

THE WORLD OF REGIONALISM:  
AMERICAN LOCAL COLOR AS A VISUAL PROBLEM, 1820-1900

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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In order to understand American regionalist aesthetics, we must look abroad.

This dissertation tells the story of nineteenth-century regionalism as a locally-specific textual expression of a transnational problem, specifically a problem of vision. A critical preoccupation with the relays between region and nation in regionalist texts has diverted attention away from the transatlantic circulation of aesthetic styles within which American regionalism took shape, thereby producing a narrow view of the formal properties of regionalist texts. By excavating these neglected aesthetic contexts, I show that nineteenth-century anxieties about the arbitrary and conditional nature of human perception—anxieties that both permeated various art forms and transcended national boundaries—are constitutive elements of regionalist literary form. Regional sources constitute a particularly vibrant archive that speaks to how American literature of the late nineteenth century became a site for the circulation of a strikingly modern aesthetic grammar—one that regionalist writers not only drew upon but were actively engaged in developing. Regionalist writers such as George Washington Cable, Washington Irving, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Murfree, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, and Constance Fenimore Woolson were deeply engaged with aesthetic preoccupations that transcended

national concerns. Regionalism therefore resonates with contemporaneous innovations in European fine arts—Impressionism, Paul Cézanne’s landscape paintings—as well as with avant-garde French performance art and the bohemian *fin-de-siècle*. Attending to regionalism’s investment in the scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic explorations of the problem of vision enables a new way of categorizing the literary production of this transitional period of American literature. By making local color writing recognizable as a visual problem, I draw together unfamiliar constellations of texts by means of their relationships to visual styles, visual technologies, and aesthetic movements. Mark Twain’s mode of vision in his foreign travel writing aligns with the disintegrative visual experience of Impressionist representations; George Washington Cable’s magazine writing echoes French Orientalist painting and the gestural language of Parisian cabaret performers; and Mary Murfree’s landscape descriptions resonate with Paul Cézanne’s late landscapes. These case studies add a new layer to our understanding of regionalism in a postnational context.

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I dedicate this achievement to Nana, Pop, and Kamala.

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## Introduction

### American Local Color as a Visual Problem

In order to understand American regionalist aesthetics, we must look abroad. In the pages that follow, I tell the story of regionalism as a locally-specific textual expression of a transnational problem, specifically a problem of vision. I contend that emergent nineteenth-century anxieties about the arbitrary and conditional nature of human perception—anxieties that transcended national boundaries and permeated various art forms—are constitutive elements of regionalist literary form. Because of its engagement with the vicissitudes of vision, regionalism functioned not only as a conservative force of national cohesion in the post-bellum era, but also as a crucible of what Ernest Daudet, in his memoir *Mon Frère et Moi* (1882), referred to repeatedly as the “*modernité*” of Alphonse Daudet’s literary endeavors (James, ADC 229).

Henry James called the term *modernité* a “barbarous substantive,” yet he continued to use it to describe various facets of the new, modern school of writers who were intent on conveying “all the newly-developed, the newly-invented perceptions” (ADC 229) of modern life. James claimed that this “new sense” was “not easily named or classified, but recognisable in all the most characteristic productions of modern art,” and was best described as “a more analytic consideration of appearances” (229). Daudet was “peculiarly modern” because he had “a wonderfully large allowance” of this emergent style that, James wrote, “traces [the associations awakened by things] into the most unlighted corners of our being, into the most devious paths of experience. The appearance of things is constantly more complicated as the world grows older, and it



needs a more and more patient art, a closer notation, to divide it into its parts” (230). Yet art that successfully expressed these associations and divided the world into its parts was also “inveterately synthetic” (James, “Guy de Maupassant” 526) in its attempts to represent “the latest and most composite things” (ADC 229). A fundamental element of this “more patient art” was a particular facility with vision; “to describe [places and things],” James wrote, “we must see them, and some people see, on the same occasion, infinitely more than others. Alphonse Daudet, James pronounced, “is one of those who see most” (ADA 217).

James, in these comments about Daudet and other French writers, was not describing American local color or regionalist writing—he was interested in the relationship between literary realism and what he perceived as French writers’ cultivation of a capacity for “quickness of vision, combined with a talent for specifying and analyzing what they see” (ADA 217). However, to the extent that a central element of the *modernité* he was describing emerged from a tension between increasingly complex understandings of perception and issues of literary and pictorial representation, then local color, I will argue, should be at the center of that discussion. Nineteenth-century regionalist and local color writing also possessed a “tendency to resolve [their] discoveries into pictorial form” (James, ADC 229) and resonances with “the newly-developed, the newly-invented, perceptions” that James found in Daudet’s writing. American regionalism and local color writing of the *fin-de-siècle* represented the problem of locality in highly visual language that situated local particularities in the web of international aesthetic preoccupations described by James. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that local color was more engaged with the aesthetic problems of *modernité* than

other American literary genres, a fact that became apparent in the twentieth century with Faulkner, but which, I contend, was true from its origins.

Regionalism was once considered a primarily elegiac genre, a form that responded to postbellum transformations and anxieties by embalming the anti-modern elements of vanishing local cultures; as Edd Winfield Parks phrased it in his 1941 biography of Mary Murfree, “[o]nly when localism was well on the road to death and decay could men discern its existence” (87). Evaluations of regionalist writing in the early- to mid-twentieth century, such as Fred Lewis Pattee’s *A History of American Literature since 1870* (1915) and Werner Berthoff’s *The Ferment of Realism* (1965), framed regionalism as a preservationist literary mode. In the 1970s and 1980s, regionalism was recuperated as a feminist genre by critics such as Elizabeth Ammons, Josephine Donovan, Judith Fetterley, and Marjorie Pryse—all of whom argued for regionalist writing as a critique of the gendered biases of the American canon. Regionalism then came to the fore in the 1990s as a mode that seemed newly central to literature’s participation in the cultural project of reconciliation in the aftermath of the Civil War; Richard Brodhead, June Howard, Amy Kaplan, Eric Sundquist, and Sandra Zagarell connected the genre in various ways to the ideologies of American expansionism. Brodhead’s assertion that regionalism’s “public function was not just to mourn lost cultures but to purvey a certain story of contemporary cultures and of the relations among them: to tell local cultures into a history of their supersession by a modern order now risen to national dominance” (121) sums up a now-familiar reading of much regionalist fiction as an expression of cultural imperialism.

Such nation-focused assessments of regionalism have given rise to another wave of interest in situating American regionalist writing in transnational frameworks. As Krista Comer has argued, “regionalism offers one method by which to render literary studies more postnational and transnational” (113). Hsuan Hsu has argued, for example, that Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) demonstrates “how global restructuring produces and transforms regions in concrete and material ways” (53). Philip Joseph argued for regionalism’s resistance to global imperatives, contending that the genre “presents us with many models of local community that are incompatible with a globalized world” (3). Jennifer Greeson has shown that George Washington Cable’s short fiction “worked to engage and to validate US intervention” (510) in the postbellum South. These efforts to situate literary regionalism in a postnational framework have tended, like the earlier appraisals of the genre’s nationalist agendas, to focus on the ways that regionalism is either implicated in the material realities of American expansionism or resistant to its ideological imperatives. Hsu’s reading of Jewett in an international context revealed the local place as “a forum for resisting and critiquing nation-states and world systems” (62), while Greeson asserted that Cable’s work serves a “proto-imperial pedagogical function” (510). Brad Evans has resisted the notion that literary regionalism was about local places at all, identifying the genre instead as a particular “dynamic of circulation,” the movement of aesthetic commodities bound up in a “transnational network of distribution” (776-77).

While regionalist writing has been productively situated in such frameworks, the critical preoccupation with nation-building has diverted attention away from the transatlantic circulation of aesthetic styles within which American regionalism took

shape, thereby producing a paradoxically narrow view of the aesthetics of the regionalist texts which are supposed to do such internationalizing ideological work. The critical tendency to focus on the relays between region and nation, and especially on regionalism's accommodation of (or resistance to) the consolidation of American national identity and the ideological imperatives of imperial expansion, has obscured regionalism's ricochet with the history of vision and visual technologies. Yet regional sources constitute a particularly vibrant archive that speaks to how American literature of the *fin-de-siècle* period became a site for the circulation of a strikingly modern aesthetic grammar—one that regionalist writers not only drew upon but were actively engaged in developing. Regionalist writers such as George Washington Cable, Washington Irving, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Murfree, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, and Constance Fenimore Woolson were deeply engaged with aesthetic preoccupations that transcended national concerns.

This dissertation focuses on just one of those engagements: regionalist writers' attention to issues of embodied perception. The emergent understanding of what Jonathan Crary refers to as the “disintegrative limits of vision” (*SP* 88) in the mid- to late nineteenth century led, in turn, to literary expressions of disintegration. Regionalism resonates with contemporaneous innovations in the European fine arts—Impressionism, Paul Cézanne's landscape paintings—as well as with avant-garde French performance art and the bohemian *fin-de-siècle*. This is not an argument for the direct influence of European aesthetic movements on American regionalist writing; rather, it addresses their shared engagement with nascent discourses surrounding embodied perception and visual technologies—what Helen Groth refers to as a “symbiotic relationship between

nineteenth-century literary descriptive techniques and visual technologies,” which was “[f]orged out of a productive tension between literary and material culture” (222).

Regionalism emerges from this analysis as a dynamic genre that resides at the intersection of the local and the international, the visual and the verbal, in which visual technologies such as the panorama, the stereopticon, and the kaleidoscope—the nineteenth-century aesthetic and ideological properties of which have been well-documented by such critics as Crary, John Sears, and Alan Wallach—are constituent elements of literary form.

From James’ discussion of *modernité* and the increasing awareness of the disintegrative nature of perception in the second half of the nineteenth century, a productive dissonance emerges. James identified perception as a key element of *modernité*, yet the disintegrative facets of vision were indispensable to the modern style that James described as “inveterately synthetic.” The texts by the regionalist authors that I examine here exhibit this tension: in their use of pictorial language and formal identification with technologies of vision, these writers grappled with “the latest and most composite things,” while at the same time exploring perceptual disintegration on both thematic and formal levels. Cultivating a deeper understanding of regionalism’s investment in the scientific, philosophical, and aesthetic explorations of the problem of vision enables a new way of categorizing the literary production of this transitional period of American literature. This dissertation presents three case studies that aim for such a rearrangement. By making local color and regionalism recognizable as visual problems, I draw together unfamiliar constellations of texts by means of their relationships to visual styles, visual technologies, and aesthetic movements. Mark

Twain's mode of vision in his foreign travel writing aligns with the disintegrative visual experience of Impressionist representation; George Washington Cable's magazine writing echoes French Orientalist painting and the gestural language of Parisian cabaret performers; and Mary Murfree's landscape descriptions resonate with Cézanne's late landscapes. These lines of inquiry, I hope, will add a new layer to our understanding of regionalism in a postnational context.

In my first chapter, "The Contrasting Visions of Local Color," I reconceptualize "local color" writing by analyzing instances of integrative and disintegrative vision in Mark Twain's foreign and domestic travel writings. When he traveled on U.S. soil (*Roughing It*), Twain described his perceptions as primarily integrative. By contrast, during his foreign travels (in *The Innocents Abroad*, *A Tramp Abroad*, and *Following the Equator*), his vision oscillated between an integrative and a disintegrative mode. This oscillation—the perceptual experience of dissolution, coupled with reintegration—aligns Twain's foreign travel writings with the early efforts of Impressionist painters such as Édouard Manet. As Crary has commented in his work on Manet, in the 1880s pictorial realism was "no longer a question of mimesis but a tenuous relation between perceptual synthesis and dissociation" (*SP* 92). Despite Manet's apparently effortless arrangement of figures and objects in *In the Conservatory* (1879), the "'reality effect'... is the result of having worked to hold something together, to 'contain' things, or to ward off experiences of disintegration" (*SP* 92). Twain's writings about his overseas travels, I argue, provide early instances of this crisis of perception.

