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Jewett on Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Imperialism: A Reply to Her Critics

By JOSEPHINE DONOVAN

WHETHER OR NOT it was their intention, several Sarah Orne Jewett scholars of the recent past have succeeded in establishing as a widely accepted commonplace of Jewett criticism that her work was racist, classist, pro-imperialist—even "proto-fascist."[1] While these characterizations have already been challenged,[2] the stigmatization that they entail lingers over Jewett scholarship; indeed some of the most recent studies seem to imply that there is now critical consensus on the issue, that we must reluctantly accept the fact that *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for example, was in fact all of the above.[3] As these characterizations are simplistic and distortive and as the evidence upon which they are based is both slim and has been ahistorically misinterpreted, further analysis of them would seem to be in order.

In this article I intend, therefore, first, to refute or at least drastically modify these attributions by reinvestigating the alleged racism, fascism, pro-imperialism, and classism ascribed to her work. The latter of these charges was made primarily by Richard Brodhead in *Culture of Letters* (1993) where the former three allegations were made by several of the contributors to *New Essays on "The Country of the Pointed Firs"* (1994), notably Elizabeth Ammons, Sandra Zagarell, and Susan Gillman. I will begin with Brodhead and the question of Jewett's class positioning.

1. Elizabeth Ammons, "Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," in *New Essays on "The Country of the Pointed Firs,"* ed. June Howard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 96. Further references follow in the text.

2. See especially Judith Fetterley, "Commentary: Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Politics of Recovery," *American Literary History* 6.3 (Fall 1994): 600-11; Fetterley, "'Not in the Least American': Nineteenth-Century Literary Regionalism," *College English* 56, 8 (Dec. 1994): 877-95; Laurie Shannon, "The Country of Our Friendship: Jewett's Intimist Art." *American Literature* 71, 2 (June 1999): 227-62; Jacqueline Shea-Murphy, "Getting Jewett: A Response to Sandra A. Zagarell, 'Troubling Realism'," *American Literary History* 10, 4 (Winter 1998): 698-701; Shea Murphy, "Replacing Regionalism: Abenaki Tales and 'Jewett's Coastal Maine." *American Literary History* 10, 4 (Winter 1998): 664-90; Paul Petrie, "'To Make Them Acquainted With One Another': Jewett, Howells, and the Dual Aesthetic of Deephaven," in *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*, ed. Karen L Kilcup and Thomas S. Edwards (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999), pp. 99-120; and Marjorie Pryse, "Sex, Class, and 'Category Crisis': Reading Jewett's Transitivity," *American Literature* 70, 3 (Sept. 1998): 517-49.

3. See, for example, Kate McCullough, *Regions of Identity: The Construction of America in Women's Fiction, 1885-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 29, 53; Sandra A. Zagarell, "Crosscurrents: Registers of Nordicism, Community, and Culture in Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 10, 2 (Fall 1997): 355-70; Mitzi Schrag, "'Whiteness' as Loss in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'The Foreigner'," in *Jewett and Her Contemporaries*, edited by Kilcup and Edwards, pp. 185-206, the latter gratuitously throwing in anti-Semitic for good measure, p. 189.

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Brodhead's work is regrettably tendentious and seriously flawed with numerous factual and interpretive errors.[4] In positioning Jewett and other local-color writers (including, for example, Celia Thaxter, whose brilliant *Among the Isles of Shoals* he amazingly dismisses as tourist propaganda [151]) as little more than tourist writers, Brodhead, is out to prove that local-color writing is indeed from the vantage point of the Arnoldian masterpiece canon an inferior form of literature. Those who have asserted that Jewett belongs in said canon are dismissed as "utopian" and "illusionistic" (108). Moreover, the "nearly obsessional critical attention [of feminist scholars]... has not produced a female Spenser or Shakespeare, or even a Surrey or Nashe" (108).[5] In short, although (or because) it provided access to women writers, local-color writing is inferior: "Regional fiction set as the competence required to produce it the need to know how to write, but it set this entry requirement unusually low ... it did not require the more elaborated writerly skills that other forms asked for successful performance" (116). "[V]irtually anyone who could supply this commodity could get his or her work into print" (119).

Aside from the fact that it is completely false (Jewett regularly had stories rejected for publication, as did the other local-color writers) and ignores the long-standing praise Jewett has received for her style, from eminences such as Henry James and Willa Cather and continuing through legions of nonfeminist critics, this statement betrays Brodhead's agenda, which is to discredit Jewett and the local-colorists, to, as Judith Fetterley early recognized, "revanish" them ("'Not in the Least'" 882). Brodhead claims he is out to rescue Jewett studies from "weakly specified" notions of a "women's culture" (149) in which feminist scholars have located her, instead placing her in "a quite specific late nineteenth-century upper class" (149).[6] Jewett's and other regional-

