and St. Peter both establish their identities through an attempt to form a community based on imagined, constructed histories, ironically these very attempts at identity formation make them even more socially isolated. Outland's use of material objects as symbols of cultural status forces the loss and alienation of his closest friend, Roddy Blake. And a similar lack of personal connection forces St. Peter's crisis of identity. Through its portrayal of the loss of friendship and family connections, *The Professor's House* examines the danger of using material exchange to support an idealized nativist American identity.

Cather's skillful weaving together of the Outland and St. Peter stories makes it difficult to imagine the one without the other, but *The Professor's House* began as two separate narratives. The central portion, "Tom Outland's Story," grew out of Cather's own trip in 1915 to Colorado's Mesa Verde as well as her investigations of the historical figure Richard Wetherill.<sup>1</sup> The roots of the first and third sections come from two of Cather's short stories: both Bernice Slote and David Stouck have highlighted similarities between the 1917 story "Her Boss" and the St. Peter portions of *The Professor's House* while an earlier story, 1902's "The Professor's Commencement," has also been linked to themes present in the first and third parts of the novel.

At the intersection of these two source stories Cather makes a complex argument about the text's competing cultural values and the formation of American national identity. Considered separately from Outland's narrative, "The Professor's Commencement" and "Her Boss" are

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<sup>1</sup> Several critics have examined the origins of Cather's Mesa narratives. Susan Rosowski and Bernice Slote's 1984 article "Willa Cather's 1916 Mesa Verde Essay: The Genesis of *The Professor's House*" began the tide of formal investigation into earlier biographical and historical influences on specifically "Tom Outland's Story." The most in-depth is David Harrell's *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House* (1992) which works to reveal the influence of the Mesa Verde material on both the content and the form of *The Professor's House*. John N. Swift and Joseph R. Urgo's 2002 edited collection *Willa Cather and the American Southwest* examines Cather's connections to and uses of the American Southwest through a range of biographical, historical, and cultural readings.



about men confronting change while facing personal or professional difficulties. “The Professor’s Commencement” tells the story of Emerson Graves, professor of English literature at a high school in a manufacturing city, who has devoted his life to a subject for which he lacks passion. Now, on the day of his retirement, he realizes he has given the best years of his life to unfulfilling work (save one inspiring protégé, a brilliant student who tragically died young) and most likely lacks the energy or ability to write his true life’s work, a history of European Art. “Her Boss” focuses on businessman Paul Wanning, who encounters the fact that his relationship with his wife and family is built on material values he no longer respects. Wanning is dying, and takes comfort in the composition of an autobiography about his youth in Wyoming with the help of a sympathetic young secretary. Both stories establish dichotomies between the work one does to advance professionally or financially and the “true” calling of creative achievements; both feature younger figures who inspire the older male protagonists but in the end fail to allow the men to transcend their physical realities.<sup>2</sup> Both stories highlight the perils of affluence: the polluted factory town of “The Professor’s Commencement” illuminates the corrupting effects of materialism on the natural environment while the cluttered family home in “Her Boss” reveals “perfect taste” but also a “house too full of things,” and the lack of discrimination ultimately alienates Wanning (95). These themes carry over to *The Professor’s House*; like Graves and Wanning, who see themselves as bastions of culture in the face of mass industrialization and material consumption, St. Peter struggles against what he sees as his family’s vulgar conflation of commodity exchange and non-commodity objects, including people (Slote xv).

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<sup>2</sup> Bernice Slote notes the presence of “a situation which by its recurrence takes on a kind of archetypal significance in [Cather’s] imaginative world” in the Paul Wanning figure in “Her Boss” (xiv). Slote also offers an extended analysis of the similarities between Wanning and St. Peter; see her introduction to *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories*, xiv-xvi.

Read independently of the rest of the novel, “Tom Outland’s Story” reveals the nativist impulse at the heart of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropological investigations into American origins. If the themes of “The Professor’s Commencement” and “Her Boss” center on the loss of aesthetic ideals and the turn to uncorrupted youth or the past in the face of some contemporary threat of change, then the focus in “Tom Outland’s Story” on the historical loss of what is seen as a superior culture is even more significant. On one level, Outland’s foray into the mesa ruins reveals a search for idealized American source material in the ruins of a pre-Columbian community. This type of archaeological and historical activity during the late nineteenth century allowed nativists simultaneously to lay claim to the type of cultural currency previously seen as unavailable to the nation due to its youth and lack of cultural history and to justify exclusionary political tactics. Supporters of more liberal immigration and naturalization laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries point towards America’s longstanding disparate roots as proof of the positive influence of diversity in the formation of American democracy.<sup>3</sup> The nativist search for the archetype of the idealized American, in contrast, justifies the continued antipathy to perceived outsiders. The text illustrates this impulse in Outland’s anthropological investigation.

In resistance to a motley nation, Outland’s narrative unearths the elusive aboriginal root, an instinct that also drives views of regional literature in service of national unity.<sup>4</sup> St. Peter’s crisis clarifies, in turn, the modern threat to a purportedly true American identity arising from a

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in an 1881 article in *The North American Review*, Nina Morais argues against Jewish discrimination in the United States with the simple claim that American democratic principles make that kind of alienation impossible: “America has no extenuation for antipathy to the stranger. The American people is not a nation that traces a long line of ancestry to an aboriginal root. America is the scrap-bag of the world. The nations have contributed, and do still contribute, to form a motley population, from which a new people is to arise” (266).

<sup>4</sup> I discuss the narrative of national appropriation, a critical approach to regionalist literature that sees regionalism primarily as articulating national identity, in the introduction. In essence, this narrative identifies the purpose of regional literature as providing a peripheral imagined space that receives and reflects back idealized images of the national.

superior common ancestry. Like “The Professor’s Commencement” and “Her Boss,” *The Professor’s House* marks a historical period of momentous change in social institutions. St. Peter clearly sees modernist innovations, ethnic multiculturalism, and the rise of conspicuous consumption as threats to nostalgic notions of community and traditional family structure, concerns that many critics have found compelling. However, the combination of St. Peter’s story with the central section focusing on Outland moves beyond St. Peter’s discomfort with the democratic potential of the modernist era. By linking mass consumption to nativist classifications of different Native American groups, *The Professor’s House* reveals a more complex argument that raises troubling questions about Cather’s potential complicity with St. Peter’s exclusionary idea of U.S. identity.

Cather’s own identification and possible collusion with her central character and his nativist ideals has been the subject of much debate. I see the participants in this debate falling into three categories: critics who extol Cather’s identification with St. Peter and his selective philosophy, critics who condemn either Cather’s identification with St. Peter or with the text’s nativist ideals, and critics who see Cather or the text’s collusion with the nativist ideals associated with St. Peter as complex or ambiguous. Many critics fall into the first category, finding in St. Peter’s increasing alienation from his family, community, and university a commendable response to the cheapening effects of modern mass consumerism. David Harrell, for example, identifies with St. Peter’s passive criticism of “the deterioration of the university, the corruption of society, or the disintegration of his family” (185). Similarly, Leo Jacks focuses on Outland’s similarities to St. Peter and find in Outland an “essential goodness” that seems above corruption (qtd. in Harrell 186).<sup>5</sup> However, the critics who identify with St. Peter’s

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<sup>5</sup> Other critics who identify with St. Peter’s crisis include Kim Vanderlaan, who reads St. Peter’s crisis as a result of the split between his authentic, aesthetic self and the socially obligated husband, father, and teacher. Stuart Burrows

alienation from modern society and who equate Cather herself with this alienation, miss the problems inherent in the exclusionary impulse—problems the text illuminates, particularly in the portrayal of St. Peter’s son-in-law Marsellus and in the depiction of Outland’s regret at his betrayal of his friend Blake. While *The Professor’s House* primarily focuses on St. Peter’s perspective, it also illuminates alternative philosophies of identification, philosophies that illustrate the democratic potential in expanding symbolic capital beyond cultural markers to include those who cannot inherit these symbols of class. St. Peter is threatened by this potential, represented in the text mainly by his son-in-law Marsellus, and so, it seems, are many critics who identify with St. Peter’s cultural elitism. These critics miss the secondary narratives of Marsellus and Blake, as well as Outland’s ongoing sense of remorse for his own cultural exclusivity.

The second category of criticism involves those who condemn Cather’s identification with either St. Peter or with the text’s nativist ideals. Recent evaluations of *The Professor’s House* have called attention to important connections between Cather’s work and historical questions of U.S. nationality. Walter Benn Michaels’s provocative yet ultimately problematic reading of *The Professor’s House* associates racial and nativist thinking with modernism itself. Guy Reynolds’s historicist reading of Cather’s works identifies her formal efforts to write with a progressive, diverse America. Joseph Urgo reads *The Professor’s House* as embodying a culture based on chaos, transition, and change. Many critics who question the nativist themes in *The Professor’s House* continue to link the author’s identity and values to those of her fictional creations. Sarah Wilson, for example, finds in Outland and St. Peter’s attempts to construct a personal/national history out of coopted objects from other cultures and others’ lives the danger

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identifies the persistent idea of the need for empathetic understanding in Cather’s texts to overcome the “acute sense of the social isolation and fragmentation of American life.” (25). John Hilgart notes that “Godfrey St. Peter’s determination to hold on to an idealized past, as a defense against the gross materialism of his present, leaves him utterly adrift” (388). However, this idealized past is not inherently better than the present—it is simply a fabricated version of history that enforces St. Peter’s position of cultural power at the expense of social or economic influences.

of unquestioned nostalgia. Other critics label Cather's efforts as a sympathetic depiction of a hierarchical, racist society.<sup>6</sup>

Several recent critics, however, have emphasized Cather's complex attitude toward her central characters and their nativist or classist tendencies. Julianne Newmark argues that Cather's novel moves beyond the racial nativism of the modernist era to create instead what she calls a "neonativist" agenda, which counters the "nativism of [the] day with a textual vision of a newly assembled native selfhood," one that depends on non-racial categories of identification including, in Newmark's analysis, geographical place (91). While Newmark argues for a unifying national identity that draws from multiple categories, Stuart Burrows believes *St. Peter* reveals the impossibility of a unified identity, personal or national. Burrows reads *St. Peter*'s crisis as "less interested in quarantining American identity in order to preserve it from the threat of foreign contagion than it is in depicting American identity as inevitably partial, mediated, and hybrid," attributes that Burrows argues that Michaels refuses to acknowledge in his racially focused analysis (44).