Through Twain's travel writings, I strive to broaden the definition of "local color," which has often been used interchangeably with "regionalism" in recent literary

criticism. In the feminist recuperation of regionalist women authors in the 1970s, by contrast, “local color” was deemed a derogatory label that relegated women writers to the sidelines of realist writing, while “regionalism” denoted an aesthetically-serious literary endeavor. Divesting local color of this resilient critical hold allows us to recover the nineteenth-century resonance of “local” color as *foreign* color, thereby framing it as a broader category that encompasses regionalist narratives and travel writing about both domestic and foreign locales. As W. P. James noted in 1897, the phrase “local color” “has been used at different times and on different lips to signify two distinct and almost opposite things. It has been used on the one hand to signify the magic of the unfamiliar, the romance of the unknown regions ‘over the hills and far away;’ it is used, on the other hand, to signify the intimate touch of familiarity, the harvest of the quiet eye and loving spirit in their own little corner of earth” (22). Edd Winfield Parks claimed that this “original meaning” of local color “never quite carried over into English and American literature” (89); broadening the definition of American local color writing to include both Harriet Beecher Stowe’s New England regionalism and Twain’s foreign travel narratives demonstrates the tension between competing modes of vision that was one of the driving forces behind the interest in local color writing.

A key component of my approach to this revision of local color’s scope is the genre’s relationship to the history of vision and the place of visual apparatuses such as the panorama and the stereopticon in that history. Local color, in my analysis, is no longer a subset of regionalism but rather a more inclusive concept. Regionalism, I argue, is a literary genre characterized by an integrative vision—a mode of representation that constructs locality in terms of unified, coherent, and collective visual experience. The

foreign travel mode of local color writing, on the other hand, offers frequent moments of disintegrative vision, a subjective perceptual experience that reveals the constant metamorphosis and evanescence of the visual field. The term “local color” underlines this visual tension that defines the genre.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1869 regionalist novel *Oldtown Folks* employed an integrative vision, the seeming “naturalness” of which—like that of Manet’s *In the Conservatory*—was carefully constructed to ward off disintegration. Twain’s domestic travel writings, particularly *Roughing It* (1872), resonate more with the integrative mode of Stowe’s novel than with the perceptual disintegration that characterize his accounts of travel overseas. Twain’s literary efforts encoded the tensions and oscillations between integrative and disintegrative vision that drove aesthetic innovation in the visual arts (particularly Impressionism) during the same period. By demonstrating this, I show that emergent understandings of the act of seeing were themselves both exceptionally mobile world travelers and constitutive elements of literary form. While Stowe’s integrative vision idealized the achievement of national consolidation, Twain’s expressions of foreign locality were unevenly rooted in the subjectivity and multiple contingencies of vision. Rather than being merely oppositional, these forces were constitutive of one another and led to the interpretive significance of local color writing—both domestic and foreign, encompassing not only regionalism but also travel writing—in the literary imagination of late-nineteenth-century America.

In *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), for example, Twain’s prose style at moments of prolonged, intense looking corresponds to the dissolve between fixed images that was the hallmark of the stereopticon or magic lantern—or the constant rearrangement of elements



of the visual field that characterized the kaleidoscope. Throughout *Innocents*, Twain oscillated between striving for a sense of distance from and control over the visual field and surrendering to the instabilities of shifting, ineffable visual experiences. When Twain recounted his travels on U.S. soil, however, his visual register was almost exclusively panoramic; the sweeping vistas of *Roughing It* induced an unproblematic visual absorption. Twain's foreign travel writing departed from regionalism in its openness to disintegration; kaleidoscopic vision emerged as an alternative to the conventional panoramic landscape. This dissolution of cohesive vision may not have been intentional on Twain's part; rather, the visual excess of foreign travel—what he referred to more than once as “surfeited sight”—catalyzed the disintegration of a singular visual field into an array of unstable parts.

By recuperating this nineteenth-century meaning of local color, I aim to provide a broader conceptual framework that will enable a reading of texts such as *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It* as divergent yet interlinked, complementary, and mutually constitutive experiments in the kind of literary vision James associated with that “barbarous substantive,” *modernité*. Seen through this lens, nineteenth-century American literature that privileges place engaged an international framework through its alignment, whether conscious or otherwise, of the complex and often contradictory experience of embodied vision with burgeoning aesthetic movements that transcended the nation's borders. I read Twain's travel writings not as “enabling and enabled by the changing borders of imperial expansion” (Kaplan 52), but as manifestations of the broader aesthetic enterprise of local color writing, wherein the forces of disintegration included not only the political issues noted by Kaplan and others, but also the forces exerted on the

human sensorium and consciousness by modern, urban experience in the Age of Tourism. I also hope to show that the integrative vision of regionalism, which struck nineteenth century writers—and tends to strike us—as more “natural” than a fractured, disjunctive visual field, was in fact more carefully-constructed, perhaps more artificial, than the disintegrative vision that expressed a more immediate perceptual experience—one that diverged from the constraints of ideology and genre.

Having made this intervention towards redefining the genre of local color based on the underlying aesthetic tensions in which such writing is rooted, I turn to “George Washington Cable’s ‘Paris in the swamps,’” which situates Cable’s essays about New Orleans Creole culture in a heretofore unrecognized visual-cultural context. Critical assessments of Cable’s essays have clung tenaciously to the notion that they were ethnographic, reinforcing the view of regionalism as a genre that embalms vanishing local cultures. I show, however, that Cable reinvented the slave dances of Congo Square in the image of a distinctly modern, immensely popular, and internationally-known new type of performer in the late-nineteenth-century Parisian cabaret: the *chanteuse épileptique* or Epileptic Singer. By situating Cable’s writing for the *Century* in relation to Edward Windsor Kemble’s accompanying illustrations, and by placing both within the parameters of late-nineteenth-century American periodical publication, I further our understanding of regionalism as an international genre. Both Cable and Kemble routed their representations of race through the contemporary lenses of French Orientalism and Parisian avant-garde performance art. It has been tempting to read American periodicals of the postbellum period as conservative forces that simultaneously commodified and papered over sectional differences in the service of constructing a nationalist identity. In

addition, in the view of many commentators, Congo Square appealed to “Africanist Francophiles” (Widmer 77) like Cable and Lafcadio Hearn because it represented vanishing aspects of African culture. However, Cable’s magazine writing—particularly the serialized novel *The Grandissimes* (1880) and the pair of essays “The Dance in Place Congo” and “Creole Slave Songs” (1886)—were part of a broader trend in illustrated American periodicals, in which writing about North Africa and the American South both processed and produced racial otherness through written and visual representations of nervous afflictions.

These aesthetic preoccupations suggest that both Cable and Kemble reframed early-nineteenth-century New Orleans history—a history already replete with French influences—through the lens of a *contemporary* constellation of French representations of racial otherness that bore no direct connection to either American imperial efforts or Africanist cultural retentions. Rather, the American magazines that were the primary forum for regionalist writing by Cable and others in the post-bellum period also became vehicles for the circulation of a strikingly modern and composite aesthetic grammar—one that featured points of intersection among Orientalist imagery, emergent understandings of nervous disease, and theories of contagion in the literary, visual, and performing arts. I show how components of the Epileptic Singers’ performance style, and the myriad representations of their physiques and body language in French popular culture, are relevant to a new understanding of both Cable’s essays and late-nineteenth-century American monthlies. American periodicals circulated the notion that exposure to epileptic movement sparks disintegration: the erosion of self-control, the dissolution of the rational mind’s sway over the body. Cable’s *Century* essays epitomize tensions that

pervaded American magazines during this period: between an ethnographic impulse and the lure of contemporary aesthetics; between the integrative, containing function of literary preservationism and the contagious, *disintegrative*, boundary-violating excess of epileptic movement.

In this chapter, I also reframe the relationship between Cable's *Century* essays and Kemble's accompanying illustrations. Some critics, including Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, have taken for granted the illustrative quality of Kemble's images—their continuity with Cable's text. The epileptic energy of Cable's writing, however, reveals the dissonances and disjunctions between his text and Kemble's illustrations, rather than their cohesion or mutual reinforcement. The dissonance between Kemble's illustrations and Cable's text results from their investment in divergent yet complementary modes of representation—Kemble's aesthetically-restrained illustrations presented the Congo Square dances as a neatly packaged Orientalist commodity relegated safely to the past, while Cable drew his *Century* readers into the ring, exposing them to the “quick contagion” of convulsive movement. This was not Cable's longing for the Africanist culture of the past, but his insistence on its persistence into the present, its inherent compatibility with the current vogue for contagion. Cable made spectators of his readers, delivering the threat and thrill of contagion into their homes via the periodical's printed page.

Taken together, Cable's text and Kemble's images represent a Jamesian composite: Cable's essays are pictorial, commanding his readers to visualize (and internalize) the disintegrative elements of the Congo Square dances through the contemporary discourses of epileptic movement and contagion; Kemble's illustrations

evoke the restrained form and imperialist flavor of Jean-Leon Gérôme's canvases. The dissonance between these modes lay at the heart of the sensibility of *modernité*, which was, paradoxically, both synthetic and disintegrative. As his re-creation of the Congo Square dances in both the *Century* essays and *The Grandissimes* reveals, Cable's conception of the local was a hybrid mode that fused local artifacts and histories with contemporary and international aesthetic trends. Cable's magazine writing and Kemble's illustrations enacted a compositing visual turn, transforming literary subjects into pictorial form while simultaneously engaging theories about "modern nerves" and contagious transmission that permeated *fin-de-siècle* representations of sensory experience.

In the third and final chapter, "Landscape Painting and the Visual Scale of American Regionalism," I argue that while regionalism has come to be associated with the diminutive in both scope and scale, various regionalist writers engaged with the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of panoramic American landscape representations. The seemingly unmediated, documentary quality of regionalism has encouraged an emphasis on minutiae in both its form and content. Details such as dialect and intricate descriptions of places off the beaten track, along with the brevity of regionalism's signal form, the sketch, have led to critical assessments of regionalism's aesthetic and canonical smallness. Based on these assessments, regionalist writing would seem to have little in common with the circular panorama, one of the nineteenth century's most popular spectacles.<sup>1</sup> However, in this chapter, I argue that Washington Irving, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Murfree all engaged with the contemporaneous discourse of panoramic vision,

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<sup>1</sup> Viewing the circular panorama required spectators to climb a tower to a viewing platform, which positioned them in such a way as to induce a sense of "presid[ing] over all visibility" (Wallach 82-83).

which in turn highlights various congruencies and discontinuities with the tradition of American landscape painting. Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) predominantly adhered to a panoramic mode of landscape representation, while Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and Murfree's *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1885), among other writings, departed from this mode in ways that reveal regionalism's use of scalar inversion and its affinities with the abstraction of Paul Cézanne's landscape painting.

Building upon Alan Wallach's analysis of Thomas Cole's painting *The Oxbow* (1836), I consider the ways that regionalist writers adopted, adapted, or undercut the conventions of the traditional panoramic landscape. Wallach distinguishes between the panoramic view and the *panoptic* view, pointing out that Jeremy Bentham's invention of the panopticon was nearly contemporaneous with the emergence of the panorama.<sup>2</sup> The panoptic view "was panoramic in the everyday sense of that terms because it covered the entire lateral circuit of visibility; but it was also intensive or telescopic because it aspired to control every element within the visual field" (Wallach 83). *The Oxbow* depicts a popular tourist attraction of the 1820s and 1830s, a view of the Connecticut Valley from Mount Holyoke; it is now considered an originary Hudson River School landscape that epitomizes what Wallach has referred to as the "grafting of panoramic convention onto landscape" (82). Wallach defined the "panoptic sublime" as the experience of "a sudden access of power, a dizzying sense of having suddenly come into possession of a terrain

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<sup>2</sup> Stephan Oettermann, in *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997) and Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) have also connected the panorama and the panopticon as ideologically-inflected and politically useful visual technologies. For general background on the status and uses of the panorama in nineteenth-century visual culture, see Ralph Hyde, *Panoromania! The Art and Entertainment of the 'All-Embracing' View* (London: Trefoil Publications, 1988).

stretching as far as the eye could see” (83). Jewett and Murfree inverted elements of panoramic landscapes in ways that rupture this sense of panopticism: Jewett inverted micro- and macrocosmic elements of her landscapes, while Murfree reversed foregrounds and backgrounds. While Irving’s sketches were, by and large, congruent with the mode of the panoptic sublime, they also hinted at the inversions of scale that characterized Jewett and Murfree’s later work. These inversions and indeterminacies—particularly those in Murfree’s writing—problematize an understanding of regionalist writing as simply a subset of realism. The regionalist engagement with panoramic landscape also challenges the notion that regionalist sketches are of a humbler scale than other sorts of literature, since assessments of their literary value have been based, in some measure, upon the apparently spontaneous and unfinished nature of the sketch.