4. Richard Brodhead, *Culture of Letters: Studies of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Further references follow in the text. Among Brodhead's errors: South Berwick is not "a coastal town," as he claims (151); Jewett was not "well-educated" (152) as compared with male peers. He also claims erroneously that Jewett "never constructs ... in traditional religious terms" (160)–on the contrary, she wrote numerous conventionally didactic religious stories. He cites as definitive an opinion she voiced on Stowe's *Pearl of Orr's Island* that she later recanted (see Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition* (1983; New York: Continuum, 1988), 46. He incorrectly states, "Stowe ... shifted into regional writing with *The Pearl of Orr's Island* and *Oldtown Folks*" (122). Untrue: Stowe's regional writing began with her first published story in 1834. Brodhead also makes patently false historical statements, such as "There was no ... suppression of local-cultural economies in the period of intense capitalist-industrial development" (121). On the contrary. Or: "regionalism's representation of vernacular cultures as enclaves of tradition insulated from larger cultural contact is palpably a fiction" (121). All I can say is Brodhead can not have spent much time in Maine where such enclaves–including the Martinsville area where *Pointed Firs* is thought to be set–still exist.

5. For a rebuttal of similarly conservative revanchist charges, see Josephine Donovan, "Women's Masterpieces" in *Challenging Boundaries: Gender and Periodization*, ed. Joyce W. Warren and Margaret Dickie (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

6. Brodhead specifies as one of his targets my *New England Local Color Literature,* arguing that "the feminist reconception of regionalism has tended to repeat the autonomy fantasies of the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres" (144). Brodhead appears to misunderstand the concept of "women's literary realism" I adumbrated in *New England Local Color Literature*, which stipulates that it was directed against the restrictive sphere of "the cult of true womanhood." As for the charge that the notion of a "women's culture" is "weakly specified" and ahistorically essentialist (as other recent critics– Susan Gillman, "Regionalism and Nationalism in Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," in Howard, ed., *New Essays*, p. 103; McCullough, *Regions*, p. 20; and Kilcup and Edwards, *Jewett*, pp. 6-8, for example—have claimed), I think a careful reading of my *After the Fall* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1989) will show that my conception of the nineteenth-century "women's culture" is indeed historically based.

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ists' work was not produced "for the cultures it was written about, which were nonliterate and ... orally based" (122); instead she was writing for the upper-class tourist. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is "a world realized in a vacationer's mental image" (145). The evidence Brodhead produces for these erroneous claims is one rooted largely in fallacious guilt-by-association logic: since Jewett published in journals like the *Atlantic Monthly*, which also produced "touristic or vacationistic prose" (125) for "an upper-class-centered social interest" (126), she must therefore be writing such prose. To judge serial fiction by the contents of the journal in which it appears is to reduce literature to the status of sociological artifact.

Brodhead's thesis may be challenged on several other counts as well. For one, as Charles Johanningsmeier has demonstrated, Jewett published numerous stories in popular newspapers and syndicated outlets, the audience for which was popular, not elite. Jewett's interest in reaching a popular audience was not financial (as Johanningsmeier implies), however, but related to her view of literature as a form of moral teaching.[7] And while certainly part of her readership was the elite Boston subscriber to the *Atlantic Monthly*, her reason for wanting to reach this reader may best be understood in terms of the dialectic I treat below. From her earliest theorizing Jewett maintained that she wanted to rescue the rural Mainers who are the subjects of her fiction from preconceived touristy prejudices held by the urban upper classes. One of her most earnest explanations of her own sense of writerly purpose is the following:

> When I was, perhaps fifteen, the first city boarders began to make their appearance near Berwick; and they so misunderstood the country people, and made such game of their peculiarities, that I was fired with indignation. I determined to teach the world that country people were not the awkward, ignorant set that those persons seemed to think.[8]

Finally, while the world Jewett wrote about was largely "orally-based," as Brodhead asserts, it was not "nonliterate." There is considerable evidence that Jewett also wrote for and was read and appreciated by the unelite of her own Maine neighborhood. On several occasions she mentions reading a story to her family or neighbors. For example, in an unpublished (probably 1887) letter to Annie Fields, Jewett mentions reading a story (probably "The Courting of Sister Wisby"), which she had just completed, "to Mother and Mary [her sister] and Miss Grant this afternoon and they all laughed most of the way through and were very kind in applauding."[9] "Miss Grant" was Olive Grant, a local dressmaker, characterized to me once as "eccentric" by Elizabeth Hayes

7. Charles Johanningsmeier, "Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman): Two Shrewd Businesswomen in Search of Markets." *New England Quarterly* 70, 1 (March 1997): 57-82.
Johanningsmeier lists ten Jewett stories that were syndicated but there are at least twelve more that were published in popular journals and may have been syndicated as well as several early articles that appeared in Maine newspapers. On Jewett's moralizing tendencies see Josephine Donovan, "Jewett and Swedenborg," *American Literature* 65, 4 (Dec. 1993): 731-50.

8. Helen Winslow, *Literary Boston of Today* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1902), p. 68.

9. Sarah Orne Jewett, ALS to Annie Adams Fields, Houghton Library bMS Am 1743 (255), Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Published by permission of the Houghton Library.