There is more at stake in the text than racial or aesthetic purity. As Christopher Nealon notes, Michaels's reading glosses over "St. Peter's desire to be rid of his entire family, gentiles as well as Jews" (30). Here the issue of Cather's identification with *St. Peter* must again be examined. While Cather clearly relates to the professor's artistic mission, the text also reveals support for characters who defy the limitations of selective racial, gendered, and class identity in their creation of communities. Because, as I will examine later in this chapter, *St. Peter*'s aesthetic philosophy grows out of Cather's identity as an artist, my reading of *The Professor's House* recognizes Cather's identification with *St. Peter*, to a certain extent. But the text

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<sup>6</sup> Michaels in particular describes the novel's troubling conclusion as upholding the nativist ideals of separation and racial absolutism, attributes he sees throughout American modernist literature.

undermines a reading that entirely aligns Cather with St. Peter's nativist isolation, specifically through her depiction of Outland's ongoing remorse for his own exclusionary attitudes—remorse that may have led to his decision to enlist, an attempt to make retribution for his transgressions against his friend Blake. Outland's regret (a feature St. Peter seems to consistently overlook in his assessment of his young friend) is based on his ultimate belief that building social bonds takes precedence over socially elite exclusivity. In other words, Outland's regret reveals his commitment to a more democratic and less exclusive vision of community.

Because the reader only accesses this regret through the filter of St. Peter's perspective, misreadings of Cather's complicity in the professor's selective philosophy abound. Certainly, Cather carefully records St. Peter's reaction to some of the cultural effects of consumer culture. The more widespread availability of consumer goods impacts the power of traditional markers of cultural authority. Cultural ideals of masculinity and civilization are thrown aside in favor of the new materialism embraced by those with economic capital. This shift in power threatens to relocate the source of status, taste, and class from the holders of cultural currency to those in economic power. While St. Peter finds this power shift threatening, Outland's remorse at his betrayal of Blake as well as the text's sympathetic portrayals of secondary characters such as Marsellus who defy St. Peter's selective philosophy reveal Cather's attempts to reimagine as fluid and multicultural both the composition of St. Peter's regional community and, by extension, American national identity.

St. Peter's crisis emerges out of the threat of social change that the more democratic and inclusive vision of community promises, and this threat is inherently linked to consumption practice and the acquisition or maintenance of status. Once again, Pierre Bourdieu's model of social organization, which I initially discussed in Chapter Two, illuminates the link between

consumer objects and social status. St. Peter, like Lucius Harney in Wharton's *Summer*, is well-versed in the language of what Bourdieu describes as cultural capital. Composed of tastes and practices that are made manifest through the display of everyday skills and knowledge, the acquisition of academic degrees, and the possession of certain cultural objects, cultural capital shows an individual's status while masking the way that status is linked to institutions of power and control. Regardless of the form cultural capital takes, it is a "product of domination predisposed to express or legitimate domination" (Bourdieu 228). In other words, those who hold dominant positions within the area of cultural capital (the cultural elite) believe their way of determining status to be objective, unbiased, and universally superior to those who either wield less cultural capital or who seek power by drawing upon different types of assets, such as social or economic.

Like Harney, whose knowledge of the cultural capital invested in different material goods (the blue brooch is "better," the coffee Charity initially dislikes is pronounced "real" and therefore superior), St. Peter uses both consumer objects and moments of consumer activity to distinguish between the cultural elite and outsiders. Bourdieu illuminates the struggle by those in power to maintain their concept of taste while mystifying the connections between social factors such as education or family background and tastes that are held as universally good. Therefore one's position as cultural elite can be revealed by the way one relates to consumption objects. In Bourdieu's theory, someone who holds great economic capital views consumption objects primarily as markers of exchange or market value, signifying the idea of luxury, while someone who values cultural capital focuses on the consumption of objects that mark one's status within the cultural elite habitus, divorced from ideas of monetary worth. The cultural elite recognize other members of their habitus through their shared ability to recognize the distinctive value of

cultural objects.<sup>7</sup> Consumer culture offers opportunities for different forms of capital to become visible, highlighting the difficulty of negotiating new status positions when that negotiation requires accessing different types of symbolic capital.

St. Peter's crisis comes from this threat of social change, a threat marked not only by the movement away from cultural capital as a sign of cultural authority but also by the blurring of distinctions between manliness/effeminateness and civilization/savagery. St. Peter's eventual isolation comes as a response to this two-pronged threat of social change. In the text, this occurs on two levels. First, scenes of shopping offer opportunities for characters who possess or value economic capital to demonstrate their disregard for cultural capital as the highest marker of social worth. These shopping scenes also demonstrate the threat the feminine activity of shopping poses for traditional masculinity, and the way the "savage" pursuit of accumulation threatens civilized culture. Cather's careful pairing of Outland and St. Peter as like types focuses attention on the dual crises in the novel: St. Peter's off-page breakdown while shopping with his daughter Rosamond and Blake's also off-page sale of the Mesa relics to a traveling speculator. That both of these scenes center around the protagonists' unease with their counterparts' methods of partaking in buying or selling, is significant. The use of consumption objects for economic display or social climbing by those outside the cultural habitus reveals a force that threatens to reshape the boundaries of civilization. But recognizing the unrecognized undercurrent of Outland's regret is key to understanding the text's complex examination of cultural values in the face of modernist change.

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas B. Holt, who works to examine the usefulness of Bourdieu's theories of taste in American consumer culture, finds that the habitus shapes "how one classifies the universe of consumption objects to which one is exposed, constructing desire toward consecrated objects and disgust toward objects that are not valued in the field" (4). The power of cultural objects "results not from group consensus or economic scarcity but from the inferred cultural aptitude of the consumers of the object. In other words, cultural objects such as the high arts that require significant cultural capital to understand and appreciate properly imply that their consumer apply distinctive practices and so serve as surrogate representations of these practices" (Holt 5). St. Peter sees his relationship with Outland as based on a shared aptitude for cultural knowledge and objects.



Second, I see the menace of social change in the text through differing interpretations of important possessions such as the Mesa relics that signify objectified cultural capital to be guarded to St. Peter and Outland. Bourdieu points toward the possession of this kind of object as one of the distinctive signs of status, noting that to

appropriate a work of art is to assert oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object, which is thereby converted into the reified negation of all those who are unworthy of possessing it, for lack of the material or symbolic means of doing so, or simply for lack of a desire to possess it strong enough to ‘sacrifice everything for it.’ (280)

Outland’s initial efforts to retain control over his excavated relics and his work to keep them from audiences that he believes cannot appropriately appreciate the items does in fact culminate in his willingness to sacrifice nearly everything—including relationships, a sacrifice Outland comes to regret. St. Peter, too, strives to ensure that he is the sole possessor of the “authentic taste” for objects like Outland’s Mexican blanket as well as less tangible items like Outland’s Mesa narrative.

Bourdieu’s definition of consumption objects as objectified cultural capital also points toward a different theoretical understanding of cultural objects, gift theory’s notion of inalienable possessions. Annette Weiner’s definitive text *Inalienable Possessions* illuminates the particular power of these types of objects: “We are all familiar with the crowns of queens and kings—the signs and symbols of authority and power—or antique furniture and paintings that proclaim a family’s distinguished ancestry....certain things assume a subjective value that place them above exchange value” (6). This subjective value includes power—objects like the crown and the painting are imbued with ideas like fame, rank, and authority, so that the current holder of an

inalienable possession is able to assume these attributes unto herself. In *The Professor's House*, objects are often used as legitimizing tools, or as markers of cosmological authentication, in the face of cultural and social change. Weiner points to the power cosmological authentication holds, noting that it draws on “past actions or representations and in sacred or religious domains” and therefore these types of objects cannot (or should not) be exchanged in the traditional sense (4). For St. Peter, the commodification of both the relics that Outland finds and, ultimately, of Outland's legacy violates their value as markers of cultural capital and their ability to signify cultural power through their connections to individual, familial, and national identity.

Nativism also proves dangerous for Outland and St. Peter since it demonstrates their inability to adapt to modern values, which draw more on social and economic capital than on the cultural capital Outland and St. Peter value. While Cather empathizes with St. Peter and Outland, therefore supporting a reading that emphasizes high cultural values, her consistent portrayal of the alienating effects of those values highlights the danger of the inability to adapt in a progressive, democratic society. St. Peter's attempts to resist the hazard of chaos and social transformation are introduced early in the text. Houses are an important touchstone in this novel—the text begins following the construction of a new home for St. Peter and his wife Lillian, an event that unsettles St. Peter. Soon, the ongoing construction of his elder daughter's expansive new home prolongs the turmoil the professor feels about his own new house and its symbolic weight as a marker of conspicuous consumption. One of the central conflicts around which the story revolves is that Rosamond and Marsellus are able to build their pretentious home and grounds because they are profiting from an invention discovered by Outland, who was not only St. Peter's acolyte but also Rosamond's fiancé. Outland died in World War I, his discovery (the Outland vacuum and engine) gathering dust until the more business-minded Marsellus made

it profitable. From St. Peter's point of view, that is one of Marsellus's greatest faults—his ability to think in a commercially minded way.

St. Peter sees Marsellus's offense as in part linked to the way the commercialization and marketing of Outland's discovery impoverishes Outland's memory. During a dinner party at the new St. Peter family home, Marsellus divulges that he and Rosamond are naming their new estate "Outland" not only in Outland's honor, but to make the house itself "a sort of memorial to him" (31), rebuilding his laboratory in the house as well as erecting a commemorative library. In short, the Marselluses are creating a museum atmosphere within their home of "all the sources of his inspiration" (31). While Outland "got nothing out of [the Outland engine] but death and glory," Marsellus explains to a visiting academic who is a guest at the dinner party, for Marsellus and Rosamond (who was named Outland's heir in his will) the "monetary returns have been and are, of course, large," (31, 30).

While it is certainly Marsellus's intention to frame this memorialization as generous, St. Peter identifies the gesture as gauche, remarking to his wife the next morning: "Hang it, Outland doesn't need their generosity! They've got everything he ought to have had, and the least they can do is to be quiet about it, and not convert his very bones into a personal asset" (36). To St. Peter, Marsellus and Rosamond's "florid style," which lacks the appropriate aesthetic humility, is indelicate and obscene. But it is his choice of words here that is interesting: by profiting even tangentially from Outland's memory and not keeping quiet about that association, Marsellus and Rosamond "convert his very bones into a personal asset." Here St. Peter symbolizes Outland's memory, his inventions, and his intellectual property in the figure of his skeleton, an object that shouldn't be commodified—in Weiner's terms, an inalienable object.