I begin with instances in James Fenimore Cooper’s writing that emblemize the American landscape tradition instantiated by Cole’s *The Oxbow*. In *The Pioneers* (1836), Cooper presents a landscape rendered in the panoptic mode, which is simultaneously extensive and intensive—meaning that it provided a sense of power not only over a large visual field but also produced a sense of visual mastery over small details of that landscape. Irving’s landscapes were, for the most part, firmly entrenched in the mode of the panoptic sublime, aligning them with the Hudson River School style and with the visual idiom of *The Oxbow*—perhaps unexpectedly so, since Cole’s impossibly-wide panoramic view seems diametrically opposed to the visual metaphor of the “sketch.” The resonances of the sketch as a preparatory, spontaneous, unpolished form do overlap, however, with those of the simultaneously expansive and telescopically-detailed panorama. Despite the obvious disparity in scale between the sketch and the panorama,

these forms shared fundamental concerns rooted in the changing nature of perception. While Cooper's writing was rife with unproblematic panoramas and Irving's sketches merely hinted at the tension between expansive and telescopic views, their uses of landscape set the stage for Jewett and Murfree's deeper exploration of inversions in relation to landscape.

Jewett's inversions of telescopic details and panoramic landscape views suggest that we should understand her work as both an evolution and a break from Irving and Cooper's panoptic visions. Jewett used landscape as a primary form for exploring the possibilities of such inversions, in particular their ability to articulate the complex interrelations of locally-specific attributes and broader worldviews. She rejected the romantic, nationalist landscape tradition that drove Cooper, Irving, and Cole; for Jewett, deep meaning, interpersonal connection, and permanence were only to be found in modest things, and the microscopic scale, not the panoptic view, wielded power. Jewett's work made clear the minute possibilities of expansive vision; her characters' relationships to the landscape revealed panoramic views as limiting and tiny pieces of the landscape as capable of expanding human experience. It was precisely this inversion of visual scale that allowed for the cultivation of intimacy; minute details were "attaching," while idealized descriptions of landscape were associated with disconnected men.

In the work of Jewett and Murfree, expansive views of the local landscape highlight the fact that the aesthetics of the panorama and the miniature were not mutually exclusive; rather, they bled into or gave rise to one another. Murfree's landscape descriptions convey what Carol Armstrong has called a "hallucinatory indeterminacy of scale" (48), at times prefiguring the aesthetic qualities we now associate with Cézanne's



landscape paintings: the disruption of classical perspective, especially of the “proper” relationships between foreground and background. This occurs on both formal and thematic levels: Murfree focused on landscape description to the detriment of plot and character development, thereby reversing the relative significance of what would be classified in the visual arts as figure and ground. She also reversed foreground and background elements *within* her landscape descriptions, creating a sense of disorientation and visual disjunction that aligns her writing with the changing understandings of the nature of perception at that historical moment. Murfree’s depictions of the natural world produced, paradoxically, a loss of naturalness in terms of narrative. Her stories are not without narrative progression, but the temporal dimension of Murfree’s landscapes expanded and contracted in non-traditional ways to accommodate the unpredictable permutations of her visual fields. I counter critics’ dismissal of Murfree’s odes to landscape as irrelevant digressions (as one critic memorably put it, she “works her moon too hard”) by reframing these landscapes as moving toward a modernist visual idiom in their retreat from illusionistically convincing representations of nature.

I return to my original proposition: in order to gain a fuller understanding of American regionalist aesthetics, we must look abroad. In doing so, we uncover local color’s unexpected resonances with European, especially French, aesthetics. That resonance exists because Twain, Cable, Jewett, and Murfree drew aesthetic inspiration from the same perceptual well as Manet, Polaire (the most famous of the Epileptic Singers), and Cézanne. While local color has not, in general, been the genre most strongly associated with a modernist visual idiom, it certainly points toward and participates in that idiom’s emergence. The *modernité* of regionalism, its interest in “the

latest and most composite things”—the coexistence of integrative and disintegrative vision and of macro- and microcosmic visual scales, for instance—demonstrates this. The three case studies that follow will, I hope, set the stage for further inquiry into the literary manifestations of the reproduction and transatlantic circulation of texts, images, and aesthetic styles in the nineteenth century.

## Chapter 1: The Contrasting Visions of Local Color

Mark Twain is often described as a regionalist, but cases can be made for attaching him to a number of regions: the American West; the Mississippi River Valley; the Old Southwest, via the humorist tradition; Europe, the Holy Lands, and South America. Lawrence Berkove has discussed the difficulties inherent in classifying Twain as a regionalist: his “unusual mobility” within the United States and its territories, combined with his “impressive qualifications as an American international author,” mean that Twain “cannot be adequately comprehended and appreciated without taking regional influences into consideration,” but “neither can he be restricted to any one region” (496). This difficulty points to the close alignment of the thematic concerns and critical conceptions of regionalism and travel writing; it also raises the fundamental and much-debated question of what makes a literary work or an author count as “regionalist” in the first place. In this chapter, I call attention to a fault line between Twain’s domestic and foreign travel writing—based on the distinction between “integrative” and “disintegrative” modes of vision that were rooted in shifting nineteenth-century understandings of embodied perception. I also demonstrate how the aesthetic manifestations of these transformations align Twain’s travel writing with the painterly innovations of the early Impressionist movement, which, as Jules-Antoine Castagnary noted in 1874, “render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape” (Eisenman 191). By considering Twain’s travel writing in relation to the work of other American regionalists and travel writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Constance

Fenimore Woolson, I also recuperate a more capacious concept of “local color” that accommodates both regionalism and foreign travel writing.

“Local color” has long been a contested term, especially in its relationship to the regionalist sketch. In recent literary criticism, the two terms are often used interchangeably; in her discussion of George Washington Cable, for instance, Stephanie Foote wrote that “[i]t is through the genre and conventions of local-color fiction or regionalism” that Cable negotiates the relationship of his characters’ local identities to the nation (*Regional Fictions* 98).<sup>3</sup> However, local color has also been criticized as a derogatory label that depreciates the achievements of regionalist authors, particularly women writers. A notable example of the latter category is Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse’s feminist reassessment of such writers as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. “While the cultural attitudes reflected in local color may be understood as conducive to the political imperialism of the Theodore Roosevelt era,” Fetterley and Pryse claimed, “the critique of those attitudes apparent in an analysis of regionalist texts offered readers an opportunity to think in ways radically different from those of the local colorists” (*Writing Out of Place* 30). They summed up the distinction between regionalist and local color writing in terms of an ethically-inflected visibility; regionalism connotes “looking with,” while local color implies “looking at” (36).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Carrie Tirado Bramen, in *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), asserts: “I use ‘regionalism’ and ‘local color’ interchangeably. Although Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have claimed that the latter is a touristic mode of representing regions while the former is more empathic, I find June Howard’s distinction more pertinent to my purposes. For Howard, local color refers to a specific period, whereas regionalism is a more general movement not confined to the turn of the century” (315, n. 1).

<sup>4</sup> Fetterley and Pryse also make a temporal distinction between the two genres, claiming that regionalist writing preceded the Civil War, while local color was a mode that is “clearly identifiable as a product of the post-Civil War environment” (*Writing Out of Place* 104).

Debate over the meaning of “local color”—as well as its possible relationship to the act of seeing—did not begin with late-twentieth-century literary critics. In *Crumbling Idols*, Hamlin Garland famously defined local color as a writer’s spontaneous reflection of “the life which goes on around him,” and as “natural and unstrained art” (62):

Local color in a novel means that it has such quality of texture and back-ground that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native. It means a statement of life as indigenous as the plant-growth. It means that the picturesque shall not be seen by the author, —that every tree and bird and mountain shall be dear and companionable and necessary, not picturesque; the tourist cannot write the local novel.<sup>5</sup> (64)

In her 1932 essay “Regionalism in American Fiction,” Mary Austin inverted Garland’s formulation, arguing that *only* the tourist, or the writer with a culturally-exploitive sensibility, could write the novel of local color. For Austin, the true regionalist text presented a narrative that could not have occurred elsewhere (100); region “must enter constructively into the story, as another character, as the instigator of plot” (105). Notably, Austin’s distinction between regionalism and local color writing was, like Fetterley and Pryse’s, delivered in terms of vision. The American “reading public” preferred not the regionalist text, which provided “the proverbial bird’s-eye view of the American scene,” but the local-color story, which did not require an author’s presence in a region long enough to “absorb” its essence as it “[came] up through the land” (Austin 107, 101). Readers, she asserted, prefer “what you might call an automobile view, something slithering and blurred, nothing so sharply discriminated that it arrests the speed-numbed mind to understand, characters like garish gas stations picked out with electric lights” (107).

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<sup>5</sup> Garland also elides the local with the national, however: “local color means national character” (63).

My aim in this chapter is to disentangle local color from regionalism, not by casting it out of the regionalist fold as an exploitive subgenre, but by disrupting its synonymy with regionalism and reinstituting its nineteenth-century meaning as a broader term encompassing both regionalist narratives set on U.S. soil and accounts of exotic foreign travel. “Local color” has a long history as a contested and often paradoxical term, but it carried different overtones at the *fin-de-siècle* than in the mid- to late twentieth century. As W. P. James noted in 1897,

the phrase has been used at different times and on different lips to signify two distinct and almost opposite things. It has been used on the one hand to signify the magic of the unfamiliar, the romance of the unknown regions ‘over the hills and far away;’ it is used, on the other hand, to signify the intimate touch of familiarity, the harvest of the quiet eye and loving spirit in their own little corner of earth. (22)

Rather than a tension between an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective on the local place, then, for James “local color” encapsulated a tension between domestic color and *foreign* color. In the late nineteenth century, the label “local color” was applied to travel writing about exotic locales—“the magic of the unfamiliar”—as well as to Garland’s organic “statement of life as indigenous as plant-growth.” W. P. James noted that “[w]hen Eugène de Nully was in Africa, his friend Gautier wrote to him, ‘Just send me a few pots of local colour, and I will make famous Turkish and Algerian stories’...Everything foreign was in favour, everything French at a discount” (16). Gautier’s request demonstrates the slippage between domestic and foreign color: the Frenchman considered himself perfectly capable of writing Turkish and Algerian stories, in stark contrast to Garland’s declaration that it was “unnatural and artificial to find an American writing novels of Russia or Spain or the Holy Land,” and whose ideal local

colorist did not “put in” local color merely “for the sake of local color” (62, 64). In Gautier’s formulation, local color was an exotic, and mobile, commodity.

A cornerstone of Mary Louise Pratt’s methodology in her discussion of travel writing and imperial tropes was the notion that “important historical transitions alter the way people write, because they alter people’s experiences and the way people imagine, feel and think about the world they live in” (4). In what follows, I show that one such transition—the sea change in understandings of human perception during the latter half of the nineteenth century—manifested in the *formal* qualities of both travel narrative and regionalist writing. This fundamental shift was among the “important historical transitions” to which Pratt refers, and it, too, altered the way that writers portrayed locales both foreign and domestic in the post-bellum era. Seen through this lens, American literature that privileges place engaged an international framework not only because it endorsed or resisted imperialism, but also because its attempts to render the experience of embodied vision aligned with burgeoning aesthetic movements that transcended the nation’s borders. Twain’s travel writings may have been “enabling and enabled by the changing borders of imperial expansion” (Kaplan 52), but they were also manifestations of the broader aesthetic enterprise of local color writing. Attending to these facets of Twain’s work reveals overlooked formal elements of his prose; this, ironically, makes some of the recent attempts to situate Twain’s work in postnational contexts seem rather too provincial.