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Goodwin, a South Berwick native who knew her.[10] Jewett once said, "my stories are full of her [Grant] here and there," and implied that she also saw Grant as a storyteller from who she derived amusing phrases (and perhaps story ideas as well).[11] That Jewett therefore read her work to a person who was one of its subjects considerably complicates the question of who her primary audience was; Grant in any event was hardly an upper-class tourist.

Jewett mentions what was evidently a practice of reading her work to locals as early as 1869. In a diary notation she comments: "Read ["The Shipwrecked Buttons"] to Grandma ... and we had a great talk."[12] She also indicates in a later comment that she worried about whether "An October Ride" would prove popular, noting the difference between her "highly critical friends in Boston" and presumably local readers to whom she read the story in order to prove to her editors that it would fly with them.[13]

Jewett's negative attitude toward tourists is clearly expressed in a letter written from Poland Springs, Maine, a tourist watering hole, in the early 1900s. "I think this great place would amuse you ... but the line between being innocently amused and wickedly bored is very narrow." Observing nouveaux-riches vacationers from the latter perspective, Jewett notes, "Their jewels and their gowns are a wonder.... They are apt to speak of last winter at 'Pa'm Beach,'" recalling to her a comment once made by her grandfather of a similar crowd, "'They're not people, they're nothing but a pack of images!'" She also notes their class privilege and how one was "fine and masterful above quailing maids." Jewett concludes this passage with a comment about the decadent materialism of turn-of-the-century America: "One thing certain is, it is a rich country—it is like Rome before it fell!" (Fields 191).

Jewett in fact was early aware of criticism like Brodhead's and strongly refuted it. *Deephaven*, she wrote in 1877, shortly after it appeared, "is not the result of careful study during one 'summer vacation,' as some persons have thought, but I could write it because it is the fashion of life with which I have always been familiar" (Cary 36). Indeed, in an important theoretical statement made in 1885, Jewett claimed that she was trying to write fiction that was neither for the elite, "so-called intellectual persons," who already have "the wealth of literature in ... books that belong to all times"; nor for the popular market that read "the lowest level of literature, the trashy newspapers and sensational novels." Instead she was aiming to "stir ... the minds and hearts of the good men and women of such a village as this [South Berwick, her home town]. These people may not be "readers by nature [and] ... do not get their learning that way, but the truth must be recognized that few books are written

10. Elizabeth Hayes Goodman, Interview with Author, 31 May 1977.

11. Annie Fields, ed. *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), pp. 208, 37. Further references to Fields follow in the text.

12. Sarah Orne Jewett, 1869 Diary, 21 Sept. 1869, Houghton Library bMS Am 1743.26 (3), entry for 21 Sept. 1869, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Published by permission of the Houghton Library.

13. Richard Cary, ed. *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1967), p. 45. Further references follow in the text.

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for and from their standpoint." Jewett goes on to suggest that these people would reach such books of the "middle ground," "if they had them" (Cary 51). It is clear that this was what she hoped to provide. Thus, while Jewett was born into relative wealth and privilege (her class positioning has hardly been neglected by critics and biographers),[14] she was able to imaginatively and sympathetically construct the lives of the poor and less privileged and did so throughout her fiction. That she identified with them more than with a Boston elite is suggested in her poignant comment about the servant woman in "Martha's Lady" (1899): "Nobody must say Martha was dull. It is only I" (Fields 113).

I turn now to the charges of racism, fascism, and imperialism made in *New Essays on "The Country of the Pointed Firs."* The first of these is Sandra Zagarell's "*Country*'s Portrayal of Community and Exclusion of Difference." Zagarell argues that the Bowden family reunion in *Pointed Firs* is racially supremacist and expresses "racial exclusion."[15] She bases her case primarily on three evidentiary matters: one is the general assumption that racism and nativism were in the air when Jewett wrote and therefore she must have expressed them. The principal link here is Thomas Bailey Aldrich, an acquaintance of Jewett's who espoused antiimmigrant views. Here is another example of guilt-by-association logic; there is no evidence to my knowledge that Jewett anywhere expressed agreement with these views. On the contrary, her sympathetic protrayal in several stories of Irish immigrants—probably the most despised group of immigrants in New England at the time—suggests quite a different attitude.[16]

In a short history of her home town, which was published in 1894, Jewett registers in fact a positive attitude toward immigrants: "The assimilation of successive foreign elements ... [has] not been without great value."[17] Indeed, that Jewett's view of her community was racially inclusive is suggested in a passage in the same piece devoted to the African Americans in South Berwick. Speaking of a local Baptist church, Jewett comments, "The arrangement of the pews and benches reminded one of the time when there was such careful attention paid to social precedence, and provision made for the colored people, of whom there were formerly a large number in Berwick, and many have been excellent citizens" (21). While "the arrangement of the pews" suggests there may have been some sort of segregation, and while Jewett's tone is

14. See Josephine Donovan, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (New York: Ungar, 1980; rev. ed., Cybereditions, 2001); Paula Blanchard, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1994); and Alison Easton, "'How Clearly the Gradations of Society Were Defined': Negotiating Class in Sarah Orne Jewett," in Kilcup and Edwards, ed., *Jewett*, pp. 207-222; and Sarah Way Sherman, "Party Out of Bounds: Gender and Class in Jewett's 'The Best China Saucer'," in Kilcup and Edwards, ed., *Jewett*, pp. 223-48.

