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Revising New England:
Self-Portraits of a Region

By DAVID H. WATTERS

THE TITLE OF Andrew Delbanco’s Writing New England: An Anthology from the Puritans to the Present makes the claim that New England is a product of its literature. In so doing, Delbanco joins a long tradition that connects the creation, transformation, and promulgation of images and myths of the region to acts of the imagination, and he acknowledges that any anthologist “deals in fragments” that must be assembled to create a portrait of the region.1 Such portraits, I will argue, also function as a form of self-portraiture whereby the New England writer or artist necessarily limns the likeness of the region from his or her own consciousness as it responds to and is shaped by the archive of New England writing. The literary creation of New England is also suggested by the fact that Delbanco’s anthology and other compilations of New England writing commonly begin with work that was published previous to 1620—before, that is, there was a New England.2 In these early works, and in those after English settlement, the author’s subjectivity is constructed in terms of the imagined space of what New England is or should be. There is the work of Captain John Smith who named the region “New England” in 1616 in the hopes it might attract a different sort of settler than the gentlemen and servants who had struggled in Virginia. He wrote of a mythic New England where yeomen, craftsmen, and fishermen and their families would live in a land free of England’s social problems. In their writings prior to settlement, the Puritans inscribed upon the land their own social vision, describing New England as a new Israel, to be settled by a vanguard that


would create, in John Winthrop's terms, a model of Christian charity, and a city upon a hill, for all the eyes of the world to see. Later on, these myths joined the mythology of the jeremiad sermon, which rehearsed themes of decline from a mythic, Edenic past. The jeremiad castigates besetting sins and warns of dire consequences unless the region's future is endorsed as a version of its past. From the social mythology of the Puritans came a long tradition of self-scrutiny, moral idealism, and covenanted community. By linking individual behavior to the mission of the state, the jeremiad fostered a political mythology. It became a primary form for policing the boundaries of New England against outsiders and suspect insiders, be they racial, ethnic, religious, or regional. It also spawned the reformist impulse of the nineteenth century, and its vision of millennial promise traveled from Edwards to Emerson, in Perry Miller's view.3

The New England stories these early myths produced featured an iconic cast of characters: Pilgrim founders, Revolutionary patriots, rebels and reformers, ingenious tinkers and industrialists, Boston Brahmins, and Yankees. Narratives and characters connect with landscapes and built environments to make literary representations of the region part of its lived experience for New Englanders and visitors alike. This may explain why, despite the best efforts of critics to deconstruct invented and imagined New England, most readers of New England literature believe the myths aren't really myths. Rather than discard earlier versions of the New Engander like old tintypes, or toss out the box of "string too short to be saved," or "abandon a belief / Merely because it ceases to be true," writers and readers use them to construct new self-portraits as New Englanders at once old and new.4 Identity is shifty and contingent, yet in terms of the tradition I will trace readable and recognizable. As we shall see, the endurance of mythic images of New England depends on a belief that literacy enables individuals to construct themselves as New Englanders and to create a region in their image.5 In my essay I will examine the ways in which New England myths have been embodied in the self-portraiture of its writers. As Cotton Mather claimed in his epic history of New England, "whether New England may live any where else or no, it


must live in our History! I will read New England literature as a process of self-portraiture, empowered by literacy and by the ability to read and revise the existing archive of New England portraits. The myths put forward by Smith and Winthrop that New Englanders become New Englanders as they create a land in their image demands a critical examination of just what portraits are available in the New England archive. Groups denied presence in the family gallery, such as Native Americans and African Americans, perform complex acts of reading, revision, and inscription as New Englanders.

The writer who gave New England its name, Captain John Smith, created the trope of New England as a form of self-portraiture in his map of New England (1616). The map features "the most remarqueable parts thus named," including sites for a future London and Oxford. Set into the map is "The Portraictuer of Captayne John Smith Admirall of New England." In effect, the map is a double portrait, both of Smith and of his imprint on the land by means of cartography and naming. As the poem linking the portrait and map states:

> These are the Lines that shew thy Face; but those<br>They shew they Grace and Glory, brighter bee:<br>Thy Faire-Discoveries and Fowle Overthrowes<br>Of Salvages, much Civiliz'd by thee<br>Best shew they Spirit to it Glory Wyns<br>So, thou art Brasse without, but Golde within.

Smith argues in the accompanying text, *A Description of New England*, that the New England ecosystem will foster the development of an authentic "new" English character in his image, conjointing economic initiative, nationalism, and piety. Of course, the map that Smith created changed, as did the face associated with the place. William Bradford and John Winthrop soon replaced his portrait as New England archetypes, and the places, such as Smith Isles and Cape James supplied by a young Prince Charles were renamed.

Nevertheless, Smith created a literary myth that readers could make themselves New Englanders by subscribing to a textual vision of the region, seeing themselves in his portrait; moreover, they could use his map to go there. New England was New England because English people could make their own map, naming and reading their own futures into its landscape and natural resources. Over time, such reading practices were extended to other landscapes in New England: the White Mountains with the emblematic Old Man of the Mountain, the Maine Woods, and the Connecticut River Valley.
The ability to fix a connection between people and place depended, of course, on the use of English in texts and in place-names. In effect, New England had to “speak” English to be recognizable as an English place, in Smith’s words, “to change their barbarous names for ... English ....”10 In “What Became of New England?” Robert Frost underscores this notion, arguing that a particular use of the English language constituted New England: “It was the first little nation that bade fair to be an English speaking nation on this continent.” Frost points to an abiding value, “a stubborn clinging to meaning; to purify words until they meant again what they should mean. Puritanism had that meaning entirely: a purifying of words and a renewal of words and a renewal of meaning.”11 As Frost surely knew, his version of the purpose of Puritanism pointed to the most vexing New England problem, fixing the relationship between word and meaning, and name and place.