This theorization of local color also clarifies the formal distinctions among regionalism and foreign and domestic travel writing in the second half of the nineteenth century. “As a composite literary form, Jeffrey Alan Melton has argued, travel writing

“resists neat categorization” (“Mark Twain and Travel Writing” 340-41). Various critics have noted that both regionalism and travel writing are hybrid genres that incorporate elements of fiction, nonfiction, autobiography, and ethnography.<sup>6</sup> Both regionalist sketches and travel narratives concern themselves with questions of belonging: who is an insider or native, and who an outsider or foreigner?<sup>7</sup> In *Roughing It*, for instance, the members of Twain’s group were pitied in the West as “emigrants,” their city-slicker status becoming a detriment rather than an asset:

...many a time in Nevada, afterwards, we had occasion to remember with humiliation that we were ‘emigrants,’ and consequently a low and inferior sort of creatures. Perhaps the reader has visited Utah, Nevada, or California, even in these latter days, and while communing with himself upon the sorrowful banishment of these countries from what he considers ‘the world,’ has had his wings clipped by finding that he is the one to be pitied, and that there are entire populations around him ready and willing to do it for him—yea, who are complacently doing it for him already, wherever he steps his foot. (160)

Both genres frequently reveal more about the traveler’s preconditioned expectations and cultural norms than about the place visited, and both aroused the “imagination of acquisitiveness” (Brodhead 133) in nineteenth-century readers.

In what follows, I focus primarily on Twain’s travel writings—both domestic and foreign—to reframe local color as a more capacious and inclusive concept. A key component of my approach is the relationship of local color writing to the history of vision and the place of specific visual apparatuses such as the panorama, the stereopticon, and the kaleidoscope in that history. Placed in this context, nineteenth-century local color is no longer a subset of regionalism, a genre delimited by geographic or temporal boundaries, or an ethical position that expressed a “looking at,” but rather a category

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of this generic flexibility, see Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen’s introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> As Stephanie Foote has noted: “Because it is concerned with place, regional writing is deeply concerned with who is a native and who a stranger” (“The Cultural Work of American Regionalism” 36).



encompassing diverse narrative modes inflected by complex, shifting, and often contradictory understandings of perception. Foreign travel writing during the post-bellum period, which took as its subject “the magic of the unfamiliar,” expressed what I will refer to as a disintegrative vision.<sup>8</sup> Writing about American locales, on the other hand—what we usually refer to as regionalism—was demarcated not only by its representation of “the intimate touch of familiarity,” but also by its attempts to construct an integrative vision. The point, however, is to recognize the extent to which these modes of vision were mutually constitutive, the one playing off the other: they were both, in historical terms, “local color.”

When Twain wrote about his travels on American soil, particularly in *Roughing It*, he cleaved to a mode of representation that constructed locality in terms of integrative—unified, coherent, and collective—visual experience. His foreign travel writing, on the other hand, expressed a disintegrative or kaleidoscopic vision,<sup>9</sup> locating narrative power in the oscillation between integrative vision and a subjective, unreliable visual experience that revealed the constant metamorphosis and evanescence of visual data. In *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain’s mode of seeing often strained for integration but conveyed an awareness of the multiple contingencies of embodied perception—contingencies that produced a shifting, destabilized, and fragmented visual field. By demonstrating how Twain’s literary expressions of this tension paralleled the oscillations between integrative and disintegrative vision that drove aesthetic innovation in the visual and performing arts during the same period, I show that emergent understandings of the

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<sup>8</sup> I have adapted this term from Jonathan Crary’s discussion of the “disintegrative limits of vision” in French Impressionist painting (*SP* 88).

<sup>9</sup> I use the terms “disintegrative” and “kaleidoscopic” interchangeably when referring to perception.

act of seeing were themselves exceptionally mobile world travelers and constitutive elements of literary form.

# 1. The mirror and the kaleidoscope

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* (1869) and Twain's wildly popular travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, published in the same year, represent two competing aesthetics under the broader rubric of local color writing. Guiding both authors was a concern with the powers and limitations of vision—with what it means to look and the stakes that attach to representing what one sees. But while *Oldtown Folks* is a poster child for the integrative vision of post-bellum American regionalist fiction in its coming of age, Twain's book of foreign travel showcased the disintegrative vision that was its doppelganger. Stowe made a particular mode of seeing—an integrative vision—central to understanding the “seminal period” of New England's history under consideration in *Oldtown Folks*. “In doing this work,” her narrator Horace Holyoke comments in the book's preface, “I have tried to make my mind as still and passive as a looking-glass, or a mountain lake, and then to give you merely the images reflected there. I desire that you should see the characteristic persons of those times, and hear them talk; and sometimes I have taken an author's liberty of explaining their characters to you, and telling you why they talked and lived as they did” (3). Stowe positioned Holyoke as no more and no less than a “sympathetic spectator” of “real characters, real scenes, and real incidents” (3). He is a self-professed “observer and reporter, seeing much,” who strives to represent faithfully that which he observes (4). Holyoke's description of his narrative as a mirror inscribes a reflective visuality as key to the book's narrative strategy.<sup>10</sup>

Stowe's novel casts a nostalgic eye over the New England of nearly a century before, pronouncing the “New England theocracy” of the post-revolutionary period “the

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<sup>10</sup> In *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), Pam Morris presents a critique of the tendency to think of literary realism in terms of reflection and mirroring: “literary realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents” (4).

simplest, purest, and least objectionable state of society that the world ever saw” (191). If post-Civil War America aimed to cultivate true egalitarianism, the logic of *Oldtown Folks* ran, it should look to late-eighteenth-century New England for its model. In the preface, Holyoke comments: “My object is to interpret to the world the New England life and character in that particular time of its history which may be called the seminal period. I would endeavor to show you New England in its *seed-bed*, before the hot suns of modern progress had developed its sprouting germs into the great trees of to-day” (3; Stowe’s emphasis). Citing the “dead formalism” of Puritanism and the tenacious vestiges of a hierarchical social structure (39), Stowe acknowledged that the utopian promise of eighteenth-century New England was never fully realized.<sup>11</sup> *Oldtown Folks* sought to revive that latent promise by calling attention to particularly promising features of New England’s history and bygone ways of life. The novel found in the soil of pre-revolutionary New England qualities that might prove vitally important to healing the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War. The “seeds of democratic social equality,” for instance, that “lay as yet ungerminated” (48) in post-revolutionary Massachusetts might prove viable in the soil of post-bellum America.

The notion that a collective, integrative visual sensibility was integral to post-bellum American literature was advanced by Edwin Cady in *The Light of Common Day* (1971), which proposed that the “principal American realists” created a collective body of literature undergirded by a “theory of common vision” (5). Predictably, Cady had only male writers like Henry James, Mark Twain, and Theodore Dreiser in mind, but his

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<sup>11</sup> Stowe’s nostalgia for a New England prior to the “hot suns of modern progress” epitomizes the now-familiar (and largely debunked, but tenacious) interpretation of regionalist writing as purely elegiac. As Edd Winfield Parks phrased it in his 1941 biography of Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Murfree), “throughout the country sentimental persons watched the disappearance of local individualities, only half conscious of such disappearance, with a nostalgic pang. Only when localism was well on the road to death and decay could men discern its existence. The war increased this awareness of sectional differences” (87).

theory of realist vision also applies directly to Stowe's *Oldtown Folks*. The phrase "light of common day," borrowed from William Dean Howells, proposed that realist literature serves a reflective function like the one Holyoke describes: "the words of the text on the page in their patterns" reliably evoke "art as experience" in any given reader, by "impelling his imagination to create that experience subjectively" (18). For Cady, realism delivered a direct, one-to-one correlation between "art-experience" and "non-art experiences," meaning that "in some meaningful sense art-experiences and non-art experiences can be paired as with A to A-1, B to B-1, etc" (19). Likewise, with national reunification and reconstruction in view, Stowe's narrator aimed to use "the words of the text on the page in their patterns" to convey "one kind, a dominant variety, of non-art experience," or "one sort of reality common to almost everybody" (Cady 18, 20).<sup>12</sup>

Central to both Cady's theory of realism and Stowe's brand of regionalism in *Oldtown Folks* is what I would describe as an integrative vision. The notion that an observer-narrator who "sees much" can create a readership, the members of which share a common vision or readerly experience, is essential to the claim Stowe makes for regional histories and literatures as potentially vital connective tissues of national cohesion. *Oldtown Folks* is both expansive and inclusive, calling to mind Amy Kaplan's

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<sup>12</sup> Literary realism, in other words, is "the art-variety of a 'real' order of non-art experience—an order, that is, which even those who held deeply opposed temperamental and metaphysical notions of ultimate reality might agree to accept as 'real' in some useful and common, even though minimal, sense" (19). While Cady affirms that "literary realism has nothing special to do with 'reality' as such" (15), his insistence on the uniformity of subjective effect and the direct correspondence between "art-experience" and "non-art experience" suggests that literary realism has quite a lot to do with reality as such. The phrase "light of common day" is meant to evoke realism's democratic vision, yet Cady's description of that vision as a "dominant variety" of experience exhibits a totalizing bent. Cady admits the difficulties of defining realism "across patterns of culture or down historical perspectives" (18), but he nonetheless insists that "literary experience is mainly shared experience," a "means of communion by which one may realize degrees of his oneness with other men, with authors, critics, teachers, and, above all, other readers both near in time or culture and far away" (215). This simultaneous acknowledgment and disavowal of literary realism's contingency upon the specificities of time, place, and culture—Cady's iron grip on the notion of universality—may explain why his argument now seems outdated.

use of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" to describe the cultural work of American regionalist writing. An example of Stowe's integrative vision is the Oldtown residents' treatment of the nomadic Indians:

Oldtown had in many respects a peculiar sort of society. The Indian tribe that once had been settled in its vicinity had left upon the place the tradition of a sort of wandering, gypsy, tramping life, so that there was in the town an unusual number of that roving, uncertain class of people, who are always falling into want, and needing to be helped, hanging like tattered fringe on the thrifty and well-kept petticoat of New England society. (23)

While they were marginal figures, the "tattered fringe" clinging to New England's petticoat, the roving Indians also served a crucial function within Oldtown's social order: they provided the occasion for Oldtown "natives" to practice generosity, and thus to solidify their sense of themselves as a beneficent and democratic community. Among the Oldtown residents, there were "certain well-established ranks and orders in social positions"; paradoxically, however, they also associated with one another another "on terms of strict equality" (49). Stowe wrote that "[t]he traditions of tenderness, pity, and indulgence" that governed the townspeople's treatment of all outsiders to their community provided the Indians with "certain established rights in every household, which in those days no one ever thought of disowning" (49). Stowe's wandering Indians stood in for recently-emancipated slaves: they, too, were an "uncertain class," recently unmoored from their "well-established rank" in American society. Treating them benevolently, *Oldtown Folks* implied, would foster a social climate all but devoid of "the embarrassing, dreadful social problems and mysteries of life" (192). Even the nomads, who by definition were not tied to any one locality, constituted an integral part of Oldtown's sense of place.

Twain's foreign travel writing, by contrast, engaged what Jonathan Crary has referred to as the "disintegrative limits of vision" (*SP* 88). Beginning in the 1860s, Édouard Manet, Crary argues, was the first modern artist to explore the aesthetic possibilities of the disintegrative qualities of perception. In the first half of the nineteenth century, human vision came to be recognized through new scientific discoveries as faulty, unreliable, and arbitrary, rather than as objective or certain. By midcentury, "the eye cease[d] to be a window, with transparent and reflective properties"—it could not be counted on to provide, that is, the mirrorlike narration to which Horace Holyoke aspired. Embodied perception became "something more evanescent, [the visual field's] substantiality irrevocably discredited"; for Crary, Manet's work "dramatizes the evaporation of a cohesive world that is perceived collectively" (83-84). Under this new paradigm, Cady's conception of realist literature as a medium that creates for readers a uniform affective experience, a "sort of reality common to almost everybody" (20), cannot hold; there is no common vision, and "art-experiences" and "non-art experiences" can no longer be reliably reproduced or paired in any meaningful sense. Nor can we trust Horace Holyoke's promise to pass on to readers "merely the images reflected" in what he imagined as the still, passive looking-glass of his mind.