Before turning to a closer examination of this type of object, I wish to look at a parallel situation in the text: the other, more literal, skeleton in the closet of this story: “Mother Eve,” the skeletal remains of a woman, found and named by Outland and his partner, Blake, in a pre-Columbian civilization in the New Mexico desert, related in the novel’s central section, “Tom Outland’s Story.” Although Outland and Blake find other bodies in the ruins, Mother Eve is set apart, both in the text and in Outland’s memory. The other three bodies, found later and in the Cliff City itself, were clearly elderly, and the explorers “believed they were among the aged who were left behind” in the normal seasonal movements of the tribe, and who died natural deaths (192). Mother Eve, on the other hand, is found in an area dubbed the “Eagle’s Nest,” set apart from the main dwellings of the city, and her death is clearly not natural. “We thought she had been murdered,” Outland relates, noting a gaping wound on her mummified side, as well as “a look of terrible agony” on her face (192). Father Duchene later corroborates Outland’s theory of murder, hypothesizing a scenario of infidelity: “In primitive society the husband is allowed to punish an unfaithful wife with death” (201).

For Outland, the Mesa relics and specifically Mother Eve represent something sacred. They are therefore items that shouldn’t be sullied by becoming commodities. They are pseudo-religious cultural icons, representative of the kind of civilized culture Outland values. However, to Blake, the objects have a different value. Outland returns from his trip to Washington D.C. to discover that Blake has sold the relics. The encounter with Blake explains the men’s different understanding of the objects. Blake explains that this opportunity “was a chance in a million, boy.... There’s only one man in thousands that wants to buy relics and pay real money for them” (218). When Outland replies that while he had hoped the government would compensate the men

for their time, and also supposed that they would “maybe get a bonus of some kind, for our discovery,” he

never thought of selling them, because they weren't mine to sell—nor yours!

They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from....I'm not so poor that I have to sell the pots and pans that belonged to my poor mothers a thousand years ago. (219)

In case the men's different perspectives aren't clear, Blake reiterates that “he knew [Outland] cared about the things, and was proud of them, but he'd always supposed [Outland] meant to ‘realize’ on them, just as he did, and that it would come to money in the end” (220). The nature of Outland's relationship to the objects the two men found on the Mesa is familial and sacred. He would “as soon have sold [his] own mother as Mother Eve,” and the “Fourth of July talk” he gives Blake clearly indicates the sort of religious-patriotic symbolism with which Outland imbues the Mesa ruins and relics (221). To Outland, the Mesa relics are inalienable possessions. They are the markers of objectified cultural capital, representing a particular interpretation of American history—one that parallels the philosophy of selection asserted by St. Peter, and one that fulfills the nativist quest for culturally superior American roots. Outland wants to use these objects as a way to gain access to a position of authority within the cultural habitus. As an orphan with no real concept of his familial history, Outland is uniquely positioned to take on the particular brand of identity the Mesa relics impart. Outland's status as an orphan means he has no way of acquiring objects imbued with cosmological authentication other than by “discovering” them and claiming them as his legacy. And this is a legacy Outland is eager to

shape in a specific way that will mark his cultural status. As an orphan, Outland also represents the U.S., an entity with no “family” history.

Outland focuses in his narrative on revealing the Mesa tribe as a superior race of people, one set in contrast to “some roving Indian tribe without culture or domestic virtues” that likely destroyed them (198). The cliff dwellers are described in terms of their clear cultural sophistication. The language used in this section highlights two distinct features of the Mesa tribe: first, their intrinsic connection with nature; second, their ability to rise above their “savage” roots. The first attribute is clear in the description of the tribe’s insightful use of natural space; the well-maintained homes take advantage of natural springs and the temperature control of the cave’s light and shade. Their building materials are stones “warm to the touch, smooth and pleasant to feel” (185). The setting is “open and clean,” and “there was very little rubbish or disorder” (185-86). Set in the cliffside, the village’s vista over the canyon and valley demonstrates to Outland the occupants’ worth: “A people who had the hardihood to build there, and who lived day after day looking down upon such grandeur, who came and went by those hazardous trails, must have been, as we often told each other, a fine people” (191). Outland clearly connects the ability to brave danger and difficulty in order to live a life of aesthetic appreciation to personal and communal quality. Father Duchene also makes that connection: “There is unquestionably a distinct feeling for design in what you call the Cliff City....Convenience often dictates very sound design” (197). Father Duchene links the layout of the Cliff City to an innate yet thoughtful response to the environment: set up on the cliffs “without the influence of example or emulation, with no incentive but some natural yearning for order and security....[they] built themselves into this mesa and humanized it” (199). The cliff dwellers’ special connection with their natural surroundings gives them greater worth as a

people. They work purposefully instead of impetuously: signal words include “patience,” “deliberation,” and “carefully.” Their life in Cliff City suggests permanence rather than transience.

This also points to the tribe’s perceived cultural superiority. In addition to their close connection with their natural environment, they have a clear appreciation for certain aesthetic touches: walls are tinted with soft, inoffensive colors and “some of the chambers were frescoed in geometrical patterns” (190). The items they create are judged as exceptional: “beautifully shaped water jars” are both practical and linked by Father Duchene to “early pottery from the island of Crete” rather than other native tribes (191, 197). The mention of Crete points toward the nineteenth-century notion that to be linked to the Greeks was a move toward cultural superiority. The passage where Outland relays his memories of Father Duchene’s report contains several of these evaluative statements, each of which sets the Cliff Dwellers in opposition to other native tribes. Their secure existence allows them to “[develop] considerably the arts of peace” rather than those of war or “brute strength and ferocity” (197-98). They are “a provident, rather thoughtful people” who “had an appreciation of comfort, and went even further than that,” developing art, sport, and possibly religion (197).

As several critics have noted, Cather’s account of Outland’s explorations draws upon the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century craze for anthropological investigation into America’s origins. Newspaper and magazine articles of the time period illuminate the popular interest in the excavations and explorations of the American Southwest. The *Galveston Daily News* on December 3, 1879 quotes the *New York Evening Post*’s article “The Cliff Dwellers: America the Old World in Reality,” demonstrating the regional appeal of the anthropological efforts. An evocative description of the excavation sites is first given for the armchair traveler,

followed by the assessment that “these and other tokens tell that in reality America is the old world, and that thousands of years ago races flourished here in a high state of barbaric civilization.” A letter to the editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, similarly reprinted in the *Wisconsin State Register* on August 16, 1884, echoes the national significance of these explorations: “What care we for Pompeii? We have a vaster, richer field in which to search for treasures hid for untold ages.”

Cather herself was invested in this notion of the cliff dwellers as a sort of common ancestor for the otherwise culturally rootless American. In a 1925 interview, Cather recalled, “When I was a little girl nothing in the world gave me such a moment as the idea of the cliff dwellers, of whole civilizations before ours linking me to the soil” (Tennant 32). The link Cather draws between herself, a privileged white woman, and the defunct civilization of what was certainly considered at the time another race demonstrates the lasting cultural power the notion of the cliff civilizations had in the American subconscious. Cather clearly sees the extinct cliff dwellers as a tie to the natural world, but their significance extends beyond the environmental. Harrell suspects that Cather found in Mesa Verde a prototype for an artistic utopia: “she saw [the cliff dwellings] as points along a continuum of creativity in which she herself was a participant” (210). It appears that for Cather as for *Outland* the cliff city forms a perfect foundation for a culturally superior proto-American that meets its apex in those who value cultural capital over other forms.

Anthropological discoveries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked to create a rich cultural history in a country where previously there was perceived to have been none. Father Duchene asserts, for example, that the Mesa tribe “lived for something more than food and shelter,” giving them a more “complex” life than that of “our roving Navajos” (197).



The possessive “our” here is important. While the Navajo are a tribe contemporary to Outland and Father Duchene, the Mesa tribe is much older. Father Duchene’s careful counting of a cedar tree’s rings shows the tribe to be pre-Columbian. These two groups, the ancient cliff dwellers and the present-day Navajo Indians, are set against each other in the Mesa narrative constructed by Outland and Father Duchene, as well as in the dialogue of the time period surrounding American origins and Indian removal. While the advanced cliff dwellers lived to “work out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man...where they had practically overcome the worst hardships that primitive man had to fear,” Father Duchene fears they might have been “too far advanced for their time and environment” (198). The others of their time are imagined to be transient, uncultured, and inferior, “some horde that fell upon [the Mesa tribe] in their summer camp and destroyed them for their hides and clothing and weapons, or from mere love of slaughter” (198). In other words, the opposite of the cultivated and advanced cliff dwellers were either desirous of material goods or hungry for violence. This imagined ancient tribe is described as brutal and roving, composed of invaders clearly aligned not only with the barbaric savagery out of which the Mesa tribe rose, but with the contemporary Navajo tribes contiguous to the region.<sup>8</sup>

The rhetoric surrounding the cliff dwellers and contemporary American Indian tribes imposes a concept of national history that maintains idealized standards of civilization. One recurring question posed by anthropologists, journalists, and readers alike in newspaper and book

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<sup>8</sup> There is a link here to early nineteenth-century theories of the mound people as distinct from barbaric Natives—a theory famously embedded in William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies.” For more on Bryant’s poem, the distinction it draws between the mound-builders and the “red man,” and its link to nation-building and racial politics, see Ralph N. Miller’s 1949 article “Nationalism in Bryant’s ‘The Prairies,’” and, more recently, Gordon M. Sayre’s “The Mound Builders and the Imagination of American Antiquity in Jefferson, Bartram, and Chateaubriand.”

accounts of the cliff dwellers is “who is this race of people?” The two dominant theories are that the cliff dwellers are either a prehistoric ancestor of contemporary tribes such as the Pueblo, Navajo, or Ute Indians, or that they are a completely separate race that had been wiped out due to some kind of natural force or by attack from another tribe. Linking the cliff dwellers to contemporary tribes is obviously problematic because it forces readers to acknowledge the potential connection between the mythic American origins the cliff cities seemed to offer and the contemporary “savages” the American public was working actively to suppress and remove. Therefore we see news articles like the Montezuma Valley Correspondence to the *Wisconsin Journal* (again, reprinted in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on March 14, 1880) that speculates that the Montezuma valley cliff dwellers possibly descended from the Aztecs and makes tentative connections to the contemporary Pueblo Indians’ devotion to Montezuma’s return. These connections are then used in the article’s conclusion as a rallying cry for the government to continue their attempts to reclaim the area of southwest Colorado from the “jealous” Ute Indians.<sup>9</sup>

The prevailing theory is that the cliff dwellers are a completely independent race from contemporary tribes. Not only does this reading support American governmental policy regarding living Indian tribes, but it also allows Americans to employ the cliff dweller narrative for their own gain, to construct a story of national origins that allows American access to the kind of cultural currency previously limited to European aristocracy. It permits assertions of cultural authority that continue to enforce boundaries between categories of identity and status.