15. Sandra Zagarell, "*Country's* Portrayal of Community and Exclusion of Difference," in Howard, ed. *New Essays*, 47. Further references follow in the text. Zagarell modified her position somewhat in "Response to Jacqueline Shea Murphy's 'Replacing Regionalism'," *American Literary History* 10, 4 (Winter 1998): 691-97.

16. See Jack Morgan and Louis A. Renza, ed., *The Irish Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).

17. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Old Town of Berwick* (1894; South Berwick, Maine: Old Berwick Historical Society, 1967), p.19. Further references follow in the text.

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defensive, she is clearly attempting to deflect, not endorse, a racist stereotype. Jewett further notes how "most of the prominent families" "possessed one or more African slaves in the last century and one may still hear delightful stories of their strange traits of inheritance and their loyal affection to their families which they adopted as their own" (21). Jewett further notes that a local landmark, "Cato's Hill," was named after "a native Guineaman" for whom it was known to be a "favorite retreat." "[T]he last generation loved to recall the tradition of his droll ways and speeches" (21). Again, while "strange traits of inheritance" and "droll ways" certainly connotes "difference," even "otherness," when seen within the context of Jewett's overall and repeated affirmation of difference, the comments seem to bespeak once again her interest in hearing the stories of the marginalized and dispossessed, which is manifest throughout her fiction. Cato and his "tradition" therefore were part of local oral history, which Jewett clearly honors in this passage. It is an inclusive perspective: African Americans are seen as part of the community culture and history.

This attitude appears to govern Jewett's handling of African-American slave characters in *The Tory Lover* (1901), who are seen as part of their respective owners' families. One upper-class character does express a stereotypical view of his slave Ajax as lazy and deceptive,[18] but otherwise the treatment is sympathetic. Jewett also writes positively and inclusively about some Cuban boys with "handsome dark faces" with whom she went to school in her early teens. They gave her guava jelly and cigarettes, which she said she smoked.[19] Jewett did write one racist story, "A War Debt" (1895) (see Donovan, *Sarah Orne Jewett* 95). This story is set in the Reconstruction South and in it Jewett appears to have picked up uncritically the point of view of white former slave-owners. In his biography John Eldridge Frost claims it was a story that was told to her (147), and in any event can only be seen as an anomaly within the context of her complete oeuvre.

Zagarell's second piece of evidence, much more serious, is that Jewett espoused a kind of racial chauvinism vis-à-vis the "Normans," from whom she believed herself descended, and that that chauvinism is exposed in the Bowden reunion episode in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. As evidence Zagarell proffers Jewett's juvenile history, *The Story of the Normans* (1886), a work that does indeed laud the Normans as a superior "race." Even this lamentable text, however, presents a by no means unambiguous view of its subject. In equating the Normans with present-day Americans, for example, Jewett notes, "For with many of the gifts and *many of the weaknesses* (and dangers, too) of our viking ancestry, we have repeated the rapid increase of power which was characteristic of our Norman kindred." She goes on to say "the secret of Normandy's failures was the secret of all failures—blindness … and unwillingness to listen to her best … teachers." Citing Carlyle's remark,

18. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Tory Lover* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), p. 14.
19. John Eldridge Frost, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Kittery Point, Maine: Gundalow Club, 1960), pp. 18-19.

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"There has never been a nation yet that did anything great that was not deeply religious," Jewett concludes by warning that a people should not choose "the things that are easy and near" but rather "the things that make for righteousness." When

> luxury becomes not the means, but the end of life ... humanity's best intelligence is dulled and threatens to disappear. The church forgets her purpose and invites worshippers of the church instead of worshippers of God. *The state is no longer an impersonal administrator of justice and order, but a reservoir from which to plunder and by which to serve private ends* (my emphasis added).[20]

Jewett concludes, "I have not been unmindful of the dark side of [the Norman] character" (364). Jewett thus offers in the conclusion of her book on the Normans a not-so-veiled critique of American materialism and imperialism, one that echoes the sentiment cited above that she made about the American tourists presaging the fall of the American empire.