Twain's foreign travel writing, no less than Manet's *The Balcony* (1868), exhibits the aesthetic markers of this emergent discourse of disintegrative vision: "the unmeasurable but tangible pulse of a suspended moment hovering between a functional operation of vision and the atemporal undulations of reverie" (Crary, *SP* 88). Twain's writing, like Manet's painting at the same historical moment, oscillated between "a binding together of vision, an obsessive holding together of perception to maintain the

viability of a functional real world” on the one hand; and “various kinds of sensory or cognitive breakdown” on the other (Crary, *SP* 91-92). Twain’s prose sporadically enacted what William James identified in “The Stream of Consciousness” as “the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life” (164). James described the “perpetual rearrangement” of the brain in visual terms: “As in a kaleidoscope revolving at a uniform rate, although the figures are always rearranging themselves, there are instants during which the transformation seems minute and interstitial and almost absent, followed by others when it shoots with magical rapidity, relatively stable forms thus alternating with forms we should not distinguish if seen again” (162). James theorized attention as a process of exclusion, in which human senses (“organs of selection”) shaped individual experience from the “infinite chaos of movements” that constituted the world (169). By the late nineteenth century, any stabilization of the perceptual field was recognized as tenuous and temporary; the kaleidoscope became more apt than the “light of common day” as an analogue for human perception.

If we place *The Innocents Abroad* alongside Stowe’s *Oldtown Folks*, what emerges is the story of American local color as a genre that alternately resisted, circumvented, or gave way to this new understanding of the vicissitudes of perception. Twain’s engagement with the nascent discourse of disintegrative vision was sporadic and ambivalent, but there were moments at which his descriptions of tourist attractions grappled with the breakdown of a cohesive visual field. The result was an *uncommon*, or anti-communal, vision—one that was utterly individual and not reproducible, and that therefore could not claim to reproduce sights or to package them neatly for vicarious



consumption. While Stowe's integrative regionalism idealized the potential achievement of national consolidation via a common vision, Twain's expressions of foreign locality were unevenly rooted in the subjectivity and multiple contingencies of vision.

## 2. Fixed pictures and dissolving views

Twain framed *The Innocents Abroad*, his first major travel book, with a paradoxical set of claims about the act of seeing.<sup>13</sup> Twain echoed Stowe's Horace Holyoke in insisting that his book offered readers an objective, unbiased look at the places and people he encountered: "I offer no apologies for any departures from the usual style of travel writing that may be charged against me—for I think I have seen with impartial eyes" (3). Twain framed his observations as direct and unmediated; his narrative promised readers a non-prescriptive experience of armchair tourism that appealed explicitly to their visual sensibilities. In doing so, however, he gestured toward the mode of disintegrative vision that would become an increasingly present component of his narrative:

Yet notwithstanding [this book] is only a record of a picnic, it has a purpose, which is to suggest to the reader how he would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him. I make small pretense of showing anyone how he ought to look at objects of interest beyond the sea—other books do that, and therefore, even if I were competent to do it, there is no need. (3; Twain's emphasis)

The preface to *Innocents* valorized the traveler with innocent *eyes*—the tourist who managed to jettison the cultural baggage, the preconceived written and graphic templates, that motivated other travel accounts and popular guidebooks. Twain complained of the predictability of such texts, lamenting that they prevented travelers from seeing afresh and blocked authentic verbal and affective responses: "I can almost tell, in set phrase,

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<sup>13</sup> In 1867, the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* hired Twain as a travelling correspondent and agreed to pay his fare—the substantial sum of \$1250—for a pleasure cruise aboard the *Quaker City* steamship in exchange for a series of letters about his travels. The *Alta* published a total of fifty-one letters from Twain between August 2, 1867 and January 8, 1868. These missives, along with a handful of letters published in New York newspapers, formed the basis for *The Innocents Abroad*, which Twain compiled and revised during the latter half of 1868, and which the American Publishing Company sold by subscription and then published in 1869.

what [other travelers] will say when they see Tabor, Nazareth, Jericho, and Jerusalem—*because I have the books they will smouch their ideas from*. These authors write pictures and frame rhapsodies, and lesser men follow and see with the author’s eyes instead of their own, and speak with his tongue” (393; Twain’s emphasis). In *Innocents*, as well as in his later travel writings, Twain continually found his aim of seeing iconic tourist destinations through innocent eyes undermined by the ways the traveler’s experience was preconditioned, inflexible, and immobilized.<sup>14</sup> Twain’s ideal traveler, then, could throw off the prescriptive “common vision” and see foreign sights with his own eyes. However, this put Twain in something of a bind: if visual experience was entirely subjective, how could he claim to show the armchair traveler what he would see “with his own eyes”? The best Twain could do was to offer descriptions of his own experiences of disintegrative vision, showing the reader that this was *how* the traveler with innocent eyes would experience foreign sights—not the exact picture he would see. This enactment of the disintegrative mode, more than Twain’s vow to jettison the filter of other travelogues, is what distinguished his book from the books travelers tended to “smouch their ideas from.” What initially reads as Twain’s promise of objectivity—the vow to provide an unmediated, if vicarious, visual experience—was, in fact, an ambivalent nod to the *subjective* nature of visual experience.

Throughout *Innocents*, Twain was repeatedly forced to confront the tension between his own idealized expectations about certain sights and his direct experience of them. The contrast unsettled him, and he strove to reconcile the seductive preconceptions

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<sup>14</sup> Henry James’ European travel accounts offer numerous instances of the preconditioning of travelers’ visual expectations by extant representations. He describes Venice as “the easiest [city in the world] to visit without going there” (1) and proclaims, in “Normandy to the Pyrenees,” that “[w]herever I look I seem to see one of the familiar pictures on a dealer’s wall—a Lambinet, a Troyon, a Daubigny, a Diaz” (709). James, *Collected Travel Writings: The Continent*. New York: Library of America, 1993.

of the places he visited with his firsthand experiences. Twain wrote of Damascus that even the “unimpressible” observer succumbed to the “dreamy influences” of the city at nightfall (394). Of Palestine, he reflected:

I can see easily enough that if I wish to profit by this tour and come to a correct understanding of the matters of interest connected with it, I must studiously and faithfully unlearn a great many things I have somehow absorbed concerning Palestine. I must begin a system of reduction . . . I must try to reduce my ideas of Palestine to a more reasonable shape. One gets large impressions in boyhood sometimes, which he has to fight against all his life. (372)

The distinction Twain drew between a “correct understanding” of Palestine and the “large impressions” of his childhood suggests that he was acutely conscious of the conflict between “imagined” and “real” that inheres in the culturally-conditioned act of seeing. This tension existed between *impressions* on the one hand—the traces or imprints that idealized representations (common visions) of places have left upon one’s consciousness, and an *impressionistic* mode of seeing, which registered disjunctions in the visual field and occurred in the present, not the past. *Innocents* suggests that the fruits of vision are conditioned in ways that erode the distance between what we actually see and what we think we ought to see. Twain’s ambivalence about unlearning his “large impressions” had as much to do with the prevailing understanding of the nature of looking at this historical moment as with the tension between romantic expectation and disillusioning reality.<sup>15</sup> In *Innocents*, acts of seeing accumulate meanings that diverge from Twain’s self-proclaimed project of unmooring his narrative from the “imagined pictures” created by other representations of Europe and the Holy Land.

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<sup>15</sup> For accounts of the ways that scientific advancement and studies on perception altered basic understandings about human vision, see Jonathan Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) and *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); and Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

When Twain saw Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in Milan, for example, he was baffled by the rapturous ejaculations ("Such faultless drawing!" "Such matchless coloring!" "What delicacy of touch!") of the other onlookers. He objected, in part, to the tourists' parroting of phrases from their guidebooks, but their responses—whether disingenuous or otherwise—also troubled Twain's prefatory assertions about the hindrances posed by a common vision:

I only envy these people; I envy them their honest admiration, if it be honest—their delight, if they feel delight. I harbor no animosity toward any of them. But at the same time the thought will intrude itself upon me: How can they see what is not visible?

[. . .]

We can imagine the beauty that was once in an aged face; we can imagine the forest if we see the stumps; but we cannot absolutely see these things when they are not there. I am willing to believe that the eye of the practiced artist can rest upon 'The Last Supper' and renew a luster where only a hint of it is left, supply a tint that has faded away, restore an expression that is gone; patch and color and add to the dull canvas until at last its figures shall stand before him aglow with the life, the feeling, the freshness, yea, with all the noble beauty that was theirs when first they came from the hand of the master. But I cannot work this miracle. Can those other uninspired visitors do it, or do they only happily imagine they do? (138-39)

Before da Vinci's masterwork, the "impartial eyes" Twain touted in the book's preface may yield unmediated, unembellished visual information. Yet, at this juncture, Twain experienced his inability to "see what is not visible"—the common vision, the large impression—as a limitation, rather than a benefit, of his chosen mode of narration. Having eschewed the possibility of seeing things that aren't there, Twain descended quickly into doubt: perhaps he merely lacked some transcendent perceptual ability that his fellow visitors, however "uninspired," had successfully cultivated. Having declared his independence from trite guidebook prose, Twain seems to have wondered what he was left with.

What he was left with was the “dissolving view.” On June 4, 1867—four days prior to the *Quaker City* steamer’s scheduled departure from New York City, the New York *Sun* reported that a professional photographer, William E. James, would be joining the ranks of travelers aboard the ship for what Twain would later describe as “a picnic on a gigantic scale” (*Innocents* 5). The *Sun* detailed the benefits of having such a passenger on board:

If pictures, such as the stereopticon with its magic dissolving views can furnish, are desired, they will be found glancing along the white screen during the summer evenings. Fixed pictures, too, which may be carried to the fireside, and enjoyed for years after the excursion is forgotten; pictures which bring back its scenes of interest with unfailing accuracy; these are not only among the possibilities, but, with the accession of a celebrated photographer to the passenger list, have been rendered delightfully certain. (Hirst and Rowles 15)

This article from the *Sun* set up a contrast between two distinct modes of visual representation: the “fixed picture” or developed photograph and the “dissolving views” of the stereopticon or magic lantern.<sup>16</sup> In the *Sun*’s formulation, the photograph or “fixed picture” was a material as well as an aesthetic object, a souvenir that possessed the ability to prompt a viewer to recall the experiences of travel with “unfailing accuracy.” The photograph signified materiality, durability, and the reliable reproducibility of memories—a common vision—while the seamless dissolve between images that “glance” along the screen created a transitory and ineffable impression. Although the stereopticon projected static images in succession, the space of the dissolve was a space of flux and ephemerality—the perceptual space where disintegrative vision temporarily had full rein.

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<sup>16</sup> Introduced in America in approximately 1850, the stereopticon featured two lenses that allowed it to create a dissolve between the two-dimensional images it projected onto a screen.

The dissolve that was the hallmark of the stereopticon corresponds with Twain's style at moments of prolonged, intense looking in *The Innocents Abroad*. A grand tour of Europe and the Holy Land provided opportunities for disintegrative vision partly because of the condition Twain referred to as "surfeited" sight; foreign travel was often disconcerting, "dazing to the senses" (*Innocents* 67). Twain's prose registered an understanding that human perception—even, perhaps especially, the perception of eyes avowedly unconditioned by other representations of what they observed—was fraught with disjunctions and disintegration. These disjunctions, in turn, complicated both the cultural baggage travelers mapped onto foreign sights and injected ambivalence into Twain's intent to see with "impartial eyes." Sustained looking revealed the unstable nature of visual experience, an instability that resonated both with Jules-Antoine Castagnary's influential usage of the term "impressionist" in 1874—"They are *Impressionists* in the sense that they render not the landscape but the sensation produced by the landscape" (Eisenman 191)—and with the perceptual experience produced by the kaleidoscope.<sup>17</sup> As Helen Groth has noted: "To describe an event or phenomenon as kaleidoscopic evoked a sense of perpetual transformation, in contrast to the spectacular stasis and visual mastery suggested by contemporary popular sensations such as the panorama. The kaleidoscope immersed the observer in a visual field that never allowed the eye to rest" (217). On his ascent of Mount Vesuvius, Twain described such a protean visual field:

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<sup>17</sup> As Eisenman notes, the emergence of impressionism as a descriptor in the visual arts is intertwined with an interest in the contingencies of perception: "The word *impression* entered the vocabulary of art criticism at about the same time that the French positivists were undertaking their studies of perception. Charles Baudelaire, for example, in 1863 described the 'Impression produced by things on the spirit of M. G[uys]'" (189).