This narrative is supported by Outland’s fictionalized Mesa narrative. Outland’s careful attempts

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<sup>9</sup>The article concludes: “A vigorous effort is now being made by our Senators and Representatives in Congress and Governor to have all these and all the Utes removed to some other locality, which will be a very desirable movement, and conducive to the welfare and rapid progress of our State. The Indians, as they have been recently managed, are a great hindrance to the growth and development of this country, and the sooner they are banished from sight the better. There always has been, and always will be, an ‘irrepressible conflict’ between the white man and the Indian, so long as they continue to live upon and occupy the same soil.”

to establish the cultural superiority of the cliff dwellers is offset by comparisons to contemporary American Indian groups that work to justify their continued displacement and forced acculturation.

This narrative subtly reworks the extinction discourse that dominated Western concepts of savagery and civilization. The vast body of literature that began in the late eighteenth century to describe the fatal encounters between “primitive” peoples and white Western culture, is both descriptive and generative; the focus on the “savagery” of Native Americans both assumed the inability of Indians to survive while also justifying the continued removal and genocide of the “doomed” race, for example. The extinction of indigenous people was seen as inevitable, a result of the unshakeable Western faith in the progress of civilization. The narratives of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny contained within them the seeds for the destruction of indigenous people, as did eventually the social Darwinist belief that those who triumphed from progress were ultimately the most fit. Postcolonial critic Patrick Brantlinger uses the term “extinction discourse” to encapsulate this idea of the inevitable annihilation of lesser peoples, and the threads of this discourse run throughout Outland’s account of the Mesa tribe. But it is interesting that rather than framing the cliff dwellers’ demise as a result of their own savage nature, which is the traditional approach in this discourse, Outland casts them as victims of the true savages, the imagined “roving” tribes. Here Cather is clearly demonstrating Outland’s desire to link his identity (an identity he claims through his possession and apparent ownership of the Mesa relics and, by extension, their story) to a semi-mythic ancient past that bypasses the supposed savage Indian tribes of more recent American history. In doing so, Outland reworks the idea of America’s foundations. The true Americans, the originals, are, to Outland and St. Peter, those who live like the Mesa tribe: in close concert with and yet in control of their natural

environment, developing the fine arts and aesthetic sensibilities. The Cliff City people are the original creators of the cultural habitus.

In reworking the narrative of America's foundations, Outland is also demonstrating one of the key attributes of inalienable possessions. According to Weiner, these objects "do not just control the dimensions of giving, but their historicities retain for the future, memories, either fabricated or not, of the past" (Weiner 7). In other words, these objects that represent a spiritual link to the giver can also be used to both manufacture and perpetuate historical cultural memories. The possession of such objects then lends the possessor a particular type of symbolic capital, one linked with the ability to manage and shape collective history. Outland's goal in working to unearth the Mesa relics, in attempting to bring national attention to the relics, and in sharing the story of his expedition with St. Peter is to authenticate a specific version of both his individual and America's national history. Weiner notes that "What makes a possession inalienable is its exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through time. Its history is authenticated by fictive or true genealogies, origin myths, sacred ancestors, and gods" (92). Outland's response to Blake's sale of the Mesa relics is important: to Outland the relics belong simultaneously to the nation and to orphaned individuals without "other ancestors to inherit from" (219). These relics therefore serve as both national cultural icons and inalienable possessions that lend cosmological authentication to the ideal American individual, in this case a physical manifestation of the frontier thesis in the figure of the white, male, individual explorer. Outland's outrage at the sale of the relics comes from this double violation of both the fictive national and personal identities he creates through the objects. Not only does this allow Outland to claim the Mesa relics as inalienable possessions that mark his position in the narrative of

American civilization, but it also demonstrates his desire to control and reorder the narrative itself.

Outland's vision of national identity is shaped by the distinctions between savagery and civilization, but also by the threat of change on other cultural markers of order, including nineteenth-century ideas of manliness, which becomes clear during his trip to Washington. Outland and Blake expect certain responses to their visit to Washington, notably government sponsorship that will cover all their expenses and a troop of workers who will not only continue their careful work but will understand and appreciate the Mesa's contributions to civilization. In contrast, Outland finds the capital to be a world where authority and hierarchy do not correspond to the organizing principles of culture he expects, but instead to social and economic capital. Outland finds the social landscape unreadable at times, such as when he "wasted three days...being questioned by clerks and secretaries" in the office of the commissioner of Indian affairs, unclear "how influential these people might be—they talked as if they had great authority" (203). But in addition to finding the Washington social culture baffling, Outland finds the indications of social disorder and change to be both threatening and repellent. To Outland, the people of Washington, from the clerks to the secretaries to the directors, who spend their time grasping for a different kind of life, seem "like people in slavery, who ought to be free" (211).

The Bixbys, a young couple with whom Outland lives while in Washington, are an excellent representation of this class of people. Mr. Bixby works as a clerk in the War Department, leading one of the petty, slavish lives Outland disdains (209). The Bixbys' conversations always focus on keeping up with the others in or above their social and economic class; as Outland says, "they spent their lives trying to keep up appearances, and to make his salary do more than it could" (209). The scene in which Mr. Bixby borrows money from Outland

to buy Mrs. Bixby a dress for an important social occasion gives us insight into Outland's attitude toward this monetary quest for status. When Mr. Bixby goes shopping with his wife, it "seemed to [Outland] very strange. In New Mexico the Indian boys sometimes went to a trader's with their wives and bought shawls or calico, and we thought it rather contemptible" (210). First, it is clear that Outland is making a gendered criticism here, too: nineteenth-century concepts of masculinity denote that shopping is women's work, and the participation of Mr. Bixby and the Indian boys in this feminine sphere calls into question their manliness. But his comment also taps into another common narrative, that of the degraded Indian—the one whose essential noble savagery is tarnished through participation in the market.<sup>10</sup> Outland finds Mr. Bixby's participation in his wife's shopping repugnant, and by linking it to the contemporary Indian tribes he is subsequently linking it to the drifting, rootless Navajo tribes' lifestyles he deplores.

Part of Outland's concept of a strong and admirable culture comes from holding to notions of "manliness" in late nineteenth and early twentieth century U.S. culture. According to E. Anthony Rotundo, the new passionate man of the late nineteenth century was defined by devotion to developing a manly physique, embracing the masculine passions of competitiveness, assertiveness, and a desire for power, returning to an Edenic primitive masculinity, and focusing on values of behavior encouraged by wartime—martial values embodied in the form of Theodore Roosevelt (222). Notions of manliness impacted not only individual or familial formation, but also played a role in imperialist reasoning. Civilization and masculinity go hand in hand, and therefore so do savagery and effeminate cultures. And because masculinity is aligned with power and the right to power, then a culture that appears to be feminized is justified in being controlled.

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<sup>10</sup> George Catlin's famous painting *Wi-jun-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going to and Returning from Washington* (1837-39) represents this belief in the corrupting influence of consumer objects on primitive peoples. See, for example, Francis Flavin's "The Adventurer-Artists of the Nineteenth Century and the Image of the American Indian." Brian Dippie's *George Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage* sees paintings like *Wi-jun-jon* which depict the clash of "primitive" and established cultures as emblematic of Catlin's own difficulties finding acceptance among the art establishment.

Outland's critique of both Bixby and the "Indian boys" (note, not men) is that they are contemptible because they play feminine roles rather than masculine. By extension, this justifies U.S. control of Native Americans, and the western critique of "effete" eastern culture.

Washington comes to epitomize cultural degradation to Outland, and his encounters with the more important governmental officials reinforce that idea. The Smithsonian secretary's office assistant clues Outland into the fact that the secretary would be more tempted by the offer to dine (on Outland's tab) at a fine restaurant than by promises of the quality of the Mesa objects. Over lunch, the secretary "was friendly and talked a great deal" but it is clear that he is more interested in impressing Outland with his famous connections than learning anything about the mesa (208). Outland's reaction, again, is disgust: "I was amazed and ashamed that a man of fifty, a man of the world, a scholar with ever so many degrees, should find it worth his while to show off before a boy, and a boy of such humble pretensions" (208). The language here is significant: the secretary is in possession of degrees and worldly experience, two assets of cultural capital, which Outland marks as the highest form of symbolic capital; however, the secretary is more interested in social climbing and economic gain than acquisition of what Outland views as objects controlling cosmological authentication. Outland's surprise that the lunch with the secretary actually leads to an interview with the Smithsonian director reveals his continued inability to read the social climate of Washington. Further encounters with officials, from the director to the museum's authority on prehistoric Indian remains, shows them to be more interested, as Virginia Ward, the office assistant, explains, in "getting another ribbon on their coats" (212).

In Washington, social climbing via recognition by those in power and the pursuit of economic gain represent a kind of currency that Outland cannot relate to, and that he holds in disregard. It is characterized by movement and instability, dissatisfaction and fitful envy. The

correlation in Outland's mind between the Bixbys and the Indian men who shop with their wives points to a larger parallel between Outland and the cliff dwellers, on the one hand, and the roving tribes and the Washington politicians, on the other. The Bixbys and the shopping Indian husbands, the roving Navajo tribes and the social-climbing politicians all denote cultural decadence that is destructive and impotent. Outland and the cliff dwellers are representations of permanence, symbolic of cultural capital. The move toward a society defined by economic and social power, one in which the boundaries of distinction are blurred, and away from the timeless transcendence of the Mesa people is, in Outland's mind, the new savagery.

The Washington trip also demonstrates why Outland holds fast to the idea of his Mesa relics as a totemic representation of advanced civilization, and why he works to claim the relics as markers of an adopted American lineage. As inalienable possessions, the relics symbolize to Outland his connection to a better, truer America, one unsullied by the polluting effects of contemporary consumer culture and economic capital. They are markers of true masculinity and true culture. As Weiner notes, through inalienable possessions we demonstrate "the determination to defeat change by substituting an icon of permanence" (8). The Washington clerks and secretaries are unable to recognize the Mesa relics as cultural artifacts, instead seeing these icons as potentially tradable objects to be used in their attempts to negotiate for greater social or economic status.

While Washington's savagery renders it incapable of recognizing the value of Outland's icons, St. Peter proves to be a more appropriate audience for Outland's cultural objects. Outland first comes to St. Peter's house seeking advice on entering the university despite his lack of formal education; the encounter gives each a positive impression of the other as possessing cultural capital, authenticity, and masculinity. St. Peter finds Outland to be a strong figure, with



special emphasis put on his physical manliness: St. Peter notes his “manly, mature voice” and mentally sets it in contrast to “the thin ring or the hoarse shouts of boyish voices about the campus” (95). Outland is “fine-looking, he saw—tall and presumably well built” under the camouflage of his heavy coat (95). It is clear from his strongly contrasted tan lines that Outland has spent time working outdoors in “a stronger sun than the spring sun of Hamilton” (95). Here we see Outland in St. Peter’s perception fulfilling the requirements of early twentieth century masculinity: physically strong, mature rather than childlike, an experienced Western outdoorsman, Outland embodies physically Roosevelt’s civilizing mission. Outland’s manliness establishes him in St. Peter’s mind as rightly ordered, not challenging gender categories or polluted by a prolonged youth.