William Bradford notes the instability of New England place-names when he discusses Cape Cod:

...it was thus first named by Captea Gosnold and his company, 1602, and after by Captain Smith was called Cape James. But it retains the former name amongst seamen. Also that pointe which first shewed those dangerous shoals unto them, they called Pointe Care, and Tuckers Terror. But the French and Dutch to this day call it Malabarr, by reason of those perilous shoals, and the losses they have suffered there.12

The confusion of names seems in this passage as treacherous as the shoals themselves, warning in its own way of the losses the Pilgrims would endure. Bradford understands that the power to place a name on the land and make it stick will have implications for those who will read the map of New England. Thus, in the Pilgrim’s battle with the small group of colonists led by Anglican Thomas Morton, Bradford moves to erase the names that might suggest an alternate future for the region. Morton tells us that his company at Pasonages-set, “having translated the name of their habitation from that ancient Salvage name to Ma-re Mount, and being resolved to have the new name confirmed for a memorial to after ages,” sets up a maypole.13 Bradford won’t have such naming rituals in his version of a New English Canaan, and he renames the maypole an idol, a calf of Horeb, and revises the settlement name as Mount Dagon. Morton’s own presence is effaced when he is later banished and the maypole is cut down.14

10. John Smith, The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles ... (London, 1624), 205. Dighton Rock stands as an emblem of the ways in which New Englanders have sought to fix European presence in the New England landscape. The rock features pictographs recorded as early as the seventeenth century by Cotton Mather. Native Americans created pictographs throughout the region, but such images were reread as evidence of early European presence. As Edmund Burke Delabarre recounts in Dighton Rock: A Study of the Written Rocks of New England, theories include those of the Phoenician, Scythian, Trojan, Jewish, Egyptian, Libyan, Japanese, Chinese, Norse, Portuguese, English, and American Indian. At the site today is a Portuguese American museum. What distinguishes New England are the layers of historical inscriptions on the landscape, a palimpsest for multiple readings. Edmund Burke Delabarre, Dighton Rock: A Study of the Written Rocks of New England (New York: Walter Neale, 1928).


If inscribing a New England identity on the land creates a myth of place in New England literature, acts of self-inscription create the mythic New England author. A primal scene in the creation of New England literature is John Rogers’s “Exhortation to his Children,” written shortly before his martyrdom by burning at the stake in 1554, and included in all versions of The New England Primer. Its placement in the Primer sets the meaning of New England literacy in the history of Protestant martyrdom. In some versions of the illustration accompanying the poem, Rogers seems to speak the text from the flames to his wife and children:

Give ear my Children to my words,  
whom God hath dearly bought,  
Lay up his Laws within your heart,  
and print them in your thought,  
I leave you here a little Book,  
for you to look upon;  
That you may see your Fathers face,  
when he is dead and gone. 15

The reader, like Rogers’s children, should associate text, the presence of the author, the image of God, and laws within the heart. Indeed, the process of the acquisition of literacy is recapitulated in this scene, as well as a style of reading in which the reader’s identity is transformed by print. In Rogers’s poem a twofold inscription occurs: one on the page, the other in the reader’s mind and heart. The images of inscription are derived from biblical metaphors, the Protestant emblem tradition, and Protestant theories of salvific reading. The hermeneutical act required of the New England reader is an interpretation of New England as the fulfillment of the providential history of the Reformation. The performance of such a reading constitutes assent to a construction of one’s identity as a child of that history.

Tropes of New England’s mission, whether in Winthrop’s image of New England as a city upon a hill or in Samuel Danforth’s errand in the wilderness, inscribe New Englanders in a narrative that shapes regional identity. In Increase Mather’s formulation of New England as an “English Israel,” only a typological reading, whereby the Old Testament is fulfilled in New Testament events and prophecies, can make sense of the nomenclature. 16 Mythic images of New England literary tradition have been described as the products of the “New England Mind,” a “literary culture,” as a series of “inventions” and “imaginings,” and, indeed, such images present a complex genealogy of regional identity. 17 But less attention has been paid to processes of reading and revision sustaining this archive. For many authors and readers, to be a

17. See Delbanco, Buell, Conforti, and Brown cited above.
New Englander is to have a literary identity, to appear in its literary archives. To be a New Englander is to see one’s self through such inscriptions in New England’s narrative of a special place, engraving it on one’s heart, mind, and story, thus making oneself readable. To be a New Englander is to know how to read others in this way.

What results is a literary tradition that foregrounds literariness as a foundation of regional identity. Writers who enter the tradition must master the archive, and its practices of inscription, as a sign of regional identity. However, this very definition also establishes the possibility of misreadings and revisions. By the time a young Benjamin Franklin wrote his parody of a New England elegy in the guise of Silence Dogood, some features of the Puritan tradition were ripe for parody. If one can only speak in New England through texts of mission, and be readable by doing so, then entering the tradition is a complex process of erasure, revision, and self-portraiture. Moreover, the archive of New England inscriptions is subject to readings in terms of new master narratives and interpretive paradigms, arising internally, or arriving externally, as occurred in the nineteenth century when New York became the national center of writing and publishing authority.

If one can be written into history by assenting to the New England narrative, one risks an erasure of identity by alienating oneself from the region by word or deed. For example, when difficult economic conditions accompanying the start of the English Civil War led to substantial back-migration in 1642, John Winthrop speculated whether one can in good faith withdraw from the social covenant presented in his “A Modell of Christian Charity,” citing the fate of one group, who spoke “evil of this good land and the Lord’s people here.” It was an easy passage for the group to the very shores of England, but there, they are beset by a tempest. Once they land, a horrible fate ensues: “One had a daughter that presently ran mad, and two others of his daughters, being under ten years of age, were discovered to have been often abused by divers lewd persons, and filthiness in his family. The schoolmaster had no sooner hired an house, and gotten in some scholars, but the plague set in, and took away two of his own children.”

The implications are clear: to be a part of New England is to have a motive of participation based on religious aspiration; to speak against it is to put oneself at risk, and indeed, to risk corruption and even death.

The Puritans recognized the instability of the relationship between language and identity, and this may explain the energy put into attempts to stabilize and authorize inscriptions of New England identity and their readings. Anne Bradstreet’s portrait of Eve, with the bloody baby Cain in her lap, resonates with a self-portraiture of doubt, revealed in many of her works: “His mother sighs, to think of Paradise, / And how she lost her bliss, to be more
In this passage rich with an immigrant’s nostalgia for a land left behind, and expressing doubts about seductive narratives, Bradstreet places her particular ancestry in an inscription of lies. In this poem “Contemplations,” and in her late poetry, she suggests that the location of New England is subject to slippage between nostalgia for a vision unfulfilled and prophecy of a land to come. She seems increasingly skeptical of the narratives of New England’s errand. Her identity as a New Engander is inscribed between constructions of a self at once slipping away and becoming. When she turns to create her own self-portrait in words, she invokes the language of John Rogers:

This Book by Any yet unread,
I leave for you when I am dead,
That being gone, here you may find
What was your living mother’s mind.
Make use of what I leave in Love
And God shall blesse you from above.
A.B.

By subscribing herself to this statement, Bradstreet avers the power of writing, not only to represent what was in her mind, but to present the mind. A right reading, and use, of her words will make her children recognizable in God’s eyes, and thus blessed. It is a complex bargain. In “The Author to Her Book,” Bradstreet compared her book to a bastard child she blushes to have read by the public; here the children are enjoined to make themselves legitimate heirs, fit for public viewing, by properly reading her book.