It was a rough, narrow trail and led over an old lava flow—a black ocean which was tumbled into a thousand fantastic shapes—a wild chaos of ruin, desolation, and barrenness—a wilderness of billowy upheavals, of furious whirlpools, of miniature mountains rent asunder—of gnarled and knotted, wrinkled and twisted masses of blackness that mimicked branching roots, great vines, trunks of trees, all interlaced and mingled together: and all these weird shapes, all this turbulent panorama, all this stormy, far-stretching waste of blackness, with its thrilling suggestiveness of life, of action, of boiling, surging, furious motion, was petrified!—stricken dead and cold in the instant of its maddest rioting!—fettered, paralyzed, and left to glower at heaven in impotent rage forevermore! (*IA* 242-43)

Twain's prolonged looking at Vesuvius from high above sea level resulted in a disintegrative view of the solidified lava flow that brims with movement. His language is kaleidoscopic—lava “tumbled into a thousand fantastic shapes”; tree-shaped forms “all interlaced and mingled together.” It is easy to forget that Twain was describing a petrified landscape; he bookended the passage with references to the “fettered, paralyzed” lava flow, but in between we find the “thrilling suggestiveness of life” in a variety of shifting visual forms.

Twain referred to this view of Vesuvius as a “turbulent panorama,” which is curious, considering that the panorama is an integrative visual mode—the opposite of the kaleidoscope. Portions of *The Innocents Abroad* were, as Curtis Dahl has suggested, rendered in a panoramic mode<sup>18</sup>; the panorama was also the visual mode most prevalent throughout Twain's *Roughing It*. The nineteenth-century panorama “consisted of a series of paintings depicting a particular place which were either mounted on the walls of a circular room which the spectator walked around or were made to move in front of him as

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<sup>18</sup> See Curtis Dahl, “Mark Twain and the Moving Panoramas,” *American Quarterly* 13.1 (Spring 1961): 20-32. Dahl argues that “Twain, who despite his contempt for the Old Masters had throughout his life a primarily visual imagination and a predilection for popular or ‘chromo’ art, was greatly impressed by the moving panoramas of his younger days and unconsciously absorbed much of their technique into his writing” (22).



he remained stationary” (Sears 50).<sup>19</sup> Panoramas were both “cosmic in scope” and “democratic in their easily understood format” (Sears 51); one commentator alleged that the panorama could “captivate all classes of spectators” because “no study or cultivated taste is required fully to appreciate the merits of such representations” (Sears 52).<sup>20</sup>

Paradoxically, this form that democratized art experience also encouraged what Mary Louise Pratt has called the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” perspective (201). The panorama’s “cosmic” breadth, its permanent activation of the eye’s apprehension of periphery (Crary, *S of P* 297), constructed a masterful point of view from which viewers could take in a vast swath of scenery. The panorama also engendered escapist longings; as Alexander von Humboldt claimed, the spectator of the panorama was “enclosed as it were within a magical circle, and wholly removed from all the disturbing influences of reality” (Sears 51). The panorama could provide an imaginative antidote to the more troubling features of modernity.

When Twain traveled on U.S. soil, his visual register was almost exclusively the sweeping, “monarch-of-all-I-survey” panorama, rather than the “turbulent panorama” of Vesuvius in *Innocents*. Twain’s description of a volcano in the Hawaii section of *Roughing It* flirted with disintegrative vision but ultimately shifted into the register of the infinite panorama, which could not be further from his kaleidoscopic description of Vesuvius:

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<sup>19</sup> Dahl also notes that there were three main types of panoramas that attained popularity in the nineteenth century: the American West; the Mississippi River Valley; and the foreign panorama (particularly Europe and the Holy Land). Twain’s travel writings correlate with all of these locales.

<sup>20</sup> The panorama is, in ways that extend beyond the purely aesthetic, a politically-conflicted form: it is democratic in the sense to which Sears refers, but it is also an example of Pratt’s “monarch-of-all-I-survey” mode of looking (Sears also mentions the masterful point of view offered by the panorama [54]). This simultaneous democratization of art experience and the production of a spectacle that invites mastery suggests that while the panorama is a visually integrative form, its politics are disintegrative.

I turned my eyes upon the volcano again... For a mile and a half in front of us and half a mile on either side, the floor of the abyss was magnificently illuminated; beyond those limits the mists hung down their gauzy curtains and cast a deceptive gloom over all that made the twinkling fires in the remote corners of the crater seem countless leagues removed—made them seem like the campfires of a great army far away. Here was room for the imagination to work! You could imagine those lights the width of a continent away—and that hidden under the intervening darkness were hills, and winding rivers, and weary wastes of plain and desert—and even then the tremendous vista stretched on, and on, and on!—to the fires and far beyond! You could not compass it—it was the idea of eternity made tangible—and the longest end of it made visible to the naked eye.<sup>21</sup> (530)

Twain's exhilaration resonates with his tone in the description of Vesuvius in *Innocents*, and the "room for the imagination to work" opens up the possibility for kaleidoscopic vision. However, this imagination ultimately worked only within the confines of the panorama, making possible a "tremendous vista" that is the "idea of eternity made tangible." This is the ur-panorama, an infinite view that seems to have no horizon, and with nothing more than his "naked eye" the spectator can achieve the imaginative domination of lands "countless leagues" distant.

Twain referred explicitly to the panorama in describing his Hawaiian travels: "I could see the North Lake lying out on the black floor away off in the outer edge of our panorama, and knitted to it by a web-work of lava streams" (*RI* 532). The use of the possessive pronoun here reinforces the sense of ownership of the view, and the "knitted" quality of the lava streams bind together the various geological elements of the view.

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Adams: "As far as one ventured to interpret actual science, the mind had thus far adjusted itself by an infinite series of infinitely delicate adjustments forced on it by the infinite motion of an infinite chaos of motion; dragged at one moment into the unknowable and unthinkable, then trying to scramble back within its senses and to bar the chaos out, but always assimilating bits of it, until at last, in 1900, a new avalanche of unknown forces had fallen on in, which required new mental powers to control. If this view was correct, the mind could gain nothing by fight or flight; it must merge in its supersensual multiverse, or succumb to it" (from "The Grammar of Science" chp of *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918]: 460-61). – articulates what H. Peter Stowell, in *Literary Impressionism, James and Chekhov* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980) calls "[c]oncerns over an accelerating, multiplying, and increasingly unknowable reality" (20).

Integrative, panoramic views also occurred frequently while Twain was in California, with Lake Tahoe providing the most appealing spectacle. “We plodded on,” he wrote,

two or three hours longer, and at last the Lake [Tahoe] burst upon us—a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft three thousand feet higher still! It was a vast oval, and one would have to use up eighty or a hundred good miles in traveling around it. As it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth affords. (187)

Unlike the chaotic vision of Vesuvius, Tahoe was measurable and quantifiable: its height above sea level, the height of the surrounding mountains, and the circumference of the lake were all catalogued. While Tahoe was “vast,” this quantitative information produced a sense of containment that is not present in the “furious whirlpools” of Vesuvius. Rather than the disorienting image of “miniature mountains rent asunder,” Tahoe offered a picturesque “rim of snow-clad mountain peaks.” There is no movement in this description: the lake simply “lay there,” and the mountains’ reflections were “photographed upon its still surface.” There are no dissolving views here.

Twain’s panoramic views of Tahoe produced an unproblematic sense of pleasure, in part because they were neatly contained. At another point in *Roughing It*, Twain explicitly referred to his view of Tahoe as a framed picture:

The forest about us was dense and cool, the sky above us was cloudless and brilliant with sunshine, the broad lake before us was glassy and clear, or rippled and breezy, or black and storm-tossed, according to Nature’s mood; and its circling border of mountain domes, clothed with forests, scarred with land-slides, cloven by canons and valleys, and helmeted with glittering snow, fitly framed and finished the noble picture. The view was always fascinating, bewitching, entrancing. The eye was never tired of gazing, night or day, in calm or storm; it suffered but one grief, and that was that it could not look always, but must close sometimes in sleep. (191)

The panoramas of *Roughing It* produce an unproblematic visual absorption: Twain’s tireless eyes could gaze at Tahoe indefinitely, and his view is not disturbed or disrupted

in any way. Indeed, Twain asserted that “all scenery in California requires *distance* to give it its highest charm. The mountains are imposing in their sublimity and their majesty of form and altitude, from any point of view—but one must have distance to soften their ruggedness and enrich their tintings” (407; Twain’s emphasis). “Charm” was not the effect of distance from Vesuvius’ volcanic fields; in that instance of disintegrative vision, Twain’s prose—a jumble of commas, exclamation points, adjectives, em-dashes—echoed the kaleidoscopic, “dissolving” effect of the view. The phrase “turbulent panorama” is as oxymoronic as the fusion of movement and stasis of the old lava flow.

### 3. Twain's Claude glass

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an object called the Claude glass became popular among both artists and tourists. Known variously as the Claude glass, the Claude mirror, and the Lorrain glass, this portable device was named for the seventeenth-century French landscape painter Claude Lorrain. According to Arnaud Maillet, the “minimal definition” of the Claude glass was simply “convex tinted mirror” (15). There was, he notes, considerable variety within this umbrella category: there was “no fixed model for the Claude mirror but rather all sorts of variations with different types of reflections and tints, different sizes, forms, and degrees of convexity, all corresponding to different needs” (15). The Claude glass was so named because “it gave the landscapes reflected in it the somber light and golden tint associated with Lorrain’s paintings” (Maillet 34). If Lorrain’s landscapes appeared to represent “a sort of filter through which one looked at nature” (35), the Claude glass was also “resolutely practical” (25). “Easily transported,” Maillet writes, “the mirror did not weigh heavily on tramping tourists, particularly as they climbed the steep heights that the vogue for the picturesque and for wide prospects encouraged in the eighteenth century” and beyond (20).

With the aid of the Claude glass, as Jeffrey Melton has suggested, the tourist or artist “could view landscapes as if they were paintings,” and in *The Innocents Abroad*, Melton sees Twain enacting “a literary equivalent to the Claude glass” (*Mark Twain, Travel Books, and Tourism* 63). Just as the Claude glass “orders the natural landscape into a gilded rectangle and transforms it into ‘art,’ a commodity,” Twain’s narrative framing “effectively focuses the eyes on a particular part of the whole” (63). These

narrative frames, Melton claims, “help make touristic experiences manageable, structured, and more convenient” (63). Maillet comments that the utility of the Claude glass is that it “creates a surplus of distance for the artist when, limited by the configuration of the site, he cannot move back any farther: an ‘optical’ distance is added to the physical one” (91). Throughout *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain oscillated between striving for such a “surplus of distance” from (and, concomitantly, a sense of control over) his subject and a surrender to the instabilities of shifting, ineffable visual experiences.

Lake Tahoe was a touchstone throughout Twain’s travel writings, both foreign and domestic, in ways that usefully highlight the differences between the panoramic and the dissolving view. In *Roughing It*, he wrote: “Every feature of the spectacle was repeated in the glowing mirror of the lake! Both pictures were sublime, both were beautiful; but that in the lake had a bewildering richness about it that enchanted the eye and held it with the stronger fascination” (195). In fact, the water of Tahoe made possible a kind of visual hyper-clarity: “All objects seen through it had a bright, strong vividness, not only of outline, but of every minute detail, which they would not have had when seen simply through the same depth of atmosphere” (193). This emphasis on “minute detail” pervades *Roughing It*, which frequently—almost obsessively—references numbers: speeds, distances, times of day, durations, and so forth. In the chapter “Overland to Nevada Territory,” Twain wrote:

At four P.M. we had doubled our distance and were ninety or a hundred miles from Salt Lake. And now we entered upon one of that species of deserts whose concentrated hideousness shames the diffused and diluted horrors of Sahara—an “alkali” desert. For sixty-eight miles there was but one break in it. I do not remember that this was really a break; indeed it seems to me that it was nothing but a watering depot *in the midst* of the stretch of sixty-eight miles...It was forty-five miles

from the beginning of the desert, and twenty-three from the end of it. (162; Twain's emphasis)

This clarity, precision, and concreteness of perception is far less evident in Twain's accounts of travel overseas; the profusion of numbers and measurements in *Roughing It* imparted a specificity and concrete knowability that was largely absent from his foreign travel writing.