Outland has not only masculinity but also the symbolic capital of a cultural habitus. St. Peter sees that Outland has set aside the deficits of frontier life and taken on a classical education from Father Duchene. St. Peter’s regard for Outland’s cultural currency is further bolstered by the latter’s knowledge of Latin and a bit of Spanish, taught by the French priest. St. Peter’s acceptance of a young man who lacks the social niceties to distinguish among the forks at a dinner table or know what weight of suit to wear points toward St. Peter’s appreciation of a life based less on social or economic ability and much more on cultural assets. While he lacks table manners or certain social graces, Outland embodies true American civilization for St. Peter—self-made but still culturally aware of aesthetic superiority, hard-working but not willing to stoop to servitude (Outland will do any kind of work “but wait table,” which he seems to see as below him, as it marks a inferior role not unlike the shopping he scorned in the “Indian boy”), possessed of manly physical strength but not at the expense of a fine mind (98).

Outland, too, seems to judge St. Peter worthy. While we are never privy to Outland's interior workings except in his recollections of the Mesa dig in "Tom Outland's Story," it is clear that he finds in St. Peter the cultural authenticity, civility, and manliness that the powerful Washington men lack. He had sought St. Peter on Father Duchene's advice, after reading "an article by you in a magazine, about Fray Marcos. Father Duchene said it was the only thing with any truth in it he'd read about our country down there" (97). St. Peter's account of the early sixteenth-century Spanish explorer's movements through the American Southwest and Mexico most likely upholds Outland's belief in the superiority of his pre-Columbian cliff dwellers. St. Peter is described elsewhere in the text as attractive in a manly sense, "with the slender hips and springy shoulders of a tireless swimmer" and a "high, polished" forehead that is "hard as bronze," making it "more like a statue's head than a man's" (4, 5). Outland also admires the St. Peter family's older home and his two young daughters. Outland finds a living embodiment of permanence, masculinity, and cultural authority in St. Peter.

Because St. Peter recognizes Outland's objects as valuable in a cultural sense, Outland passes on to the family two important gifts. During a conversation with Lillian and St. Peter about the Indians of the Southwest, Outland states that the "very best" of the Indian pottery "is the old,—the cliff dweller pottery," and immediately produces one of his treasured pieces (100). He pulls from his bag "an earthen water jar, shaped like those common in Greek sculpture, and ornamented with a geometrical pattern in black and white" (101). Again the link is made between the Mesa relics and the higher classical order of Greek culture. Outland leaves the water jar with the St. Peter family, as well as two soft unpolished turquoise stones, which he gives to Kathleen and Rosamond. St. Peter recognizes the cultural value of these gifts: their cosmological authentication. They are icons of stability and civilization that Outland passes on to St. Peter,

demonstrating his desire to “secure permanence in a serial world that is always subject to loss and decay” by linking his destiny with that of the St. Peter family he has judged as worthy (Weiner 8).

St. Peter, too, finds in Outland a source for permanence. While Outland serves as a marker of the same cultural attributes, his youthfulness suggests to St. Peter the possibility that someone in the younger generation will continue to guard against the threat of disorder. Therefore the loss of Outland himself, who is the embodiment of cultural ideals, is as devastating to St. Peter as the loss of the Mesa relics was to Outland. While for Outland, the new savagery is embodied in the form of the imagined roving tribe that presumably destroyed the cliff dwellers, the social-climbing Washingtonians, and other disordered people, for St. Peter the threat of savagery comes from members of his family and community who are willing to adapt to the new world, most especially his son-in-law, Marsellus. That each of these new savage characters is in some way a marginalized figure (his family is made up of women, Marsellus is an ethnic outsider) reveals the nativist impulse behind St. Peter’s reluctance to accept change. Each of these markers of modern transformation introduces a new level of disruption to St. Peter’s carefully crafted existence, pushing him further into isolation and alienation.

St. Peter’s belief in cultural authenticity and tradition is best articulated in terms of his philosophy of selection, a manifestation of the inferred cultural aptitude inherent in the cultural habitus. The key to this life philosophy can be seen in scene where St. Peter, coming home from campus, views the drawing-room of his new family home through the French window:

There was, in the room, as he looked through the window, a rich, intense effect of autumn, something that presented October much more sharply and sweetly to him than the coloured maples and the aster-bordered paths by which he had come

home. It struck him that the seasons sometimes gain by being brought into the house, just as they gain by being brought into painting, and into poetry. The hand, fastidious and bold, which selected and placed—it was that which made the difference. In Nature there is no selection. (61)

Selection is the imposition of a privileged perspective on the disorder of too many options, of excess and abundance. St. Peter's philosophy mimics the ability of the Mesa tribes to improve upon their natural environment while still existing harmoniously with nature. This philosophy is built on an intolerance of disorder and change, and a desire to guard against the danger of modernity. The effect of selection, of course, is not only the superiority of that which is selected, but the absence of that which is left behind, which is framed as mediocre. The preference for selection is one St. Peter shares with Cather, who was described as having the ability to select discriminately. In Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's recollection of her 1910 open-top bus ride around Manhattan with Cather she notes that she

admired [Cather] for her vigor, her authenticity, her delight in the landmarks we passed; and her frank disclosure of what was pertinent to her in this multifarious universe of New York City. There was so much she did not want to see and saw not. What she did see she had selected instinctively and made so her own that her impulsive sharing of it gave it a sort of halo of brightness. (46)

Cather's ability to simply not see that which is not pertinent among the surplus of diversity reflects St. Peter's selecting hand creating an aesthetically pleasing tableau out of chaotic excess. Cather's "halo of brightness" and St. Peter's "rich, intense effect" are both artificial spotlights the artist casts onto selected objects. The hand that makes the selection can be seen as the artist's hand, but also the hand of the cultural elite, those who bestow taste and cultural capital. What is

cut out is the kind of miscellaneous decadence associated with the threat of social and economic capital, or the new savagery.

St. Peter's attempts to prevent disruption to his culturally centered life are unsettled by the signs of transformation he registers in his community and his family. Marsellus in particular embodies the type of transformative character St. Peter fears, one with plenty of economic capital and a desire for social connections, but without the sense of discrimination and distinction necessary to uphold cultural differences and without access to the cultural habitus. However, it is also very difficult for both the reader and St. Peter to dislike Marsellus, as he is as generous and friendly as he is rich. St. Peter frequently swings between two contrasting responses to his son-in-law: disgust at his exuberant embrace of objects without regard to their status as economic luxuries or cultural icons versus a reluctant sense of affection for a son-in-law clearly devoted to his wife and her family.

To St. Peter, Marsellus lacks all the qualities Outland possessed. Where Outland was characterized by manliness, Marsellus has feminine qualities and constantly transgresses the gendered characteristics ascribed to his sex, such as when he insists on accompanying his wife and mother-in-law on their shopping expeditions. Where Outland is industrious yet aware of work that is beneath him, Marsellus's money-making is cast as both lazy, as he profits off the work of others, and demeaning, as even one of the poorer, most unattractive of the faculty wives sneers at his "salesman's ability" (118). And most importantly, Marsellus is Jewish, described as Semitic and Eastern, while Outland is clearly white and Western.<sup>11</sup> St. Peter quotes Shakespeare

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<sup>11</sup> For more on potentially anti-Semitic attributes in Cather's portrayal of Marsellus, the best source is Donald Pizer's *American Naturalism and the Jews: Garland, Norris, Dreiser, Wharton, and Cather*. Pizer notes that his subjects' anti-Semitism is not a result of "a flawed personality," but instead emerges out of a social and cultural climate conducive to ethnocentrism (xi). Many critics, including Pizer and Michaels, condemn Cather's anti-Semitic characterization of Marsellus. Michaels links Marsellus's Jewish identity to the professor's desire to ultimately die, arguing that "it is to avoid becoming a living Indian (or a Washington bureaucrat, or a Jew) that the professor imagines himself not only dead but (like the cliff dwellers) extinct" (235). In contrast, like Lisa Marie Lucenti, I

in describing Marsellus as “an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (233). Roderigo’s words of warning about Othello are followed in the original by “of here and every where,” which point toward the Moor’s transience, an attribute St. Peter also ascribes to his son-in-law.

While Marsellus is disparaged by St. Peter as too emotional, too overbearing, he clearly presents a life devoted to active civic involvement. He is almost comically interested in learning and taking part, in activities ranging from St. Peter’s lectures (from which St. Peter snobbishly excludes him) to civic clubs like the elitist Arts and Letters society (from which his brother-in-law prevents him membership). The members of the Hamilton community are devoted to making it clear that Marsellus’s economic capital will not buy him cultural status. While Marsellus is successful in joining the Country Club (a feat for a Jewish man during this time period), St. Peter argues that while “the Country Club is a big affair, and needs money,” Marsellus should avoid attempting to join the Arts and Letters, “a little group of fellows” who are “fussy,” or more likely to uphold hierarchical distinctions between cultural and economic capital as well as ethnic barriers (65). The generally white and male holders of cultural capital work to ensure that Marsellus gets the message that he cannot buy status. Ironically, Marsellus displays excellent taste; he is able to recognize fine objects like furs and jewels for their innate aesthetic qualities, not just their monetary value. However, because his enthusiasm includes all types of consumption objects (economic goods and cultural objects), he lacks discrimination.

For St. Peter, Marsellus’s lack of selection is made clear in scenes where he misinterprets objects that represent cultural capital and are linked to St. Peter’s traditional values. While the emerald necklace Marsellus gives to Rosamond is described by Lillian as “a little out of scale—

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wish to highlight the ways in which Marsellus’s extravagant generosity cast him as a positive figure in the text without downplaying his anti-Semitic and at the very least stereotypical features (259). My reading expands on that of critics who have aligned the “princely” generosity of Outland and Marsellus, including Jonathan Goldberg and Nancy Chinn.

to belong to a different scheme of life than any you and Rosamond can live here,” to Marsellus, the necklace is in keeping with Rosamond’s other items of jewelry, even simple ones like “a little bracelet she wore the first night [Marsellus] met her” (62, 90). It becomes clear that this bracelet, a “turquoise set in dull silver,” is one of Outland’s original gifts, and that Rosamond had since stopped wearing the bracelet. While Outland worked to keep the turquoises out of the economic market, striving instead to keep them as inalienable possessions and markers of cosmological authentication, St. Peter feels that Marsellus is unable to see the qualitative difference between his expensive necklace and the simple turquoise stone. Because of this lack of distinction, St. Peter cannot welcome Marsellus into the cultural habitus in the way he does Outland.