Bradstreet’s familial authority has a political parallel in William Bradford’s creation of the myth that New England’s authentic ancestry is English. In a well-known passage, William Bradford pauses in his narrative of the arrival of the Pilgrims on Cape Cod to instruct the reader how to read: “But here I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor people’s present condition. And so I think will the reader too, when he well considers the same.” Having written the reader into the text, he concludes the passage by giving the readers of the next generation a scripted reading of the original which then can become a fulfillment of Bradford’s vision: “May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness ... Let them therefore praise the Lord ...”

This passage creates a primal myth of New Englanders as pilgrims. What has been little noticed in


the passage is the construction of New England identity through a reader’s assent to Bradford’s ventriloquism. Nor has it been noticed that he inscribes white, English heritage as the true genealogy of New England; for without it, one has no voice with which to participate in the text.

After the Puritan era, New England’s mythology of a textual identity persists. For example, Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography presents the classic version of self-fashioning through self-inscription, and it deploys the author’s identification with printing. In the autobiography, Franklin jokes about reliving his life, “only asking the Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first.” Since life is not to be lived again, recollection, made durable in writing, will do. Franklin shows in his text how very much he was the product of print, shaping his beliefs and his writing and speaking style through the books available to him. As will be shown, the impulse among New Englanders to write themselves into literary tradition is an important motif in self-inscription.

The core mythology of New England as an English region depends upon the claim that God removed Native Americans, first by disease in 1618, and then by holy wars. In early narratives, skulls are the signs and symbols of Native American absence. In Thomas Morton’s words, “Massachusetts, it seemed to me a new found Golgotha.” The skull is a ubiquitous “memento mori” image on New England gravestones, but it resonates as a historical reminder of the people the English would silence in the mythic narrative of New England’s founding. Captain Thomas Smith’s Self-Portrait (c. 1690) is an icon of Puritan self-inscription. Smith, a wealthy merchant, sits next to a window through which we see a naval battle. The subject stares directly at the viewer and signals Puritan gestures of introspection and a turning away from the world through the memento mori emblem, a skull under his right hand. The thoroughly conventional scene is made into an emblem of Puritan spirituality for this man of the world by means of a message placed under the skull:

Why why should I the World be minding
Therein a World of Evils Finding
then Farwell World: Farwell thy Jarres
thy Joies thy Toies thy Wiles thy Wars
Truth Sounds Retreat: I am not sorye.
The Eternall Drawes to him my heart
By Faith (which can thy Force Subvert)
To Crowne me (after Grace) with Gerry.
T.S.25

Like the Primer scene of John Rogers, Smith’s self-portrait attempts to stabilize the meanings of New England, but the portrait embeds a double-voiced narrative with its speaking skull. Like the death's heads on stones grown “so witty as to speak,” in Cotton Mather’s formulation, this skull bespeaks a story of displacement and erasure. Smith’s wealth may have derived, in part, from the sale into West Indian slavery captives taken in King Philip’s War. According to period records, John Hull sold two parcels of Indians to a “Thomas Smith,” in lots indicating this Thomas Smith would export them in his ships. One parcel contained forty-one captives, another twenty-nine, primarily women and children. King Philip’s skull sat atop a pole in Plymouth, and its jawbone eventually was taken from the skull by Cotton Mather, the author of the master narratives about the subjugation of New England’s native peoples. Smith’s skull utters “truth sounds retreat”; in the meantime, King Philip’s skull gazed in silence as a memento mori to New England’s failed primary directive to convert the Indians.

In New England, Native Americans have been inscribed in various New England myths, from the Pilgrims’s Thanksgiving, to the Massachusetts Bay Colony seal, with an Indian uttering the words, “Come over and help us.” From the time of the defeat of King Philip, as Jill Lepore, Renee Bergland, and William Simmons discuss, he has haunted New England. Similarly, by their supposed absence, and the trace effects of Indian names on the landscape, Native Americans shadow the process of New England’s self-representation. Significantly, Benjamin Church’s narrative, departing from the approaches of other accounts, features an old man among the last group of Indians captured named “Conscience”:

the Captain ask'd his name, who replyed; his name was Conscience; Conscience said the Captain (smiling) then the War is over, for that was what they were searching for, it being much wanting; and then return'd the said Conscience to his Post again at Swanzey, to a certain person the said Indian desired to be Sold to, and so return'd home.

Church’s creation of a literary Indian as New England’s conscience would have many descendants in the region’s literature. However silenced, translated, or appropriated, Indians and Indian speech may be in subsequent literature, even early accounts reveal Native American contestation and revision of

27. Neal Salisbury, ed., The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed ..., (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 145-46. It is generally assumed by art historians that Smith’s title of captain referred to his status as a sea captain, but he also went by the title of major (see Fairbanks, 474), indicating military service.
such inscriptions. One of the earliest accounts from New England of Native American stories concerning Europeans is an Indian’s dream recorded by Thomas Shepard in 1648. It links the Bible and the plague as sources of fatal European power:

‘about two yeers before the English came over into those parts there was a great mortaity among the Indians, and one night he could not sleep above half the night, after which hee fell into a dream, in which he did think he saw a great many men come to those parts in cloths, just at the English now are apparellled, and among them there arose up a man all in black, with a thing in his hand which hee now sees was all one English mans book; this black man he said stood upon a higher place then all the rest, and on one side of him were the English, on the other a great number of Indians; this man told all the Indians that God was moosquantum or angry with them, and that he would kill them for their sinnes ....”

Another early story has persisted in Penobscot tradition, first collected by Charles Leland in *Algonquin Legends* (1884). Culture hero Koluskap and Woodchuck traveled to England in a stone canoe “‘before the white man had ever heard of America ...’” and “‘discovered England and told them about America. It is only since his visit that white men have come to America. ’” Joan Lester notes that another ethnologist, Edwin Tappan Adney, reads the story as an ongoing political resistance to European scripts about discovery, “revealing ‘the deep-seated resentment by Indians still of the old beliefs at the claims to superiority of the white man and his ways.’” This resentment of English as a master language in a master narrative arose early. Thomas Shepard reports in 1646 that Indians believed that “Jesus Christ did not understand Indian language, one of us therefore prepared to pray in their own language ....”