In the context of *The Innocents Abroad*, the memory of Lake Tahoe was Mark Twain's Claude glass—that ever-so-convenient portable device for framing, interpreting, and containing visual experience. His description of Tahoe was prolonged and romanticized; it concluded:

. . . when the boat drifts shoreward to the white water, and [one] lolls over the gunwale and gazes by the hour down through the crystal depths and notes the colors of the pebbles and reviews the finny armies gliding in procession a hundred feet below; when at night he sees moon and stars, mountain ridges feathered with pines, jutting white capes, bold promontories, grand sweeps of rugged scenery topped with bald, glimmering peaks, all magnificently pictured in the polished mirror of the lake in richest, softest detail, the tranquil interest that was born with the morning deepens and deepens, by sure degrees, till it culminates at last in resistless fascination! (389)

Prolonged visual engagement with Tahoe's scenery, then, produced an unproblematic and linear descent into deep attention, or "resistless fascination." The lake itself resembled a Claude glass, its mirrored surface reflecting and softening the "rugged scenery" that surrounded it. Lake Como, like Tahoe, worked like a Claude glass; it was a "burnished mirror" that faithfully "counterfeit[ed]" the surrounding environment. Twain commented that he "did not like [Lake Como] yesterday. I thought Lake Tahoe was *much* finer. I have to confess now, however, that my judgment had erred somewhat, though not extravagantly" (144). But from his window in Bellaggio, Twain admitted, he had "a

view of the other side of the lake now, which is as beautiful as a picture” (145). He continued:

A scarred and wrinkled precipice rises to a height of eighteen hundred feet; on a tiny bench halfway up its vast wall sits a little snowflake of a church, no bigger than a martin box apparently; skirting the base of the cliff are a hundred orange groves and gardens, flecked with glimpses of the white dwellings that are buried in them; in front, three or four gondolas lie idle upon the water—and in the burnished mirror of the lake, mountain, chapel, houses, groves, and boats are counterfeited so brightly and so clearly that one scarce knows where the reality leaves off and the reflection begins! (145-46)

Como still struck Twain as “a bedizened little courtier” in Tahoe’s “august presence” (147), but it, like Tahoe, functioned as a Claude glass, “faithfully” reflecting and containing the surrounding environment.

Twain used the difference between disintegrative and integrative vision to his advantage, especially when sending up the artificiality of trite guidebook descriptions of tourist attractions. Upon entering the harbor at Marseilles, for instance, Twain produced (and then deflated) an integrative vision of the city: “Toward nightfall the next evening, we steamed into the great artificial harbor of this noble city of Marseilles, and saw the dying sunlight gild its clustering spires and ramparts, and flood its leagues of environing verdure with a mellow radiance that touched with an added charm the white villas that flecked the landscape far and near. [Copyright secured according to law]” (64). Here, Twain self-consciously undercut the idyllic description of Marseilles with his bracketed reference to copyright, which satirized the romantic, painterly picture he had just created. Both the bracketed aside and the allusion to the French city’s “artificial harbor” emphasized the degree to which this view of Marseilles from afar was a neatly packaged aesthetic commodity: human beings had already manipulated the natural environment to suit their aesthetic tastes, and Twain constructed a parallel between the artifice of the



harbor and the corresponding artifice of his representation. The romance of the view was perhaps more tainted by overused conventions of representation—the “mellow radiance” of the “dying sunlight”—than by its “great artificial harbor.” The sarcastic reference to copyright indicated that Twain possessed some awareness of integrative vision as itself constructed and artificial, as paradoxically less natural than disintegrative vision, even though he often clung to the integrative mode.

Thus, while Twain’s domestic travel writing—like Stowe’s *Oldtown Folks*—privileged an integrative vision that corresponded with the aesthetic properties of the panorama, his foreign travel writing incorporated a disintegrative or kaleidoscopic vision—moments of “dissolving views.” The way that absorptive looking produced a sense of things being “mingled together” recurs in *Innocents*, often in tandem with the visual saturation induced by international travel. Twain and his shipmates fell asleep in Italy “with drowsy brains harassed with a mad panorama that mixes up pictures of France, of Italy, of the ship, of the ocean, of home, in a grotesque and bewildering disorder. Then a melting away of familiar faces, of cities, and of tossing waves, into a great calm of forgetfulness and peace” (144). Even while referring to this vision as a panorama, Twain undermined the conventions of that form with kaleidoscopic elements: mixing up, “melting away,” and “bewildering disorder.” An integrative vision was, Twain indicates, much more difficult to sustain overseas; its breadth, the wealth of information foreign travel offers, was too overwhelming. His sense of visual saturation reached its apex in Jerusalem, where he was “surfeited with sights,” sights that seemed to “swarm about you at every step” (452). This surfeited sight led to the paradox of the “mad panorama,” to Twain’s ambivalent disintegrative vision: the dissolving view was

the consequence of visual repletion. In *The Innocents Abroad*, one such anti-panoramic moment occurred in Venice:

Just as far as the eye could reach, these painted lights were massed together—like a vast garden of many-colored flowers, except that these blossoms were never still; they were ceaselessly gliding in and out, and mingling together, and seducing you into bewildering attempts to follow their mazy evolutions. Here and there a strong red, green, or blue glare from a rocket that was struggling to get away splendidly illuminated all the boats around it. Every gondola that swam by us, with its crescents and pyramids and circles of colored lamps hung aloft, and lighting up the faces of the young and the sweet-scented and lovely below, was a picture; and the reflections of those lights, so long, so slender, so numberless, so many-colored, and so distorted and wrinkled by the waves, was a picture likewise, and one that was enchantingly beautiful. (159)

There is still panoramic language framing Twain's vision here—"just as far as the eye could reach"—but he did not frame this image of Venice as he did the harbor of Marseilles, in a way that foregrounds the careworn conventions of image production *en masse* (the subjective view cannot be subject to copyright). Rather, the ceaseless movement and play of light along the waterfront in Venice, along with the "melting away" and "mingling together" of elements of the scene, created an "enchantingly beautiful" picture. Like Twain's description of Vesuvius, this picture was not conventionally beautiful. It was "bewildering," but not repellent; its wrinkles and distortions made it seductive and visually engaging. Kaleidoscopic vision emerged as an alternative to the conventional panoramic landscape; Twain's foreign travel writing departed from regionalism in its openness to disintegration.

For Twain, sustained gazing at the landscapes of the Holy Land resulted not in the neatly framed and pleasantly tinted reflections of the Claude glass, or in the clarity of the static panoramic image, but rather in the perceptual disintegration that characterizes the "dissolving view." Twain set out to describe the extent to which the "celebrated Sea of

Galilee” is quantitatively inferior to Lake Tahoe, both in physical size and in aesthetic appeal (388). As Twain put it, “[s]ilence and solitude brood over Tahoe; and silence and solitude brood also over this lake of Gennesaret. But the solitude of the one is as cheerful and fascinating as the solitude of the other is dismal and repellent” (388). Twain objected to what he perceived as Galilee’s desolate scenery: “this cloudless, blistering sky; this solemn, sailless, tintless lake, reposing within its rim of yellow hills and low, steep banks, and looking just as expressionless and unpoetical (when we leave its sublime history out of the question) as any metropolitan reservoir in Christendom” (389). Ultimately, however, he was most perturbed by what he repeatedly described as the absence of “perspective” from his view of the esteemed Galilee. The “dim waters” of Galilee, Twain complained, “cannot suggest the limpid brilliancy of Tahoe; these low, shaven, yellow hillocks of rocks and sand, so devoid of perspective, cannot suggest the grand peaks that compass Tahoe like a wall” (388). He went on to describe the landscape around Galilee as “these unpeopled deserts, these rusty mounds of barrenness, that never, never, never do shake the glare from their harsh outlines, and fade and faint into vague perspective” (389). Galilee’s flattened perspective and lack of reflection indicate that at this moment in Twain’s narrative, the “optical system is no longer one in which the world is present to the subject in relations of reflection, correspondence, or representation. The eye ceases to be a window, with transparent and reflective properties” (Crary 83). The “fade and faint” of outlines that Twain observed position him at the threshold of a different way of seeing: he is poised at the edge of Crary’s “disintegrative limits of vision.”

#### 4. The “modern spirit” of the ancient pyramids

Twain’s descriptions of the Egyptian pyramids and the Sphinx, which are generally recognized as the climax of *The Innocents Abroad*, arrive not many pages before the narrative’s end. He described the travelers’ first sustained view of the pyramids from afar:

At the distance of a few miles the pyramids rising above the palms looked very clean-cut, very grand and imposing, and very soft and filmy as well. They swam in a rich haze that took from them all suggestions of unfeeling stone and made them seem only the airy nothings of a dream—structures which might blossom into tiers of vague arches or ornate colonnades maybe, and change and change again into all graceful forms of architecture, while we looked, and then melt deliriously away and blend with the tremulous atmosphere. (484-85)

A few sentences later, Twain recounted that “[a] laborious walk in the flaming sun brought us to the foot of the great pyramid of Cheops. It was a fairy vision no longer. It was a corrugated, unsightly mountain of stone. Each of its monstrous sides was a wide stairway which rose upward, step above step, narrowing as it went, till it tapered to a point far aloft in the air” (485). Here, just as Crary described in Manet’s painting, Twain entered into the ephemeral flux of vision but, finding that unsustainable, abandoned the “fairy vision” for the solidity and substance of the “unsightly mountain of stone.”

Twain’s description of the pyramids resonates with Stéphane Mallarmé’s commentary on Manet’s painting. According to Mallarmé, “perpetual metamorphosis” was the foundational principle of Manet’s work: the transparency of air took on a solid aspect, while the contours of the supposedly more substantial elements of the picture faded into faint obscurity. This constant struggle “between surface and space” was, for Mallarmé, the source of a truer, more accurate (if counterintuitively so) vision in Manet’s work:

Everywhere the luminous and transparent atmosphere struggles with the figures, the dresses, and the foliage, and seems to take to itself some of their substance and solidity; whilst their contours, consumed by the hidden sun and wasted by space, tremble, melt, and evaporate into the surrounding atmosphere, which plunders reality from the figures, yet seems to do so in order to preserve their truthful aspect. Air reigns supreme and real, as if it held an enchanted life conferred by the witchery of art; a life neither personal nor sentient, but itself subjected to the phenomena thus called up by science and shown to our astonished eyes, with its perpetual metamorphosis and its invisible action rendered visible. And how? By this fusion or by this struggle ever continued between surface and space, between colour and air. (31-32; my emphasis)

These are the same qualities I have noted in Twain's descriptions of Venice, Vesuvius, and the pyramids. Mallarmé associated this fugitive aspect of visuality with "natural perspective," which he contrasted with "learned" perspective:

If we turn to natural perspective (not that utterly and artificially classic science which makes our eyes the dupes of a civilized education, but rather that artistic perspective which we learn from the extreme East—Japan for example)—and look at these sea-pieces of Manet, where the water at the horizon rises to the height of the frame, which alone interrupts it, we feel a new delight at the recovery of a long obliterated truth. (31)

In Mallarmé's view, the metamorphosis that inhered in Impressionist painting—the fleeting quality of the visual "impression"—pierced the veil imposed on human vision by "civilized education." Although the visual elements of the image struck the spectator as shifting and impermanent, the resultant viewing experience was more authentic and less mediated than the kind of looking encouraged by realist art.