The fact remains, however, that in this and various other writings Jewett did express a belief in Norman superiority, which Zagarell, following Ferman Bishop, her main source, labels "Nordicism."[21] The question is how are we to interpret this. I believe the vexing problem of nineteenth-century race attitudes, which I have addressed elsewhere in connection with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, has best been analyzed by George W. Frederickson. In *The Black Image in the White Mind* Frederickson distinguishes between modern racism and what he terms "romantic racialism," which was prevalent in the nineteenth century. The former he defines as a "*de facto*" belief in one groups's "inferiority" and "opposition" to its "aspiration to equality,"[22] whereas the latter, "romantic racialism," deriving from the cultural nationalism of German scholar Gottfried von Herder, entailed a belief that ethnic groups and nations have distinctive cultural traits by virtue of which they may be seen as unique and indeed often superior in those respects to others. Romantic racialism, while it engaged in egregious stereotyping about alleged national traits—the hot-headed Spaniard, the cold-hearted Anglo-Saxon—was not necessarily racist in the modern sense of scapegoating one group as inferior and for this reason a threat to civilization. I believe, in short, that Jewett was engaging in "romantic racialism" in vaunting the Normans' alleged positive traits, such as their courage, adventurousness, and hospitality.

Jewett's affirmation of her French ancestry must be understood in the context of the Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony in New England. To affirm a minority group's distinctive cultural traits in the context of a dominant surrounding culture that considers itself superior is quite different from vaunting

20. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Story of the Normans: Told Chiefly in Relation to Their Conquest of England* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1886), pp. 360-61. Further references follow in the text. Ironically, an earlier critic, Richard Cary, criticized *Story of the Normans* for its feminist bias! (Cary, *Sarah Orne Jewett* [Boston: Twayne, 1962], p.157).

21. Ferman Bishop, "Sarah Orne Jewett's Ideas of Race." *New England Quarterly* 30 (1957): 243-49.

22. George W. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on the Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1917-1914* (New York: Harper, 1971), pp.13 n. 22, 101-14. See also Josephine Donovan,*"Uncle Tom's Cabin": Evil Affliction, and Redemptive Love* (Boston: Twayne, 1991; rev. ed. Cyber-editions, 2002).

the superiority of the dominant group. Persons of French ancestry were a distinct minority in nineteenth-century New England. Indeed, the Franco-Americans were, along with the Irish, its most despised minority group. An official state report issued in Massachusetts in 1881 reveals the racism directed at Franco-Americans at the time: "The Canadian French," which it terms "a horde of immigrant invaders," "are the Chinese of the Eastern states."[23] That Jewett chose to focus positively upon two such maligned groups as the Irish and the Franco-Americans suggests to my mind not racism but sympathy for oppressed minorities. (In addition to her Irish stories [see Morgan and Renza] Jewett wrote two stories about Franco-Americans, "Mère Pochette" [1888] and "Little French Mary" [1895].) That she may have erred in the direction of romanticizing these groups—especially the French—is undoubtedly true, but it is in my opinion more a matter of pridefully asserting an ethnic group's heritage than anything more sinister.

While a distinction must be made between Americans of French descent who came from Protestant (Huguenot) ancestry and the Franco-Americans of Québecois or Arcadian origin (Jewett being of the former and not the latter group), it seems possible that in her conception of the Bowden family in *Pointed Firs* Jewett was expressing solidarity with the Franco-American ethnic community of nineteenth-century New England. A central issue for this (as for every) immigrant group was "la survivance" of ethnic culture and language. One of the ways by which Franco-Americans attempted to ensure such cultural survival was through "mutual-aid societies," which restricted membership to "Catholics ... of French-Canadian descent" (Chartier 27). Often at meetings or celebrations of these societies members would hold parades or processions; some societies even had uniforms. In addition to securing cultural survival these associations were intent upon refuting the negative stereotypes foisted upon them by their Yankee neighbors. One way they did this was by vaunting their own ethnic traits. "With criticism coming from all sides," one historian notes, "it is hardly surprising to find [Franco-American] orators and journalists ... trumpeting pride in their origins" (Chartier 85).

It is likely that Jewett knew of these Franco-American rituals of "survivance," of cultural survival. There was a substantial Franco-American community in Somersworth, New Hampshire, some four miles from her home in South Berwick, Maine, and others as well in Biddeford/Saco, Maine, about twenty miles away. Jewett may well have had their rituals in mind as a model for the Bowden family get-together. Of course, the Bowdens have already lost their native language—they speak English (albeit in Maine dialect)—and their ritual procession is not overtly Catholic, though there is a decidedly Catholic tone to the event (indeed it is hard to imagine a Protestant family of Puritan heritage behaving in this way). The sympathetically portrayed protagonist of

23. Armand Chartier, *The Franco-Americans of New England: A History* (Manchester, N.H.: ACA Assurance, 2000), p. 37. Further references follow in the text.

Jewett's story "The Foreigner" (1900), Mrs. Captain Tolland, also of French descent, is, however, emphatically Catholic.