Native American writers often became the spokespersons for New England’s conscience. At once repressed and irrepressible, they frequently invert New England’s myths to reveal the racism that forbids the Indian presence in the literary tradition. Period writings make it abundantly clear that by the time of King Philip’s War, Native Americans were familiar with Puritan racial theories. Puritan writers no longer envisioned Indians as potential members of the church covenant and the social body of New England. Samuel Nowell wrote, “The Inhabitants of the land will not joyn or mix with us to make one Body”; for Increase Mather, Indians cannot inhabit a place called New England, since an inhabitant, by which he means someone who exhibits civilized behavior by living in permanent towns and by creating an English agricultural landscape, can only be English. Were the Indians to triumph in King Philip’s

War, the “English Israel,” would be “desolate, a Land not inhabited ... without an English Inhabitant.” Indians mocked English defenders who cried out during an Indian attack on Brookfield, Massachusetts: “they shouted and scoffed saying: now see how your God delivers you, or will deliver you, sending in many shots ....” Then the Native Americans occupy the meetinghouse to conduct a parodic service in earshot of the besieged English: “saying, Come and pray, & sing Psalms, & in Contempt made an hideous noise something resembling singing.”

Samson Occom, William Apess, Joseph Nicolar, Tomah Joseph, and Skip Hayward are Native American writers who reveal the forked tongues of New England literature, either by satirizing and subverting English forms, in the spirit of the example from Brookfield, or by claiming that the true representatives of New England values are Indians. William Apess notes that George Washington is “engraven on the hearts of every white in America,” but he, Apess, will “pronounce [Philip] the greatest man that was ever in America; and so it will stand, until he is proved to the contrary, to the everlasting disgrace of the Pilgrims’ fathers ....” This inscription of Philip as the true inheritor of the values of Plymouth reveals the amnesia that is essential to the construction of New England as white. It also asserts that an authentic genealogy of New England naming and narrative must include Native Americans, past and very much present. In an ironic inversion of the practice of New England ethnographic museums to place Indians under glass, the typewriter on which Skip Hayward wrote the Pequots back into recognition stands on a plinth in the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center.

A similar message of recovered memory is found in the inscriptions of Tomah Joseph, a Passamaquoddy birchbark artist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though complicated by the multiple narratives and inscriptions of tourist art, which Ruth Phillips has dubbed “Trading Identities,” Tomah Joseph created a complex self-portrait on birch bark by using such design elements as Passamaquoddy hieroglyphic narrative, phonetic representations in the Roman alphabet of Passamaquoddy speech, and English phrases. Ruth Phillips suggests that tourist art like Tomah Joseph’s retained traditional forms and symbols, even as it acceded to market demands for “Indian” art and forms of self-representation. Joseph inscribes himself in two ways, it appears. On birch bark he inscribes a snowy owl, which may have been his pohigan, “a spirit being with whom he enjoyed an intimate and protective relationship, and “These marks were so powerful that it was felt that

the spirit guardian was present if the image was represented ...." On the earliest box by Tomah Joseph known to scholar Joan Lester, Tomah Joseph presents an owl and signature together. This mark of presence, in both inscribed forms, suggests the significance for Tomah Joseph of retaining his identity even as it was connected to an object of exchange or trade with tourists. On a remarkable birch bark picture frame in the collections of the Peabody Essex Museum containing his picture, in headdress and with bow and arrow, Tomah Joseph etched animals, his signature owl, and, under the portrait, the words, "Gov. Tomah Joseph Passamaquoddy Tribe." This self-portrait submits Tomah Joseph in a Victorian-era picture frame to the gaze of tourists, but he subverts that gaze with the claim of a historical, political identity. Surely, as Joan Lester notes, signatures are an accommodation to tourist preferences for signed art, but he complicates this exchange by balancing the touristic and ethnographic representation of the Indian in photography with Passamaquoddy self-portraiture. Tomah Joseph’s most telling inscription in his phonetic spelling of Passamaquoddy, however, is the phrase MIKWID’ HAMIN, “which, according to David Francis translates as ‘recall me in your mind or remember me ....’” Here Tomah Joseph inscribes his identity on birch bark and on the purchaser’s mind, a token of remembrance resonating with New England practice, the words of the Catholic Mass, and Passamaquoddy identity. Ultimately, it is an autograph of presence.

A more recent example of revision links the New England erasure of Native Americans to New England’s image of female domesticity. In The Blue Jay’s Dance, Louise Erdrich’s chronicle of “a birth year,” the author endeavors to write herself into a landscape of northern New Hampshire that will become the landscape of her children’s lives. In the book, she alternates between images of her home place of grandmothers and youthful memories in Minnesota, with the new, alien, horizonless home of New Hampshire. Moving to her husband’s farm embeds her in a New England landscape, “All around me, kind trees and slabs of rocky land, violet and archaic gold shadows that Maxfield Parrish painted into his Saturday Evening Post covers. This is a beautiful place but it is not where I belong.” Her homesickness is “horizon sickness,” for she feels bound by the landscape, New England domesticity, and, I will argue, the literary constructs of women’s writing in the region. “At first, the entire Northeast seems like the inside of a house to me.... I am suspicious of Eastern land: the undramatic loveliness, the small scale, the lack of sky to watch, the way the weather sneaks up without enough warning.” Here is the landscape of local color writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett, with the tints of the miniature. To revise Frost’s images of New England’s woods, Erdrich writes,

40. Lester, “History on Birch bark,” 89.
41. Lester, History on Birch bark, 15.
The woods themselves seem bogus—every inch of the ground turned over more than once, and even in the second growth of old pines so much human evidence. Rock walls run everywhere, grown through and tumbled, as if the dead still have claims they impose. The unkillable and fierce trees of old orchards, those revenants, spook me when I walk in the woods. The blasted limbs spread a white lace cold as fire in the spring, and the odor of the blossoms is furiously spectral, sweet. When I stand beneath the canopies that hum and shake with bees, I hear voices, other voices. What are they saying? Where have they come from? What drove them into this earth?

Then, as often happens to sparring adversaries in 1940s movies, I fall in love.43

Surely Erdrich’s love is for her husband, and for the landscape, but also for those “other voices,” for whom she will speak, and in so doing, reinscribe New England through other eyes. This project surely shares themes with other women who have written themselves into New England, such as May Sarton in Nelson, or Lorene Cary at St. Paul’s School.