In another scene focusing on a misinterpreted possession, Marsellus interrupts St. Peter at work in his old attic study and invites his father-in-law to come for a drive. Seizing a purple blanket from the back of the professor’s couch, he throws it across his chest, declaring it a “Spanish touch” and “a very proper dressing gown...for Louie” (144). St. Peter quickly informs him that this blanket is another cultural icon: “It was Outland’s—a precious possession” (144). Marsellus’s response is to stroke the blanket while admiring his reflection in Augusta’s mirror with “increased admiration,” clearly seeing this association with Outland as a sign of the blanket’s greater value. Marsellus frequently works to connect himself to Outland, whom he had never met, both by attempting to enter Outland’s place in the St. Peter family’s lives and by making use of his wife’s inheritance in a publicly visible way. Marsellus “never think[s] of him as a rival” but as “a brother, an adored and gifted brother” (145). The possible dual meaning of “gifted,” as both talented, which Outland clearly was, and as given to another as a gift, seems to encapsulate Marsellus’s complex relationship with his forerunner. St. Peter views Marsellus’s

donning of the blanket is a physical representation of this desire to costume himself as Outland and take Outland's place. But for St. Peter, Outland's calm, steady masculinity will always stand in contrast to the florid style of Marsellus, whose "golf stockings" and "purple jacket with a fur collar" are the opposite of utilitarian manliness. The true value of the blanket as an item of cosmological authentication is out of Marsellus's reach. To St. Peter, Outland's items represent the link to an unsullied, civilized past, and Marsellus, the embodiment of social transformation, cannot truly possess them. He lacks the authentic taste, and is kept from achieving authenticity by cultural barriers set against his ethnicity, his effeminate nature, and his economic wealth.

While Marsellus represents a clear threat of disorder and change to St. Peter, his wife and daughters represent an even closer threat. For St. Peter, Marsellus's offense stems from his status as a Jewish businessman as well as his inability to note distinction between hierarchical cultural divisions; the women in St. Peter's life offend by trespassing boundaries of gender, class, and tradition.

While the scene where Outland gives the St. Peter family the gifts of the jar and stones serves to cement Outland and St. Peter as compatriots in the cultural habitus, it also marks the failure of others in St. Peter's life to uphold his cultural ideals. When Outland offers the Mesa jar to the family, Lillian protests to Outland that he "must keep it for [himself], or put it in a museum," believing the item to have value that Outland should exploit. She gives a similar response to the gift of the turquoises: "Again Mrs. St. Peter demurred. She told him very kindly that she couldn't let him give his stones to the children. 'They are worth a lot of money'" (103). While Lillian recognizes the cultural value of the turquoises as they translate to money, she resists Outland's attempts to form spiritual bonds with her family by banking on the cultural value of the Mesa relics. Lillian describes Outland as "a poor perspiring tramp boy" who



“departs leaving princely gifts” (103). The value of these gifts to Lillian is monetary, not as markers of cosmological authentication. Lillian remains unwilling to overlook Outland’s uncouth origins, and by extension to value Outland appropriately as the embodiment of the ideal American cultural habitus.

Always less entranced by Outland than her husband, Lillian’s close friendship and near-flirtation with her son-in-law Marsellus bewilders St. Peter, who “would have said she would feel about Louie just as he did; would have cultivated him as a stranger in the town, because he was so unusual and exotic, but without in the least wishing to adopt anyone so foreign into the family circle” (64). It is not difficult to extend St. Peter’s view of Marsellus as a foreign interloper on their traditional family into an allegory for national identity at a time of increased debate over immigration and citizenship. Lillian’s ability to adapt to and in fact welcome a strange and exotic influence on their all-American home is disturbing to St. Peter, another sign that she has adapted to the new social climate where the dictators of status are no longer strictly those who hold cultural capital, but those economically powerful, with “colorful” and inclusive personalities like Marsellus.

St. Peter’s philosophy of selection makes him resentful of any sign of Lillian’s willingness to change and adapt to modern culture. During their trip to Chicago with Marsellus and Rosamond, while taking in an opera performance, St. Peter notes that his wife’s face is “relaxed and reflective and undetermined,” turned inward rather than outwardly focused (77). St. Peter finds this inward turn appealing, and he thinks “If she only knew how much more lovely she was when she wasn’t doing her duty!” (78). The conversation that follows the performance emphasizes St. Peter’s philosophy of selection versus Lillian’s more active approach to the changes of modernity. St. Peter muses that they would have been happier had they “been

picturesquely shipwrecked together when [they] were young” rather than taking on the adult responsibilities of family and career; when Lillian agrees with him, he expresses his surprise: “But you’re so occupied with the future, you adapt yourself so readily” (78). “One must go on living, Godfrey,” she replies. Of course, for St. Peter, the question is whether one must in fact continue to live in the face of the transformation of societal values.

Even Kathleen, St. Peter’s intelligent younger daughter, is subject to his criticisms. While St. Peter professes “a special kind of affection” for his younger daughter, that affection seems based on a careful contract that maintains her distance from her father and keeps her locked in her appropriate gender roles (72). During the summer St. Peter spent minding Kathleen, who was then six years old, they “worked out a satisfactory plan of life together” that involved Kathleen playing by herself during the professor’s morning writing time (73). While St. Peter interprets the day Kathleen waited outside his office without disturbing him for hours with swollen, bee-stung fingers as a sign of her dependability and “pride in keeping her part of the contract,” it is difficult not to read this scene as a sign of St. Peter’s distance from even his favorite daughter (73). St. Peter also misreads his relationship to his younger daughter, claiming that “she always seemed to need his protection more than Rosamond” where really it appears that Kathleen doesn’t need his assistance or protection at all (51). St. Peter recalls occasionally seeing Kathleen as a college student “crossing the campus alone, her head and shoulders lowered against the wind... There was something too plucky, too ‘I can-go-it-alone,’ about her quick step and jaunty little head” (52). The issue here is not Kathleen’s need for protection, but St. Peter’s need to keep his strong-willed daughter under control: “he didn’t like it, it gave him a sudden pang. He would always call to her and catch up with her, and make her take his arm and be docile” (52). St. Peter needs to control and contain his daughter to keep her from becoming another threat of change.

Rosamond, too, reveals a lifestyle of economic excess and disorder that her father finds repellent. He is asked to accompany Rosamond and Marsellus on a shopping trip to Chicago, as his judgment on the Spanish furniture the Marselluses wish to buy for their estate is deemed the best. While St. Peter is tired from a long semester of work, he is told it is his duty to share his knowledge of old Spanish furnishings and rugs with his daughter and son-in-law. On his return, he is exhausted and short-tempered with his wife when she questions his decision not to buy the new coat he had planned to buy in Chicago, particularly after a walk home in the freezing rain. The professor responds tersely, “Let’s omit the verb ‘to buy’ in all forms for a time” (134).

While in Chicago with his daughter, St. Peter is faced with what he sees as excess and a lack of distinction. Rosamond involves her father in “rather an orgy of acquisition,” St. Peter explains to his wife (135). Instead of a small selection of quality antiques, St. Peter is assaulted by what would have been pretty Spanish furniture had it not been surrounded by “so many other things” (135). Rosamond’s shopping spree casts her in St. Peter’s mind as “Napoleon looting the Italian palaces,” and he concludes that “too much is certainly worse than too little—of anything” (135). While St. Peter is no stranger to quality, it appears the spectacle of quantity is too much for his philosophy of selection to bear.<sup>12</sup> Following this scene, he muses on a life of complete separation, stating to his wife that he now understands Euripides’ desire to live in a cave by the sea: “I wonder whether it was because he had observed women so closely all his life” (136). St. Peter’s ultimate retreat from the world is a response to not only the questionable consumption of his Jewish son-in-law, but also the women in his life, whose refusal to maintain hierarchical distinctions between types of status, gender roles, and the value of cultural objects all point to the new savagery, typified by instability and change.

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Brown describes St. Peter’s “effort to preserve his life as he knows it” as “an antipathy to irrepressible acquisition, possession, collection” (129). The key word here is “irrepressible.” St. Peter also acquires, possesses, and collects, but only objects that will support his philosophy of selection.

One character in St. Peter's life represents an important middle ground between savagery and civilization: Augusta, the family's hired seamstress. Augusta occupies an interesting position in the text: as an employee of the St. Peter family (as well as other area families) she clearly occupies a lower class status. Considering St. Peter's preoccupation with status and social mobility, Augusta would seem like a potential threat. However, Augusta is steady and dependable, not interested in moving up in class or acquiring nonessential material items. She is "a reliable, methodical spinster, a German Catholic, and very devout" who shared the old house's attic space with the professor (8). Augusta is consistently described with terminology that emphasizes her consistency: physically, she is "flat and stiff, with a plain, solid face"; she is firmly embedded in tradition, scoffing at new fashions like false hair and maintaining a firm commitment to her church (14).

To St. Peter, she serves as a link to an unsullied past; frequently he turns to Augusta with questions about religion, emphasizing his own secular status as well as her traditional religious authority, and he constantly links Augusta's dress forms with his daughters' youths and the earlier days of the composition of his historical texts. In fact, Augusta serves as a kind of filter between St. Peter and his family. St. Peter forms an attachment to Augusta's two dress forms, whose womanly shapes either hide an inflexible severity or reveal a flighty insubstantiality. The two forms seem to stand as symbols for the female presence in St. Peter's life, and Augusta's firm planting in tradition makes her a suitable filter for these threats: "He had grown to like the reminders of herself that she left in his work-room—especially the toilettes upon the figures. Sometimes she made those terrible women entirely plausible!" (84). Augusta and the traditional roles she represents make not only the dress forms plausible, but also the reality of St. Peter's family. As long as he is working upstairs while downstairs the "domestic drama" plays out, he is

satisfied that things are in place. He frequently romanticizes the life before commercial success (both his own academic success and the achievement of the Outland engine) as preferable to the present day, including in these musings a desire to return to the day when his daughters were young, “full of pretty fancies and generous impulses” (107).

St. Peter’s nostalgia for a simpler past is complicated by the fact that while his daughters’ childhoods seem preferable to him than their adulthoods, it is likely only so because he was largely absent from their upbringing. His daughters’ growth is overwhelming to one who would prefer to observe from a distance. His wife, too, has transformed. St. Peter is unable to understand his wife because of her future-oriented ability to adapt and change; her heart is a “dark forest” that he can’t comprehend, despite their previously closeness (78). Lillian’s flaw, according to her husband, is her ability to and desire to adapt and change, and to continue to live in community with others who also adapt and change, like Rosamond and Marsellus. Augusta, however, is steady and reliable, and does not seem to change. St. Peter insists on holding onto her dress forms as a totemic representation of those attributes, and they become additional inalienable possessions representing permanence in a fluctuating world.