The third piece of evidence Zagarell presents in support of her claim that the Bowden reunion exhibits race supremacism and exclusivity is that one of the characters, Mari' Harris, is described as looking like a "Chinee" by Mrs. Caplin, one of the attendees, in a conversation with Mrs. Todd, a central character, about eccentricity. Zagarell terms the word *Chinee* a "racist slur" (39) and argues that as it is applied to a woman Mrs. Todd doesn't like, this is evidence that the woman is thereby excluded from the community, which signifies the "racial exclusion" of the Bowden community.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. For one, Mari' Harris is never excluded from the community. Indeed, in "The Foreigner," Mrs. Todd recalls how in an earlier unpleasant encounter with Mari' Harris she had then lamented that she would continue to have to deal with her because she remained a fixture of the community.[24] (The issue is raised again during the Bowden reunion when Mrs. Todd mentions having difficulty tolerating a cousin of her husband's who she similarly regrets having to see at every community gathering.[25]) Second, though "Chinee" is obviously a racial characterization, it is not clear that it was a pejorative term, a "racist slur." Standard dictionaries designate it as slang but not pejorative. The dialect term "Portugee" is used nonpejoratively, for example, by a character in "The Foreigner."

More important, however, is the context in which the discussion between Caplin and Todd occurs. The basic issue—that of "differentness" or eccentricity—has been provoked by the example of Sant Bowden, the would-be general who leads the family procession. It is at this point that Mrs. Caplin observes that you can find lots of examples of differentness in one's own parish: "you could pick out the likeness of 'most every sort of foreigner when you looked about you.... I always did think Mari' Harris resembled a Chinee" (169). "The pleasant voice of Mrs. Blackett," arguably the most authoritative voice in the work, immediately intervenes saying Mari' Harris was a "pretty ... child." Mrs. Todd, who we already know doesn't like Harris, rejoins that she is nevertheless a "homely" adult; Todd's main objection to Harris, however, is not her looks nor her "foreignness," but rather that she doesn't treat Captain Littlepage compassionately and keep his house in proper shape (17, 44, 169), showing instead impatience with—intolerance of—his eccentric tales. Harris's intolerance of deviancy or differentness is highlighted in "The Foreigner" in which she is one of the main critics of Mrs. Tolland's dancing in the church. That Harris also reproached Mrs. Blackett for enjoying said dancing was unforgivable, according to Mrs. Todd. (Harris seems in that incident to have been retaliating for Mrs. Tolland's criticism of her singing

24. Sarah Orne Jewett,"The Foreigner," in *The Uncollected Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1971), p. 313. Further references follow in the text.

25. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), p.171. Further references follow in the text.

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off-key [312].) In any event, the rejection of Mari' Harris is because she lacks tolerance, exemplifies provincial small-mindedness, and fails to exhibit the compassionate embrace of otherness that is apotheosized in "dear old Mrs. Blackett," who at the conclusion of the discussion between Todd and Caplin says, "Live and let live" (170). This seems to be the final wisdom on the subject; it is hardly a message of racial exclusion.

Elizabeth Ammons and to a lesser extent Susan Gillman have joined Zagarell in characterizing the Bowden reunion as an ominous ritual of Aryan supremacy. Ammons terms it a celebration of "white imperialism," of "the triumphant colonization of Indian land by white people" (92). While nineteenth-century New England obviously is an example of such colonization, there is virtually no evidence that Jewett or her characters at the reunion are celebrating this fact. Ammons gives as evidence: first, various examples of souvenirs that bedeck Dunnet Landing homes brought back from remote lands by seafaring relatives. While these items can undoubtedly be read as signs of American (economic) imperialism, can they really be considered "trophies of empire" (97)? Nor do they warrant the assumption that Jewett or her text celebrate this imperialism. More recent critics have unfortunately picked up on this mischaracterization. In 1999 Kate McCullough, for example, considers that the narrator in *Pointed Firs* expresses a "celebration of imperialist expansion," offering as support the dubious proposition that as Jewett was "a descendant of wealthy ship owners" it is "not surprising" that she "would support imperialist expansion."[26]

Jewett's actual views on imperialism are stated quite clearly in her letters. When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Jewett says she has reluctantly come to support it, despite past misgivings, which included that the war was largely an expression of "petty politics ... mercenary hopes ... naval desires for promotion ... [or just] the liking for a fight." The reason she is supporting it despite these misgivings is that on visiting Cuba two years previously she had been struck by the suffering of the Cuban people, and she felt that "Spain [had] made Cuba suffer ... too long," having proved "herself perfectly incompetent to maintain any sort of civilization in Cuba" (Fields 150-51). Presumably she believed the United States would do a better job. Elsewhere, Jewett adopts a similar "white man's burden" attitude in her discussion of the necessity for the English to govern "backward" Ireland until it is ready for independence (Fields 23). While today we see that such missionary motives were but an ideological screen for the underlying reasons for imperialism that Jewett enumerated in her list of misgivings about the Spanish-American War, one can nevertheless hardly conclude from this that Jewett was a rabid celebrator of imperial expansion.

Moreover, we should not forget, as the advocates of the "neo-imperialist thesis" (so labeled by Lawrence Buell)[27] seem to have forgotten, that imperial-

26. McCullough, *Regions*, pp. 55, 290 n. 47.
27. Lawrence Buell, "Circling the Spheres." *American Literature* 70, 3 (Sept. 1998):477.