Erdrich is intensely aware of New England’s landscapes and homes as embodiments of earlier women’s lives. She begins to “chafe at the age of New England houses,” where nothing happens for the first time, and she knows she “will one day join the ranks of Yankee ghosts ....”44 With a writing office in a room once an earlier woman’s summer kitchen, Erdrich considers the parallel histories of inhabitation for her European ancestors and her Turtle Mountain ancestors since the house was built in 1782. She enacts a parody of self-inscription in New England domesticity when she climbs into a cellar crawl space to rescue a kitten. Lying under the floor, she hears the sounds of the house and her family about her. “It was like being dead, or unborn. I hadn’t thought about it then, but now I could clearly see part of me, the husk of myself, still buried against the east wall: a person sacrificed to ensure the good luck of a temple, a kind of house god, a woman lying down there, still, an empty double.... How many women are buried beneath their houses? How many startling minds, how many writers? This house is over two hundred years old. How many women lie stunned within its walls?”45 She contemplates an early photograph of a woman standing in front of the house in the flower garden, and she imagines this is the woman who has penned a note found in the walls during renovation. Significantly, the note is on paper, “embossed with a tiny picture of the capitol building in Concord,” that state house of men, and it reveals the secret history of New England domesticity, where “‘Time, passing away, but the impression of our grief the stronger makes, as streams their channels deeper wear.’”46 This is the hidden message in which Erdrich finds herself circumscribed by household bounds, even as she celebrates the love of family and birth in such a home.

Erdrich chronicles the list of “female writers in her head,” noting the paucity of mothers among them, and thus the absence of childbirth, motherhood, and nursing in the literary canon. She rewrites the male yearning for

43. Erdrich, 88-89.
44. Erdrich, 96.
45. Erdrich, 103.
46. Erdrich, 108.
epiphany and oceanic oneness in her nursing, "the sense of a self merged and at least temporarily eased—it is death-like. I close my eyes and see Frost's too peaceful snowy woods, but realize that this is also the most alive place I know—Blake's gratified desire." Simultaneously German-Catholic Madonna and Child, and Native woman and child, Erdrich inscribes herself into a New England that had attempted to erase both Mary's image and Indian bodies in its founding.

Perhaps the strongest regional myth in New England about reading and writing is that these acts constitute civil as well as spiritual identity. The American republic itself was constituted by words, and, as Cathy Davidson argues in Revolution and the Word, participation in literary culture shaped the identities and aspirations of Americans, especially female readers of novels. In New England, in the apt phrase of William Gilmore, reading became a necessity of life. If literacy is the essential New England act of self-creation, then those excluded from a civil identity can only relieve invisibility by entering into dialogue with New Englanders. African American writers, for example, imbibed New England myths about freedom even as they described their denial of citizenship and free speech.

Critics Henry Louis Gates Jr., and William Andrews describe how the acquisition of literacy by African Americans was disruptive to European assumptions of racial superiority. In New England, African Americans intervened in genres at the core of New England identity. The example of Phillis Wheatley is well-known. To prove her literacy, she was subjected to an examination by Boston's leading citizens. She practiced the highly public art of writing elegies and addresses to prominent individuals, including George Washington. Her subversive poem, in the form of an address to Harvard students, negotiates artfully her claim to speak in New England: "While an intrinsic ardor prompts to write, / The muses promise to assist my pen; / 'Twas not long since I left my native shore / The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom ...." She invokes a common humanity as an impulse to self-expression, but her right to intervene in the education of students at New England's first college is based on her own emergence from a land of errors. By invoking the term "Egyptian," she participates in New England's typological tradition of symbolism, in which the Jewish Exodus from Egypt to Israel is a pattern both for Christian redemption from sin and for English migration from

47. Erdrich, 148.
sinful England to the Israel of New England. In her case, she challenges and revises the typological tradition, since her Egyptian gloom has not been relieved by freedom in the new England Israel. In her case, New England remains a land of Egyptian gloom for slaves, even if she is spiritually redeemed. In lecturing the Harvard students, then, she warns them not to let sin, including the sin of slavery, deter them from fulfilling their destiny as New Englanders. In the concluding lines, she renames herself an “Ethiop,” acknowledging her African origins but evoking a key text that subverts racist assumptions, Jeremiah 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.”

The challenge in the poem is whether such racial origins can be inscribed as a component of New England identity. Her volume’s frontispiece portrait issues the greatest challenge to New England self-inscription.51 Presented in respectable clothing, seated in a finely crafted Queen Anne–style chair and sitting at a lady’s writing table, her black face confronts this white frame, even as she is bounded by the inscription that this oval frame announces: “Phillis Wheatley. Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston.” She holds her pen over a white sheet of paper, as if about to write what follows in the book, and this white sheet of paper also represents the reader’s mind before it is imprinted with the words that follow. Even as one reads Wheatley, and takes possession of her, she inscribes her thoughts within the reader’s mind.

That Wheatley’s gesture was not idiosyncratic can be seen in similar revisions of New England public textual traditions in slave petitions and gravestone epitaphs. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Nero Brewster, Prince Whipple (who, as local stories claimed, rowed Washington across the Delaware), petitioned the New Hampshire legislature for their freedom in 1780. They inscribe their claims within the language of the Declaration of Independence and argue that they will become, in a sense, indistinguishable in their love for freedom, as such love defines New England: “No, here we can read with others! Of this knowledge, slavery cannot wholly deprive us: here, we know we ought to be free agents!” Knowing how to read New England as a land of freedom, the petitioners intervene to revise their political identity and their names. If freed, the slaves promise to fight in the cause of the Revolution; thus they “may regain our liberty and be rank’d in the class of free agents, and that the name of SLAVE may no more be heard in a land gloriously contending for the sweets of freedom; and your humble slaves as in duty bound will ever pray.” In this erasure of slave identity, they also revise themselves as Africans in America, inventing a term as a postcolonial construct for a Revolutionary New England: “natives of Africa, now forcibly

51. This portrait from the 1773 edition of Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral is frequently reprinted. See Jehlen and Warner, 1078. Erkkila notes that the inscription “enchains” the portrait, 229.
detained in slavery, in said state ...”52 The desire to inscribe oneself in New
England while maintaining an African identity is also seen in the gravestone
carving by Pompe Stevens, a slave in New England’s foremost gravestone
carving family, the Stevens of Newport.53 Pompe Stevens makes New Eng­
land speak black by combining the most traditional and popular self-represen­
tation of New Englanders, the soul effigy, with avowals of African identity. In
one of the first objects signed by an African American, he cut on the stone he
cut for his brother, Cuffe Gibbs, in 1768, “This Stone was cut by Pompe
Stevens ....” Pompe Stevens’s stones also present African day names, such as
Cuffe, Quamino, and Quashi, a combination of New England image and
African naming that indicate the hybrid identity forming in Newport’s slave
community. Like Wheatley, Pompe Stevens challenges the racialized basis of
an “English Israel,” since Africans may join, in Wheatley’s phrase, the “heaven­
ly train,” speaking their names in heaven as well as in New England’s
graveyards.