Augusta’s value lies in her link to St. Peter’s personal past as well as an earlier version of America where the outsider was still familiar. As the daughter of a German immigrant (St. Peter’s landlord, Apelhoff), Augusta is part of the earlier wave of immigration to the United States that was seen as acceptable: white, Christian, northern European. She works with her hands, and therefore represents a prior form of production-based income, rather than Marsellus’s more speculative and potentially exploitative business based on developing products others have invented. And Augusta is clearly embedded in female gender roles; although she does not have

her own family, she stands for the traditional Victorian-era “angel of the house,” the wife- and mother-figure responsible not only for the housekeeping but who also acts as the moral compass.

Augusta’s presence at the novel’s conclusion is therefore problematic. After St. Peter collapses in his attic room, slowly succumbing to the poisonous gas that he passively let fill the space, Augusta comes to his rescue. On one level she “saves” St. Peter, both in her physical act of salvation by dragging him bodily from the room and summoning the doctor, and in her less tangible act of reminding St. Peter of the benefits of community and human connection. St. Peter is so alienated by his family’s move toward modern cultural values that he is unwilling to share a home with them again; however, seeing Augusta makes him “feel rather lonely—for the first time in months,” and he watches her as if “regarding in her humankind, as if after a definite absence from the world of men and women” (255). She brings St. Peter back to a desire for human company, and he “even felt a sense of obligation toward her, instinctive, escaping definition, but real” (256-57). However, although St. Peter thinks of Augusta as someone “with whom one was outward bound,” I argue that she actually permits St. Peter to maintain his exclusive idea of community. In one respect, Augusta represents a connection to a social network that is in some way redemptive.<sup>13</sup> However, Augusta is also a nonthreatening savior for St. Peter because she does not present a challenge to traditional order. She is utterly “civilized” in the

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<sup>13</sup> Burrows’s evocative reading of Augusta links her to other symbols of transnationalism in the novel. Reading against Michaels, Burrows sees these transnational symbols as signs that *The Professor’s House* is “less interested in quarantining American identity in order to preserve it from the threat of foreign contagion than it is in depicting American identity as inevitably partial, mediated, and hybrid” (44). While I believe this is true of Cather, St. Peter refuses to accept modern America’s multicultural, open identity. Wilson points toward St. Peter’s realization of Augusta’s “outward bound” nature as his rediscovering the “paramount values” of “prosaic particularity and relatedness” (590). While I feel Wilson overstates St. Peter’s awakening at the novel’s end, I believe she aptly identifies that Augusta is, for Cather, a marker of “an ethical relation to one’s contemporary community” which is ultimately “indissoluble from an ethical understanding of history” (590). Rosowski and Slote link Augusta to a 1916 essay in which Cather concludes not with pessimistic withdrawal from the “bustling business of the world” but with the knowledge that a current of tradition and ritual runs underneath (yet synchronously) with modern market sentiments (90). But, as Rosowski and Slote state, Augusta’s identity is less progressively multicultural (as Burrows would have us believe) than it is based “on customs, rituals, and traditions” rooted in the old world (91).

nineteenth-century sense, and therefore does not challenge his nativist notions of community and identity.

St. Peter isolates himself from the effects of modernist disruption: economic advancement, social mobility, and disruptions to racial, ethnic, and gendered categories. But his salvation at Augusta's hands does not change his isolated nature, as Augusta herself serves as a marker of permanence in a culture of transience and chaos. While St. Peter imagines his ability to live on in a "world full of Augustas," the presence of Marsellus and the other forms of new savagery in the text reveal that the diversity of the national community exceeds Augusta's traditional type. St. Peter's acknowledgement that he can remain "outward bound" or obligated in his relationship with Augusta is made with the equal knowledge that he no longer feels obligations toward his family.

St. Peter's loss of a sense of obligation toward his family begins during the summer he spends alone while his family travels in France. Ostensibly working on annotating Outland's diary, St. Peter spends more of his time daydreaming at the beach, passing hours in immobility during which he reconnects with "the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter" of his own boyhood (239). St. Peter returns to his first nature, leaving behind his entire adult existence and "the tastes and intellectual activities" that defined his adulthood. St. Peter's summer crisis is driven by the feeling that "the man he was now, the personality his friends knew, had begun to grow strong during adolescence, during the years when he was always consciously or unconsciously conjugating the verb 'to love'—in society and solitude, with people, with books, with the sky and open country, in the lonesomeness of crowded city streets" (240). The development of this "secondary social man" in contrast to the "first nature" of unattached youth, "had been shaped by all the penalties and responsibilities of being and having been a lover"

(240). The consequence of personal (and, apparently, sexual) relationships for St. Peter is the loss of the initial self, the true self. Note how St. Peter thinks of his marriage, parenting, and even his intellectual work with the term *penalties*—again the complex negotiation between obligation to others and full commitment to the inner self. St. Peter’s true self, his “first nature,” unsullied by adolescence and sex, was “a primitive,” devoted only to “earth and woods and water” (241). St. Peter’s return to a primitive past echoes Outland’s attempts to recast the original Americans in his reworking of the extinction discourse. By returning to an original state, one untouched by the responsibilities of adulthood, St. Peter avoids the modern decadence and lack of distinction that he and Outland have cast as savagery.

In focusing on interiority and tradition, St. Peter is missing one of the most crucial lessons relayed in Outland’s narrative: the priority of fostering diverse human relationships over maintaining cultural hierarchies and community boundaries. Outland’s discovery upon his return from Washington of Blake’s sale of the relics at first reinforces Outland’s commitment to the cultural habitus; as he waits out the night until he can confront Blake on the Mesa, he acknowledges that “until that night, I had never known myself that I cared more about [the relics] than about anything else in the world” (216). Outland acknowledges his mistake in caring more for these cultural icons than he does for his friendship with Blake. When reunited with Blake, Outland works for hours to convey to him “the kind of value those objects had had” for him. Ultimately Outland succeeds, but he also succeeds in convincing Blake that Outland never respected him as a partner and friend. Blake states darkly, “I supposed I had some share in the relics we dug up—you always spoke of it that way. But I see now I was working for you like a hired man, and while you were away I sold your property” (221-22). His friendship with Outland fractured, Blake leaves the Mesa in the darkness. As he goes, Outland states that “there was an



ache in my arms to reach out and detain him, but there was something else that made me absolutely powerless to do so” (223). Outland’s continued belief in the relics’ status as icons of permanence renders him powerless to stop his friend from departing. Outland ultimately recognizes his treachery: “But the older I grow, the more I understand what it was I did that night on the mesa. Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it” (229). Outland sees that the true betrayal on the Mesa was not Blake’s sale of the relics to the German man, but Outland’s refusal to forgive Blake for the sale. Outland regrets breaking the social bonds due to his cultural conceits.

However, St. Peter misses this point entirely in his recollection of Outland’s narrative, choosing instead to focus on the summer following Outland’s falling-out with Blake as an idyllic time that echoes St. Peter’s “inward turn.” After Blake leaves the Mesa, Outland expends a few meager efforts trying to locate him, but ultimately focuses on a season of study and solitude. During this time Outland achieves a kind of unity with his natural environment that mimics both the perceived special natural connection the cliff dwellers had to their setting as well as St. Peter’s return to uncorrupted boyhood during the summer he is left alone in Hamilton. This natural unity gives Outland a mental clarity that permits him to see the Mesa “as a whole” for the first time (226). “It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession” (226). Through a process not unlike St. Peter’s philosophy of selection, Outland coordinates, simplifies, and ultimately possesses the Mesa ideal. Like Cather herself, whose instinctive selection, possession, and sharing of what she chooses to see is said to have lent the shared objects or ideas a “halo of brightness,” Outland’s ability to select and share

his “princely gifts” and his bright ideas lend him the character of an unreal “glittering idea” to those who knew him (94).

The purity of Outland’s contentment cannot last, and his recollection of a summer of “happiness unalloyed” is marred by his own editorial remarks that demonstrate the selfish origins of his serenity. In the back of Outland’s mind, the specter of betrayed Blake always lurks. “During those months I didn’t worry much about poor Roddy,” he recalls, but focused solely on his own vitality, which leads Outland to note that he “used to be frightened at [his] own heartlessness” (228). This betrayal haunts Outland. Notably, his story closes with an ominous present-tense prediction: “I’m not very sanguine about good fortune for myself. I’ll be called to account when I least expect it” (229). Note the pecuniary language: Outland frames his betrayal of Blake in terms of a debt he forfeited and on which he will be “called to account.” Ultimately, despite the sense of clarity and even happiness Outland finds during his own inward turn, he recognizes that to focus only on one’s self is to become heartless, devoid of empathy for others.

Although St. Peter finds it difficult to comprehend Outland’s decision to join Father Duchene in traveling to Belgium to fight in the war, it is easy to see the sacrifice Outland makes there as potentially redemptive. He might never have been able to recover his friendship with Blake, but he could make a symbolic gesture of sacrifice for his country as payment for his social transgression. To St. Peter, Outland’s sacrifice is regretful, needless. The war and the loss of Outland stole from St. Peter the opportunity to visit Europe again and to show to Outland his philosophy of selection in effect, casting in a halo of brightness the already aesthetic superiority of Paris: “to go with him some autumn morning to the Luxembourg Gardens, when the yellow horse-chestnuts were bright and bitter after rain; to stand with him before the monument to Delacroix and watch the sun gleam on the bronze figures” (236). War is “one great catastrophe,”

a movement of chance that takes from St. Peter his opportunity to indoctrinate Outland further into his cultural habitus (236).

While Outland knew the consequence of his summer of detachment in the Mesa would be an indebtedness to humanity that would call him to account, St. Peter no longer recognizes the necessity of human relationships and is, in fact, resentful of any sense that he owes his family or his community his attention, time, or love. St. Peter's return to the original primitive boy with no social obligations is nearly complete; his visions of death the following autumn highlight the inevitable conclusion of his fantasies of distance and absence. St. Peter imagines as he lays on his office couch that he lays upon "the sham upholstery that is put in coffins," and discovers that he no longer fears death:

He could remember a time when the loneliness of death had terrified him, when the idea of it was insupportable. He used to feel that if his wife could but lie in the same coffin with him, his body would not be so insensible that the nearness of hers would not give it comfort. But now he thought of eternal solitude with gratefulness; as a release from every obligation, from every form of effort. It was the Truth. (248)

The burden of human relationships is too much for St. Peter. Death is the ultimate escape from the "obligation" of love and friendship. As St. Peter notes, falling out of love "seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed" (250). Distancing himself from his wife and family, his professional achievements, and his community in order to attain an idealized pre-cultural self leads St. Peter to the obvious conclusion: death. And while his death is thwarted, his fundamental distancing from social and familial obligation will continue.