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ist discourse of the late nineteenth century was steeped in social Darwinist masculinism. Theodore Roosevelt, Cecil Rhodes, and Houston Chamberlain saw themselves as "great predators ... for whom the world is a jungle, a battleground, a gladitorial arena." As Theodore Roszak notes, this bellicose "blood and iron" view anticipated twentieth-century movements of "Fascism and Nazism," which similarly "ennoble[d] violence ... [and] cheapen[ed] compassion and tenderness."[28] In their attempts to "historicize" *Pointed Firs* as an imperialist document recent critics have strangely elided the masculine face of imperialism—the virtual antipode of the world of Dunnet Landing.

A comparison in this regard of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a text published two years after *Pointed Firs* that deals overtly with imperialism, is instructive. Both concern quests undertaken by metropolitan narrators into the heart of remote "uncivilized" territory. Unlike Marlowe, however, the narrator in Conrad's text, the narrator in Jewett's work discovers not the evil of Kurtz but the goodness of Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett. She discovers in Dunnet Landing not a world of darkness but of light:

> The sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this which some believe to be so near.
>
> "That's where mother lives," said Mrs. Todd. (45)

Some might argue that the luminous feminine world of Dunnet Landing facilitates and enables the dark masculine world seen in Conrad's depiction of imperialism, but I would argue to the contrary that Jewett is offering a counter world, an alternative world that by definition provides a "negative critique" (in Theodor Adorno's sense of the term)[29] of the masculine world of conquer and plunder (indeed, the masculine characters in *Pointed Firs* are virtual parodies of heroic imperialist males, as various critics—including Ammons [90] and McCullough [20-21]—have noted).

Ammons's second piece of evidence in support of her imperialist reading is a reference to American Indians made by Mrs. Fosdick in her description of Shell-heap Island, Joanna Todd's lonely abode. Fosdick's description is used metonymically to characterize Joanna as living in a remote, vaguely mythical world, distant from the comfortable coziness of Mrs. Todd's parlor. Ammons adduces negative stereotypes from this characterization, but I believe she is in error. She interprets "bangeing" as meaning "lazy," for example. (The island is said to have been a "bangeing-place" for Indians [100].) A "bangeing-place," still current in Maine dialect, is simply a gathering place, like a village store. "Bangeing" means "hanging out"; it need not imply lazy. [In "A White Heron" "jay birds" are described as "bangeing" in a particular location.][30]

28. Theodore Roszak, "The Hard and the Soft: The Force of Feminism in Modern Times," in *Masculine/Feminine*, ed. Betty and Theodore Roszak (New York: Harper's, 1969), pp. 91, 93.

29. Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ernst Bloch et al. (London: Verso, 1980), p. 160.

30. Sarah Orne Jewett, "A White Heron," in The Best Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, ed. Charles G. Waugh, Martin H. Greenberg, and Josephine Donovan (Augusta, Maine: Lance Tapley, 1988), p. 84.

Nor does Mrs. Fosdick's assimilation of Indians to the shades in Littlepage's tale imply that the Indians are "slippery." Instead it invokes the spiritual mystery of the land between the living and the dead that Littlepage describes. That the Indians left a captive on the island to die similarly comments on Joanna's self-imposed abandonment, and the comment about cannibalism has the effect of releasing local Indians from the category of "otherhood" that cannibalism necessarily entails (for the noncannibal reader).

It is also important to stress that the view of Indians presented here is Mrs. Fosdick's and not necessarily Jewett's. The comments are consistent with Fosdick's character and outlook, which is clearly presented like that of most of the characters in *Pointed Firs* as somewhat comically circumscribed.[31] This brings me to the final and crucial point in my rejection of the Ammons-Gillman thesis: all the characters and events in *Pointed Firs* are ironized by the work's narrative frame. The Bowden reunion in particular is laced with comic irony.

Ammons seems oblivious to the irony that governs the Bowden family processional, which she characterizes as exhibiting "blatant" "military imagery" (95), evincing a "subtle but clear protofascis[m] ... with all those white people marching around in military formation ritualistically affirming their racial superiority, global dominance, and white ethnic superiority and solidarity" (97). Gillman similarly claims "the Bowden family might as well be one of the many fraternal organizations—among them the Knights of Columbus and the Ku Klux Klan—that flourished during this period" (113)—a gratuitous equation providing yet another example of recklessly inaccurate mischaracterization.

Let us reexamine how Jewett treats the Bowden reunion—especially the allegedly "militaristic," "protofascist" processional. That it is led by Santin Bowden, a comically pathetic character, more than "partially" undercuts the alleged militarism of the scene (a fact Gillman acknowledges [114]); it renders the entire event tragicomically ironic, an exercise in entropy. Sant Bowden is a shoemaker (166) given to drink (167) who has Walter Mitty fantasies of heroic military exploits. While plying his trade he fantasizes battle strategies, going so far as to have "aim[ed] a cannon ... right for William's fish-house five miles out on Green Island" (167). He had been rejected by the Union Army when he attempted to volunteer because "he ain't a sound man" (165)—the implication being that he ain't sound in the head.