This focus on core New England rhetorical traditions in African American
writing persists through the nineteenth century, whether in slave narratives,
abolitionist tracts, or the novel. Harriet Wilson, in Our Nig, writes “in a two­
story white house, north” for she knows whiteness in New England has two
stories to tell, one of which is her presence.54 Her authorship is inscribed as
“Our Nig,” replicating the act of possession and inscription which bounds her
story. The example of Malcolm X reveals how the region’s traditions could be
used to transform its image. In 1948 inmate Malcolm Little began copying a
dictionary in the library of the Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts to
improve his vocabulary and reading skills. Little, later to become Malcolm X,
also read the pamphlets of the Abolitionist Anti-Slavery Society of New Eng­
land, the works of W. E. B. DuBois, the Harvard Classics, and one novel,
Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Malcolm X wrote that a “new world opened to me, of
being able to read and understand,” and he decided to “devote the rest of my
life to telling the white man about himself—or die.”55 The state’s penal tools
are turned against the masters to tell the truth, an impulse inspiring an earlier
imprisoned writer, Henry David Thoreau. As these examples of internal revi­sion
suggest, a mythology of regional authenticity depends upon complicit
readers, but such readers can be disrupted.

ber 12, 1779, New Hampshire Gazette, July 15, 1780. Sydney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, The Black
53. Pompe Stevens’s stones are best viewed by visiting the Farewell Street Common Burying Ground in
Newport, Rhode Island. His life and work are presented by Ann and Dickran Tashjian, “The Afro-American
Section of Newport, Rhode Island’s Common Burying Ground,” in Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of
Youngken, African Americans in Newport: An Introduction to the Heritage of African Americans in Newport,
Rhode Island, 1700-1945 (Providence, R.I.: Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission and
54. Harriet E.Wilson, Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In A Two-Story White House,
To live by the book, however, may mean to die by the book. If the region’s library ceases to circulate, if literary authority and national mythology are transferred to experiences and places beyond its borders, and if the most important publishers and authors depart New England for New York, then New England literature runs the danger of being “merely” regional. By the time of the Civil War, Puritan, African American, and Native American inscriptions and revisions had established regional myths through a set of literary practices, genres, and subjects. Implicitly and explicitly, these regional myths were meant to be a pattern for the nation. However, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New England’s function as a region became circumscribed by a national culture based in New York City.

New England’s literary self-inscriptions, by the early 1800s, were already subject to the editing of New York. During its term as the national capital, New York had gained political, economic, and cultural authority to rival that of New England. For example, its rising literary scene drew the Hartford Wits the city, and New Yorkers created images of other regions as foils to their cosmopolitanism. As described by Sarah Burns and Patricia Hills, New Yorkers’ conventions of genre painting and literature classified the Yankee as a sharp-dealing peddler, in contrast to the simple but idealized patriotic masculinity of Brother Jonathan and Captain Manly New Englander that Royall Tyler presented to New York in his play The Contrast. In another example of recasting the regional image of New England from the perspective of New York, an enduring stereotype of an emasculated, enervated, bookish New Englander, whose patrimony was musty Puritan writers, is created in the figure of Ichabod Crane in Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Crane, “was a native of Connecticut, a State which supplies the Union with pioneers for the mind as well as for the forest, and sends forth yearly its legions of frontier woodsmen and country schoolmasters.” The ironic contrast of types of pioneers places Crane’s intellectual legacy as a doubtful means for transforming the frontier, especially from the perspective of urbane New York sophistication. Crane is a “man of letters,” who “had read several books quite through, and was a perfect master of Cotton Mather’s ‘History of New England Witchcraft,’ in which, by the way, he most firmly and potently believed.” Crane is reduced to an inhabitant of Mather’s outdated text, and Crane’s ability to read his surroundings comically replicates Mather’s hermeneutic tradition of reading natural phenomenon such as the strange noises heard at Moodus, Connecticut, comets, and shooting stars as providential signs.

58. Irving, 2097.
When Crane is driven from the field by Brom Bones posing as a headless horseman, Irving means to drive New England’s archive of inscriptions from lands New York will colonize economically and culturally. This is the legacy of New England found with Crane’s spare underwear: “a book of psalm tunes … Cotton Mather’s ‘History of Witchcraft,’ a ‘New England Almanac,’ and a book of dreams and fortune-telling …” Crane’s manuscripts are “consigned to the flames by Hans Van Ripper; who from that time forward determined to send his children no more to school; observing, that he never knew any good of this same reading and writing.” Irving parodies this anti-New England trend in American culture, but his New Yorker, Geoffrey Crayon, not Ichabod Crane, will be the portrait of an author for subsequent literary representation of American culture.

Perhaps the most potent rereading and revision of a New England literary self-portrait by a New Yorker is Herman Melville’s “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” Justly famous for its representation of Melville’s literary aspirations and for its comparison of Hawthorne to Christ and Shakespeare, it also transforms the image of New England. Melville effaces Hawthorne as a New England author by identifying him with bygone Puritanism, English literary traditions, and a national American literature. Melville tosses aside Timothy Dwight’s Travels in New England for Hawthorne’s Mosses as a tourist’s guidebook to the region’s psyche. He grants authority to Hawthorne, even as he inscribes that authorship within New York’s stereotypes of the region as a combination of a historical sublime and a village picturesque: “His wild witch voice rings through me; or, in softer cadences, I seem to hear it in the songs of the hill-side birds, that sing in the larch trees at my window.” This inaugurates a series of readings of Hawthorne, meaning both the book and the man. Melville’s readings of Hawthorne in a barn are a counterpoint to Hawthorne’s own readings of New England’s literary heritage in the attic library of the Old Manse, and it suggests a shift of a style of masculinity as well as a style of reading.

In Melville’s search for a true reading of Hawthorne, he inscribes him in a series of New England images. “In one word, the world is mistaken in this Nathaniel Hawthorne,” and Melville reads in Hawthorne, “perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanic gloom.” No “mere critic” can see this, so Melville implies that a deeper sort of reading from outside New England is required. Melville repeats, “Nathaniel Hawthorne is a man, as yet, almost utterly mistaken among men,” and in making his famous comparison between Hawthorne and Shakespeare, Melville argues that Shakespeare, too, must be reread.