While it is tempting to empathize with St. Peter and point toward the brutal, social-climbing ambition of his wife and daughters and the indiscriminate savagery of his businessman son-in-law as the root of his withdrawal from life, such a reading overlooks the ultimate lesson of Outland's narrative. St. Peter's devotion to his original, primitive self, his desire to return to Outland's country, the "long, rugged, untamed vistas dear to the American heart," demonstrates his unwillingness to be outwardly focused, specifically his refusal to engage in community and the inevitable corruptions life with other people entails (246). What St. Peter misses in overlooking Outland's sense of loss at his betrayal of Blake is that the true hazard is not the possibility of chaos and disorder. The betrayal comes not from the threat of change but from the desire to maintain tradition and selectivity at all costs—even if that means completely separating oneself from family, friends, and community.

Cather subtly critiques not only St. Peter's elite selection, but by extension the conservative responses to modern consumption and the nativist desire to withdraw from modernist democratic social changes. In a sense, St. Peter's lament for the loss of exclusive, selective community identity anticipates the arguments of historians who accept the model of community collapse as true, and who therefore mourn the impact forces of modernity have on a romanticized notion of pre-modern community. As Miranda Joseph notes, this "discourse of community positions community as the defining other of modernity, of capitalism....It distinguishes community...[as] all about boundaries between us and them, boundaries that are naturalized through reference to place or race or culture or identity, while capital would seem to denature, crossing all borders and making everything, everyone, equivalent" (1). However, *The Professor's House* reveals that capital is employed to both establish boundaries and to cross those boundaries in the formation of community. In addition, as I argue in the introduction, the

model of community collapse presents an unexamined concept of community as beneficial or benign. St. Peter's notion of community is clearly neither of these things, but instead offers a literal dead-end, while Marsellus and his family, with their more democratic notion of the uses of capital, are the ones who will live on.

## Conclusion

### The Enduring Consumption of Regional Authenticity

By way of conclusion, I want to make a slight detour from the literary regionalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, directing attention instead to a contemporary scene: a GOP fundraising event held in North Carolina in 2008. Speaking on behalf of her party's campaign, Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin expressed appreciation for the rural, regional audience:

We believe that the best of America is not all in Washington, D.C. We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard-working very patriotic, um, very, um, pro-America areas of this great nation. This is where we find the kindness and the goodness and the courage of everyday Americans.

The comment prompted immediate backlash: Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's campaign spokesman Bill Burton remarked in an e-mail to reporters: "Just asking: What part of the country isn't pro-America?" And Reuters columnist Bernd Debusmann noted that Palin's comment doesn't account for the country's demographic make-up: "In the 2008 campaign, attempts to portray one set of Americans (those living in rural areas and small towns) as more American than their big-city compatriots run counter to demographics.... According to the 2000 census... America's big cities and their suburbs are home to 192 million people. That compares with just under 60 million in rural areas overall and 30 million in towns of fewer than 50,000 people." Debusmann then asks if this could be "nostalgia for a country that no longer exists?"

Palin's comment perpetuates the notion of regional sites of authenticity that has persisted in U.S. culture since its inception, a notion that spurred the popularity and consumption of regional literature and art in the nineteenth century. As Palin's remarks make clear, this romanticized attachment to and yearning for an authentic rural culture is just as much about national identity as it is regional identity. The persistence of this cultural narrative to this day was one reason I was compelled to write about regional depictions of consumer culture—to illuminate and work to dispel the regional/national binary that has had such a long lifespan in American culture.

The idea for the dissertation began with my reading of Edith Wharton's *Summer* and my interest in the issues her novel specifically examines: the difficulty a young woman with limited resources and even less support faces in forming subjectivity, establishing empathetic relationships, and accessing a more beneficial class status. Wharton's depiction of consumer culture and gift exchange became the lens through which this struggle came into focus. Viewing other texts that depict women in regional communities through this lens revealed consumer culture to be a compelling force. Consumer goods and exchange in these texts creates, maintains, tests, and destroys the boundaries of community and class. As I examined these texts, I came to see that regional depictions of consumer culture work to undermine many of the key assumptions critics have had about each of the three interrelated categories: regional literature, consumer culture, and ideas of community.

This project has worked to reveal that many of the traditional frameworks we use to understand regional literature are too narrow. In the introduction, I proposed establishing an alternative understanding of literary regionalism's relationship to national narratives, one that went beyond the current critical perspectives. Rather than the antihegemonic strain of regionalist

criticism, which views regional literature's portrayal of local differences as a way of confronting oppressive national ideologies, I suggest that regional literature's presentation of local characteristics reveals internal discord, not unity. This project similarly works to move beyond the narrative of national appropriation that also features heavily in critical assessments of regionalism. The national appropriation model positions regional literature as a peripheral imagined space that reflects back idealized images of the national. In my assessment, regionalism does not always stand in opposition to national narratives, but instead partakes of national ideologies in unexpected ways.

The portrayal of consumption and gift exchange that works to build neighborly bonds in the regionalist Christmas stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, for example, troubles the idea that regionalist literature offers a homogenous site of local difference apart from or in opposition to national influences. Jewett and Freeman depict communities damaged by the loss of cycles of empathetic gift exchange, damage which particularly impacts social outsiders such as widows, orphans, and old maids—those who are left out of the national ideology focused on domestic intimacy. Although Jewett and Freeman present a regional alternative to a national narrative, they do not do so by presenting idealized communities that are divorced from national concerns. Instead, they reveal the detrimental effects of the dominant domestic Christmas.

Rather than viewing consumer goods as a key marker of disastrous modernity in isolated regional communities, or focusing on the appetite for regionalist stories that makes the authors themselves into consumer objects, I unpack the nuanced portrayals of consumer spending and material exchange in which regional authors engage. I argue that regional literature was not only a product or merely a casualty of the expanding consumer culture, but was also fundamentally engaged with this culture. For example, Anzia Yezierska's novels of the 1920s reveal her



appropriation and reconstitution of the modernist aesthetic, a national narrative promoted by domestic advisors. Rather than enabling homogenizing assimilation, as intended by Progressive-era reform movements focused on the threat immigrant cultures posed to dominant cultural values, Yeziarska's repurposed aesthetic of simplicity creates spaces and ways of signaling ethnic difference. The traditional approaches to criticism of regionalism do not account for the interactive, innovative ways in which regional narratives encounter consumer culture.

The texts I examine reveal that the model of community collapse, which argues that the values of isolated regional communities fail when confronted by modern forces, is equally suspect. The community collapse model attempts to support outdated dichotomies, including rural/urban, private/public, traditional/progressive. Consumer culture, the model of community collapse makes clear, is one of those forces of modernity that will facilitate the collapse of local communities, local values, and local ways of life. The regional texts I read reveal a number of issues with the belief in community collapse. Jewett and Freeman's characters clearly participate in circuits of exchange that blur the lines between gift items and consumer objects. Consumer goods pose no threat to Jewett and Freeman's regional communities as long as they are exchanged in the spirit of neighborliness. While in Edith Wharton's *Summer*, Charity is unable to use consumer objects to access a more beneficial social position, I argue that this limitation is due not to the failure of objects or the threat of modernity in Charity's regional community, but Wharton's own limited vision of social mobility. Wharton clearly depicts the flow of objects, goods, and money that signify both market and personal relationships even in rural North Dormer, without the threat of community collapse.

In addition, the question of whether consumer objects instigate community collapse points toward my dissertation's focus on questioning the benefit of community itself. Many of

the critical perspectives of literary regionalism and critiques of consumer culture assume that community is beneficial and should be preserved. However, as Miranda Joseph notes, a “diverse range of oppressions” follow the invocation of community, particularly due to community’s basis in Habermasian notions of a neutral, democratic public sphere (xix):

[P]articipation in the public sphere is necessarily guided by norms that are not in fact indifferent or neutral but are rather marked by the particular interests of a dominant group; thus, those who are different from that norm will be disabled in their participation, forced to change, or even fully excluded. (Joseph xxi)

Each of my chapters illuminates the potentially negative, exclusionary impulse of community, but also points toward ways that the proper use of consumer objects might reconstitute community. In my readings of Jewett, Freeman, and Wharton, I revealed that the failure of object exchange to promote empathetic understandings promotes communities of discipline and control. My examination of Yeziarska shows the potential for creating communities that offer alternatives to enforced consensus via the innovative repurposing of dominant discourses of consumer culture.

The potentially damaging effects of community are perhaps best seen in *The Professor’s House*, where Cather traces the misuse of objects to its logical conclusion. Both St. Peter and Outland suffer from alienation from a more democratic community, and St. Peter particularly uses material goods to reinforce an exclusionary, nativist ideal. The ultimate problem in *The Professor’s House* stems from things coming to mean more than relationships—particularly when those things are used to exclude “outsiders” from participation in relationships, exchange, and participation in a community. As *The Professor’s House* demonstrates, regionalist texts use their depictions of consumer goods and objects as a way to explore not only community, but

issues of class and class exclusivity. From Wharton's tacit disapproval of using consumer objects to cross class lines, to Yeziarska's philanthropic missions with visions of betterment (training young women of lower classes for domestic service) reinforces class distinction, to St. Peter's abhorrence of upstarts and social climbing, regionalist texts challenge confining notions of community that are class-exclusive.

It is my hope that by examining the ways regional literature depicts the impact of consumer culture on formations of community, I have scrutinized the very margins and boundaries that have delineated the categories of regionalism, consumer culture, and community. More fluid understandings of each of these ideas reveal that literary regionalism is not separate from the forces of modernity, but fully partakes—and that it is through regionalism's participation in consumer culture that it creates new concepts of community. As Mark A. Robison states, “regional fluidity deemphasizes boundaries to underscore human connectivity” (196). In addition, examining the ways in which these regionalist texts employ consumer goods to propose alternatives to homogenizing national discourses or to express anxiety about challenges to those national discourses reveals that regionalist literature is not in fact “not in the least American,” as Jewett stated in *Deephaven*. In fact, regionalist discourses about community and consumer goods reveal that to be “American” and to be “regional” are always in conversation.

I believe that despite the contemporary demographics cited by Debusmann in response to Palin's remarks about “real” Americans, productive attention to regional representations may still be paid, particularly when you apply the dialectic, transregional notions of regionalism I have worked to promote. While my examination of literary regionalism takes us into the era dominated by modernism, but regionalist literature continues to be produced today. The nature of

regionalism has shifted to reflect contemporary anxieties, but it continues in works that are more often authored by women, that take place in a specific geographic location, and that depict characters in communities and forming bonds with each other. These texts reveal characters who continue to use consumer objects and exchange in a variety of ways to define and maintain the borders of their communities. Examining regional literature from beyond the modernist era in the context of interactions with consumer culture would, I believe, work to unseat the persistent belief in binaries that inform understandings of American national identities.

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