What is particularly interesting about the way Jewett constructs this section is how she interweaves theorizing about the Normans with the emerging details about Sant Bowden, thereby clearly ironizing the romantic views she espoused in *Story of the Normans*. In her comments on Bowden, Mrs. Todd, who characteristically defends his deviancy (she takes a similarly protective position vis-à-vis other "strayaway folks" in the work, such as Joanna and

31. Shea Murphy, in "Replacing Regionalism," has shown that Jewett evinced a respectful attitude toward Indians elsewhere in her work.

Captain Littlepage), observes that he is often called upon to lead local "Decoration Day" parades. (This comment alone tends to undercut the later linkage made by the narrator of the Bowden reunion to the "great national anniversaries ... lately kept" [179]). Mrs. Todd notes how "noble" Sant Bowden looks in such events; by way of explanation she adds, "he comes of soldier stock" (166).

The narrator then inserts her comments about the Bowdens being descended from the "adventuring" Norman—"of Huguenot blood" (166). Mrs. Todd picks up on this, remarking that Santin's military prowess likely came from his militaristic ancestors: "'t was born in him" (167). Having missed his calling, "poor gloomy spells come over him now an' then," Mrs. Todd acknowledges, "an' then he has to drink" (167). During this discussion, Mrs. Caplin, Mrs. Todd's interlocutor, continually undermines Mrs. Todd's already heavily ironized praise. She says he's "good for nothing else most of the time" (165). Moreover, he routinely screws up the veterans parades he attempts to organize (168). Sant Bowden is in short hardly a proto-Brown Shirt. Nor could he possibly be construed as a shining exemplar of Norman superiority. Indeed, one senses that the Bowden family joins in the procession largely to humor one of their more eccentric members, much as the community women in Jewett's story "An Autumn Holiday" nonjudgmentally accommodate a deviant neighbor who has become a transvestite. Jewett's textual construction and ironic treatment of the procession therefore preclude taking it seriously as a militaristic, "protofascist" ceremonial equatable to a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan. Indeed, to engage in such hyperbole not only needlessly tarnishes a great writer, it shamefully trivializes the monstrous evil perpetrated by the Klan and by twentieth-century fascism.

One final point about Jewett's complex use of irony in this work. While most critics seem to think the narrator is virtually Jewett herself, this is to overlook the vein of self-parody that governs the treatment of the narrator. It is after all the narrator who uses fancy Hellenistic similes to describe characters and events (Zagarell sees Jewett's "Hellenism" ["*Country*'s Portrayal" 53] as another indication of her racial biases). That such "high-fallutin'" literariness clashes with and is undercut by the discourse of an uneducated but authoritative figure like Mrs. Todd weakens its authority in the text. Mrs. Todd's attitude toward overly erudite prose is clearly stated in her critique of Reverend Dimmock's "high soundin'" sermons (123), and she pointedly contrasts his eulogy of Joanna to that of a bird that "lit on the coffin an' begun to sing while Mr. Dimmock was speakin'.... I may have been prejudiced, but I wa'n't the only one thought the poor little bird does the best of the two" (125). Mrs. Todd's attitude effectively undercuts the narrator's own "high soundin'" figures, thus diminishing the authority of the latter's urban, educated, modern voice; it also suggests that there are rural "languages" and viewpoints such as that expressed by the bird that may be missed and thereby silenced by intellectual outsiders like Dimmock and the narrator, who represents modernity.

Despite, therefore, the ostensibly celebratory character of the event, the

Bowden reunion is laced with destabilizing subnarratives, such as that concerning Sant Bowden, that leave one not with a sense of unshakeable monolithic chauvinism—which would be required for the event to be truly fascistic—but rather on the contrary with a sense of the instability of all human positions and perspectives. That this instability is historically grounded I attempt to develop in a forthcoming article, "Jewett, Local-Color Literature and Modernity." Meanwhile, I conclude this discussion by emphasizing how the Bowden get-together ends on a note of pathos, in part for the limitations of rural life, but perhaps more importantly on a note of elegy for the entropic nature of all life. "It was not the first time that I was full of wonder at the waste of human ability in this world, as a botanist wonders at the wastefulness of nature, the thousand seeds that die, the unused provision of every sort" (174). The last two characters mentioned in the episode both register a sense of failure. The creator of the gingerbread house laments its imperfections (176), and the "poetess," Mary Anna, who presents a "long, faded garland of verses" (177), is seen to be like Sant Bowden a pathetic simulacrum of the real thing. Despite the narrator's apparently earnest appreciation for the way the reunion functions to pull the community together, giving its members a feeling of connection and meaning—a "moment of being," the overall sense one has as the participants depart back to their hard, lonely, isolated lives is one of ontological emptiness and of the temporality and fragility of human connection.