59. Irving, 2111.
60. Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in Lauter, 2714. This essay, and the relationship between Melville and Hawthorne, are the subjects of much biographical and critical discussion. See, for example, Edwin Haviland Miller, Melville (New York: G. Braziller, 1975), and Hershel Parker, Herman Melville: A Biography (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).
61. Melville, 2718.
Melville renames Hawthorne, Nathaniel of Salem, and then argues that his greatness depends not on regional identity, but on his ability to write like a man, an American. Melville also detaches Hawthorne from New England literature, “Let us away with this Bostonian leaven of literary flunkeyism towards England.” Hawthorne becomes an American as he expands over the territory opened up to New York by canal and railroad: “The smell of your beeches and hemlocks is upon him; your own broad prairies are in his soul; and if you travel away inland into his deep and noble nature, you will hear the far roar of his Niagara.”62 As an object of Melville’s gaze, Hawthorne must be capacious enough to receive Melville’s reading. Melville’s final act of colonization of Hawthorne is to inscribe Hawthorne into one of his own portraits, now selected to be Melville’s “ideal image of the man and his mind:

‘A man now entered, in neglected attire, with the aspect of a thinker, but somewhat too rough-hewn and brawny for a scholar. His face was ful of sturdy vigor, with some finer and keener attribute beneath; though harsh at first, it was tempered with the glow of a large, warm heart, which had force enough to heat his powerful intellect through and through. He advanced to the Intelligencer, and he looked at him with a glance of such stern sincerity, that perhaps few secrets were beyond its scope.

‘‘I seek for Truth’, said he.’63

This essay’s revision of the New England author is profound. Melville defines the author’s essence as a search for truth, and then he colonizes that search as part of a national project centered in New York. An important point here is that this powerful reading from New York of New England seizes control of the northern region’s protocols of representation, destabilizing the connection between person and place. Hawthorne himself may have been increasingly aware of the power and psychological pressure of an external gaze when he created the character of Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter. Dimmesdale, absent a visible “A” on his clothing, offers a false text to all but Hester, but he is subject to a piercing reading by Chillingworth. Dimmesdale is terrified that he will lose control of the ways in which he is read, most famously when a comet appears in the night sky, but also when he delivers his final sermon and confession. No longer the alpha male, Dimmesdale is split in his identity between self-inscription and the power of the reader. What remains is an inscrutable gravestone inscription.

Under the gaze of New York in the late nineteenth century, New England literature and culture risk being relegated to the status of a regional, local color literature. Indeed, the region itself was seemingly being effaced by social and economic transformations. After the Civil War, New England was shaped by rapid industrialization and urbanization, accompanied by waves of immigration, most notably from Ireland and French Canada. New England became the most industrialized region of America, and Rhode Island became America’s most Catholic state. One cultural response was the cultivation of

62. Melville, 2722, 2723.
63. Melville, 2723.
the past through historical celebrations of the colonial and revolutionary eras. Social historians see this movement, culminating in the Colonial Revival and preservation movements, together with local color writing, as an Anglo-Saxon response to immigrant America. Upcountry New England, especially in Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire, was being mythologized as a last bastion of Yankee culture. Such self-inscriptions, by Sarah Orne Jewett and Robert Frost, claimed the mantle of the past even as they participated in Modernist aesthetics. Nevertheless, New England's myths were ruthlessly exposed from the perspective of New York.

Edith Wharton was an extraordinarily astute observer of New England's social and material culture. Her *Ethan Frome* is anthropological in its presentation of a seemingly archaic people. The book is an essay on a culture whose life force either has been drained away to the city or repressed, like an "orchard of starved apple-trees writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe." Her ethnographic gaze analyzes Ethan Frome's farmhouse for the root cause of ruin: "I saw then that the unusually forlorn and stunted look of the house was partly due to the loss of what is known in New England as the "L": that long deep-roofed adjunct usually built at right angles to the main house, and connected to it, by way of store-rooms and tool-house, with the wood-shed and cow-barn." This sentence of hyphens suggests the gaps in the language of New England life, and Frome himself is so tongue-tied and laconic that he hardly has a language to articulate his desires. Not to worry, however, since the New Yorker is ready to interpret and speak for him and the region. "Whether because of its symbolic sense, the image it presents of a life linked with the soil, and enclosing in itself the chief sources of warmth and nourishment, or whether merely because of the consolatory thought that it enables the dwellers in that harsh climate to get to their morning's work without facing the weather, it is certain that the "L" rather than the house itself seems to be the centre, the actual hearth-stone of the New England farm."

Through this bit of architectural and cultural criticism, the narrator hears "a wistful note in Frome's words," and sees "in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body."

Wharton's text involves a series of such descriptions that judge contemporary New England life from the perspective of a civilized, modern New York. They also judge it as a contrast to the antebellum era of village vitality ideal-
ized by the Colonial Revival. Frome himself presents a series of self-inscriptions revealing his colonized consciousness. For example, he gazes upon the ancestral stone that shares his name and reads the implied message, "We never got away—how should you?" Wharton reduces New England’s literary culture to Zeena’s reading “Kidney Troubles and Their Cure,” and to Mattie’s recitation of “Curfew shall not ring to-night” and her failed attempt at stenography. Such images are darkly satiric about New England culture, but they also liberate Wharton, and other New Yorkers, from the dead hand of a national literary culture inscribed by New England. The closing comments of Mrs. Hale seem directed particularly at New England’s female literary tradition, “I don’t see’s there’s much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; ‘cept that down there they’re all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues.”

Given Wharton’s interest in architecture, and her participation in New York’s social colonization of New England in Newport and Lenox, it is significant that her novel *Summer* features Lucius Harney, a New York architect sketching traces of colonial architecture in the doorways of old Federal-era homes. This was the era of the White Pine Architectural Monograph Series of books, which made such designs available to colonial revival architects and to preservationists such as Wallace Nutting and William Sumner Appleton. Harney meets Charity Royall, the foster child of one of the town’s patriarchs, in a musty library, “a queer little brick temple with white wooden columns,” where no new books have been purchased for twenty years. What can a modern New Yorker like Harney find useful in a New England library? The library, its books, and the town itself, icons of the New England village ideal of the antebellum period, appear readier for a museum than for modern life: “There it lay, a weather-beaten sunburnt village of the hills, abandoned of men, left apart by railway, trolley, telegraph, and all the forces that link life to life in modern communities.” Like the young ornithologist seeking rare birds in Jewett’s “A White Heron,” Harney hunts old houses in the Berkshires, since Plymouth and Salem have already been investigated. Wharton uses the reading habits of the residents to place them—a few old novels, geography books, poems by Longfellow, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Lawyer Royall reads Bancroft and Webster. In the North Dormer world of “ancestral daguerreotypes and didactic samplers,” Charity senses the power, sexual and cultural, of New Yorker Harney. She feels a “sweet dependence” under his gaze, and she begins to see her heritage among the degenerated colony of “mountain people” through his eyes. Harney reinscribes these lawless folk as queer originals, independent and different, and it now thrills Charity to be seen this way.

69. For a discussion of such endeavors, and of colonial revival architecture, see Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England*.
She and Harney hunt for old houses with the right “look,” and they find the ruined temples of the age of reason: “The paint was almost gone from the clapboards, the window-panes were broken and patched with rags, and the garden was a poisonous tangle of nettles, burdocks and tall swamp-weeds over which big blue-bottles hummed.” Charity contrasts the slovenly interior to the “very symbol of household order,” the Royall kitchen, and she feels her identity split by the competing inscriptions of her body by Harney and Royall. She and Harney set up a play house and begin their affair in one of the abandoned homes he has sketched. Whatever Charity may have dreamed about making a real home with him, Harney, once back in New York City, has no more desire to build a future with Charity than he has to live in one of the rural houses he sketched.

Wharton presents a competing narrative of the colonial revival in the performance of Old Home Week. The complex origins of this movement in New Hampshire have been described by Dona Brown as a feature of a developing tourist industry, but Wharton creates a remarkable phrase to define its cultural work as a “form of sentimental decentralization.” This diffusion of a cultural program, with the incentive coming “rather from those who had left North Dormer than from those who had been obliged to stay there,” serves to entangle New Englanders in a web of signification. As Harney’s aunt comments on the leading role Harney plays in arranging the celebration, “Lucius has such a feeling for the past that he has roused us all to a sense of our privileges ....” The staged activities include home-made garlands, banners, and needlework, culminating in an oration by Lawyer Royall. Dona Brown emphasizes the female, domestic image of Old Home Week, but in the oration, manhood is scripted. In a national era of new print and electronic media, it is significant that New England manhood is local and oral.

Royall’s speech is a bricolage of New England rhetoric, to Charity’s ears, “fragments of sentences, sonorous quotations, allusions to illustrious men ....” He catches her and the crowd’s attention when he contrasts the celebrants who “come only on a pious pilgrimage, and will go back presently to busy cities and lives full of larger duties” to his decision to return to North Dormer. In phrases that counter Frost’s lines in “The Death of the Hired Man: “’Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.’” Royall advises those who return, even if for reasons of failure, to “make the best of your old town ...after a while, I believe you’ll be able to say, as I can say today: ‘I’m glad I’m here.’ Believe me, all of you, the best way to help the places we live in is to be glad we live here.”” The speech brings tears to the minister’s eyes, who remarks, “That was a man talking—.” Royall expresses the Old Home Week myth that New Englanders can be truest to themselves,
and achieve a kind of manhood, if they perform unself-consciously their provincial roles. Charity learns this lesson all too well, when she forsakes her claim on Harney, the father of her baby, and accepts marriage to Lawyer Royall. She cannot picture herself as Harney’s wife, “nor imagine what a civilized person would have done in her place.” Having been inscribed as a primitive in Harney’s ethnography, “She felt herself too unequally pitted against unknown forces.” Under the gaze of her husband, Lawyer Royall, she feels “ashamed and yet secure.”

Other New Englanders took a less charitable view of colonization and revised the original Puritan impulse of an errand in the wilderness into a strategic retreat. Like Frost’s drumlin woodchuck, latter-day New England writers escape scrutiny by immersing themselves in a labyrinth of historical texts or preserved buildings. Others situate themselves north of Boston or down east. The cultural adoption of the term “down east” from mariner’s parlance to inscribe it as a region of consciousness occurred with the invention of New England literary regionalism. Stowe’s *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* was one of the first to set off this region, and by the time of Samuel Adams Drake’s *Nooks and Corners of the New England Coast* (1875), the location of down east was a literary parlor game. B. A. Botkin reprints this account along with the song “Away Down East,” with its opening line, “There’s a famous fabled country never seen by mortal eyes ...” By Botkins’s time, the unseen land had been represented by D.W. Griffith’s film, *Way Down East* (1920), and mythologized by modernist regionalists from “away,” such as Marsden Hartley and N. C. Wyeth. Drake notes the term slips ever eastward from San Francisco, the Mason-Dixon line, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and finally to the Penobscot Bay where he interrogates a fisherman:

‘Whither bound?’ I asked of a fisherman, getting up his foresail before loosing from the wharf.”

‘Sir, to you. Down East.’

The evident determination to shift the responsibility forbade further pursuit of this fictitious land. Besides, Maine people are indisposed to accept without challenge the name so universally applied to them of Down-Easters.

The fisherman subverts the questions of a nosy outsiders by the literal response that he is “bound” to the dock. He also asserts that down east only exists in reference to someone who is not down east. Maine people’s resistance to the nomenclature and portraiture of Down-Easters denies that the center, be it in San Francisco, New York, or Boston, defines their circumference. This resistance to name and location leads Drake to conclude, “Of one thing I am persuaded—Down East is nowhere in New England.”

76. Wharton, *Summer*, 221.
The fishermen's ironic evasion is an example of the irony and self-deprecating humor Yankees use to deflect the tourists whose dollars they may depend upon. Down east becomes the place where true New Englanders and true values are just beyond the gaze and inscription of outsiders. It is this feature of New England that provides a space for John Preston to imagine himself as a gay New Englander. Before his life was tragically cut short, John Preston staked a claim to being gay and a traditional New Englander. In "Down East," he constructs an artful "gay version of Down East," where fishermen, lumberjacks, and construction workers offer honest hot sex for the stranger who happens upon their local bar. Preston's essay begins, "You can never reach Down East. As soon as you arrive in a place, it can no longer be Down East. Down East must be somewhere else." Preston recounts folkloric versions of stories of a fishing village, down east, where the traveler finds the gay bar, usually on a pier. Having found the place, "something that straight people say isn't supposed to exist Down East," these men no longer want to go to urban gay bars, Provincetown, or Castro Street. Yet the tellers of the tales are back in Portland, and Preston acknowledges that the dream would be lost if the place were found, and that he "can never know if it will equal the splendor of the fantasy I can hold forever." In the preface to the story, Michael Lowenthal suggests that the essay "combines the mythology of northern New England with the mythology of gay life into a perfect fantasy." And in Preston's case, it may be interpreted as "a gay New Englander's take on the afterlife." However, Preston's version also serves to revise earlier down east portraits. For example, Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, with its presentation of Captain Littlepage's dreamlike narrative of a land inhabited by men, and the narrator's homoerotic attraction to Mrs. Todd, remind us that New Englanders have been going down east ever since Morton's crew raised a maypole at Ma-Re Mount. Preston's revision relies on the mythical New England's literary archive as a seemingly inexhaustible genealogy of representation, from which writers can select ancestors stretching back to a stone canoe, slaveship, and the *Mayflower*.

82. Lowenthal, in Winter Light, 165.