Twain's disintegrative visions, and their resonance with the tenets of Impressionist painting, cast his statements about looking in the preface to the book in a different light. Twain framed his attempt to see "with impartial eyes" as an attempt to distance his account from "the usual style of travel writing" (3). I want to suggest that, regardless of Twain's success or failure in freeing his book from the constraints of past accounts of travel to the Holy Land, he sporadically managed to free his narration—and

his readers' eyes—from the sort of mediated vision that “makes our eyes the dupes of a civilized education,” as Mallarmé would say. This is what Crary referred to as the historically specific phenomenon of an “unbound” vision, the quality of Manet’s work that Mallarmé valorized. Thus, Twain’s self-professed “drifting with the tide of a great popular movement” (14) described not only his participation in the incipient Age of Tourism, but also his engagement with the new modes of seeing that Mallarmé and Crary examined.

In 1876, a minor writer named Louis Emile Edmond Duranty published a pamphlet about the French Impressionists’ second group show. The pamphlet, entitled “The New Painting,” outlines what Duranty perceived as the characteristics of avant-garde painting in the 1870s. Like Mallarmé, Duranty stresses the facility of the “new painters” in rendering not the solidity of objects, but the ineffable strangeness of natural elements, particularly light.<sup>22</sup> “In certain canvases,” he asserted, “you feel the vibration and palpitation of light and heat. You feel an intoxication of light, which is something of no merit or importance to the painters trained outside of nature and in opposition to it” (43). “The new painters,” he continued, “have tried to render the walk, movement, and hustle and bustle of passersby, just as they have tried to render the trembling of leaves, the shimmer of water, and the vibration of sun-drenched air—just as they have managed to capture the hazy atmosphere of a gray day along with the iridescent play of sunshine” (45).

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<sup>22</sup> Charles S. Moffett has noted that “[m]ost orthodox Impressionists were landscapists who concentrated on *plein-air* subjects as purportedly realized through an objective transcription of the actual experience of color and light.” “Manet and Impressionism,” *Manet 1832–1883* (exh. cat.), New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983: 29.

Duranty circled back repeatedly to a diatribe against the tendency of realist art to engage in slavish transcription, alleging that the Ecole was merely producing paintbrush-wielding sheep and calling for the outright abolition of the university system in art:

Well! Gentlemen! As artists you have nothing to be proud of in receiving an education that only turns out a race of sheep, for you will be called the Dishley-Merinos of art.

Nevertheless, it would appear that you are disdainful of the endeavors of an art that tries to capture life and the modern spirit, an art that reacts viscerally to the spectacle of reality and contemporary life. Instead, you cling to the knees of Prometheus and the wings of the Sphinx.

And do you know why you do it? Without suspecting it, what you really want is to ask the Sphinx for the secret of our time and Prometheus for the sacred fire of the present age. No, you are not as disdainful as you appear. (39-40)

Duranty aligned the Sphinx with tradition and antiquity—with “archaeological decrees” rather than with “an art that reacts viscerally to the spectacle of reality and contemporary life.” The artists churned out by the Ecole, Duranty complained, “do not realize that it is by the flame of contemporary life that great artists and learned men illuminate these ancient things” (39). In his encounter with the environs of the Sphinx in *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain prefigured Duranty’s call for an art that captures the “modern spirit,” repackaging the ancient pyramids as a deliriously melting “spectacle of contemporary life.”

5. “the sun isn’t the spectacle,—it’s *us*”

In his later travel writings, particularly *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) and *Following the Equator* (1897), Twain was less ambivalent about disintegrative vision; in fact, there were moments at which he embraced the kaleidoscopic mode of vision. After a number of comic, failed attempts to view the sunrise over the Alps in *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain and his traveling companion believed they had at last found success:

In a moment we were deeply absorbed in the marvel before us, and dead to everything else. The great cloud-barred disk of the sun stood just above a limitless expanse of tossing white-caps,—so to speak,—a billowy chaos of massy mountain domes and peaks draped in imperishable snow, and flooded with an opaline glory of changing and dissolving splendors, whilst through rifts in a black cloud-bank above the sun, radiating lances of diamond dust shot to the zenith. The cloven valleys of the lower world swam in a tinted mist which veiled the ruggedness of their crags and ribs and ragged forests, and turned all the forbidding region into a soft and rich and sensuous paradise. (192)

What distinguishes these “dissolving splendors” from the elements of the Sphinx that “melt deliriously away” in *Innocents* is that the spell of disintegrative vision was broken by Twain’s realization that, in addition to mistaking the sunset for the sunrise, the tourists were themselves the spectacle. “Look here,” one of his fellow pilgrims said, “the sun isn’t the spectacle,—it’s *us*,—stacked up here on top of this gallows, in these idiotic blankets, and two hundred and fifty well-dressed men and women down here gawking up at us and not caring a straw whether the sun rises or sets as long as they’ve got such a ridiculous spectacle as this to set down in their memorandum-books” (192). In these later works, disintegrative vision tended to be interrupted by an intense consciousness of being looked at—of being the object of another’s gaze—or by comic metacommentary on the act of looking. Of a sketch he made of a tower in Germany, Twain wrote:

The man on top, looking at the view, is apparently too large, but I found he could not be made smaller, conveniently. I wanted him there, and I wanted him visible, so I



thought out a way to manage it; I composed the picture from two points of view; the spectator is to observe the man from about where that flag is, and he must observe the tower itself from the ground. This harmonizes the seeming discrepancy. (66)

In this instance, the dissolving or kaleidoscopic view was replaced by a hyperconscious expression of visual “discrepancy”; this discrepancy resulted not from Twain’s prolonged looking but from his *construction* of an irresolvable perceptual problem. This direct engagement with issues of perception in the visual arts gradually replaced Twain’s previous expressions of disintegrative vision. At another point in *Tramp*, Twain accompanied another original sketch of a horse and carriage with a description that calls to mind Thomas Eakins’ *A May Morning in the Park* (1879-80): “This sketch has several blemishes in it; for instance, the wagon is not traveling as fast as the horse is. This is wrong. Again, the person trying to get out of the way is too small; he is out of perspective, as we say” (79). Whether or not Twain actually saw Eakins’ painting, in which the blurred spokes of the carriage wheels suggest a much higher velocity than do the horses’ legs, the sketch and its description indicated an awareness of the aesthetic issues (especially the utility of photography for painting) that were current at that time.

Twain also directly referenced the kaleidoscope in *Following the Equator* (1897), embracing (through naming) the tension between perceptual disintegration and reintegration as a mode of seeing in and of itself. Remembering his time in Bombay after returning to the U.S., Twain recalled:

When I think of Bombay now, at this distance of time, I seem to have a kaleidoscope at my eye; and I hear the clash of the glass bits as the splendid figures change, and fall apart, and flash into new forms, figure after figure, and with the birth of each new form I feel my skin crinkle and my nerve-web tingle with a new thrill of wonder and delight. These remembered pictures float past me in a sequence of contracts; following the same order always, and always whirling by and disappearing with the swiftness of a dream, leaving me with the sense that the actuality was the experience of an hour, at most, whereas it really covered days, I think. (210-11)

At this point, Twain made an explicit connection between a visual technology and a mode of seeing foreign places. While in *Innocents* he expressed ambivalence about disintegrative vision and often retreated into an integrative or panoramic mode, in *Equator* he experienced “a new thrill of wonder and delight” as a result of this kaleidoscopic perception—which Twain has personalized to the greatest possible extent, constructing his own internal kaleidoscope out of “remembered pictures” from Bombay.

### Coda: Constance Fenimore Woolson's competing visions

Although this chapter has focused primarily on Twain's *Roughing It* and *The Innocents Abroad*, moments of integrative and disintegrative vision are to be found in Twain's other writings, as well as in the travel writing of other authors classed as regionalists, such as Constance Fenimore Woolson. In "Up the Ashley and Cooper," an 1874 piece she wrote on Charleston for *Harper's*, Woolson's vision of this American city was steadfastly integrative. She proclaimed that "[Charleston] never seems to be growing or racing ahead, like the Northern towns; but finished, complete, with a background of colonial traditions, with a history, with a peculiar architecture, with settled, mature ways and habits, it lives calmly on its narrow peninsula, and sighs not for other miles to conquer" (1). This contained, synthetic quality was reflected also in her description of the view from the spire of St. Michael's: "Below lay the city, closely built, stretching from river to river, and abruptly ending there, with no continuations on the far sides of the silvery streams to perplex you with the thought that you have not seen it all, but must perforce cross over and ride on horse-cars through dusty suburbs" (1). On the following page, Woolson referred to the Ashley and Cooper as ribbons that quite literally wrap Charleston into a neat little package: "by [their] tides the city's sides are bound as with silvery ribbons, that stretch inland through the green country, shimmering and fading away into the pearly haze of the moon-lit night" (2). Woolson's diction here is simple, tidy, and compact, imparting a singsong quality (the tides bind the city's sides). Charleston begins and ends between the two rivers, existing as a complete and unified entity within a single visual field that does not strain or "perplex" the imagination. From the vantage point of the spire, Woolson wrote, "we could see the whole of this and take it

all in—the very beginning and the very end of Charleston” (1). Charleston was “whole,” complete, contained, creating a unified and comforting perceptual experience.

By contrast, Woolson’s travel writing about the Mediterranean region offered frequent moments of disintegrative vision.<sup>23</sup> Especially when compared with her account of Charleston, Woolson’s description of Mentone not only described a disorienting experience, but was itself convoluted, her prose becoming dense and twisted. In Charleston, Woolson saw linear and gridlike elements: “[t]he near streets stretch systematically east and west from side to side; and from end to end, north and south, run, from the Battery to the green of the country, two long avenues that meet and shake hands three miles out, and then blend into a lovely country road, shaded with moss-draped live-oaks, that leads out across the Neck to the rice and cotton plantations” (1). In Mentone, by contrast, the traveler must navigate “a labyrinth of crooked, staircase-like lanes, winding here and there from side to side, but constantly ascending, the whole net-work, owing to the number of arches thrown across above, seeming to be half underground, but in reality a honey-combed erection clinging to the steep hill-side.” It is as if Woolson’s prose has absorbed the labyrinthine quality of the streets; the relationship of her clauses to one another is not immediately apparent.

From Mentone, the travelers could see Corsica—or, more accurately, they could have a disintegrative perceptual experience of Corsica. One traveler claimed that the “shores and mountain-peaks could be seen only between dawn and sunrise, when they loomed up distinctly, soon fading away, however, mysteriously into the increasing daylight, and becoming entirely invisible when the sun appears.” Woolson explained:

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<sup>23</sup> “At Mentone” (1884), “Cairo 1890” (1891), and “Corfu and the Ionian Sea” (1892) were all originally published in *Harper’s*, then expanded and published as a single volume, *Mentone, Cairo, and Corfu*, in 1896.

After that each morning at breakfast the question always was, who had seen Corsica. And a vast amount of ingenious evasion was displayed in the answers. However, I did see it once. It rose from the water on the southeastern horizon, its line of purple mountain-peaks and low shore so distinctly visible that it seemed as if one could take the little boat with the crimson sail and be over there in an hour, although it was ninety miles away; but while I gazed it faded slowly, melted, as it were, into the gold of the awakening day.

A land mass that was, at first, “so distinctly visible” evaporated under Woolson’s gaze.

The subject of the “dissolving view,” to use Twain’s phrase, recurred when Woolson described the view from Sant’ Agnese and reflected on the nature of the “view”: “Now there are various ways of seeing views. I have known ‘views’ which required long gazing at points where there was nothing earthly to be seen: in such cases there was probably something heavenly. Other ‘views’ reveal themselves only to two persons at a time; if a third appears, immediately there is nothing to be seen.” The use of scare quotes around “views” suggests an awareness of the variable, subjective quality of visual data—an awareness that was not present in Woolson’s description of Charleston.

In Cairo, Woolson’s prose continued to register this “melting” and blending together of elements of a visual field that was the object of sustained attention: “[Cairo’s] colors are so softly rich, the Saracenic part of her architecture is so fantastically beautiful, the figures in her streets are so picturesque, that one who has an eye for such effects seems to himself to be living in a gallery of paintings without frames, which stretch off in vistas, melting into each other as they go.” Woolson’s frameless paintings lack the structure of the Claude glass and the neat containment of Charleston’s streets and rivers (which are, in effect, frames for the visual experience of that city); as a result, they merge with one another. Woolson continually used the visual arts, particularly photography and

painting, as a touchstone for the visual experiences of travel abroad. Of Cairo, Woolson wrote:

One spends half one's time in the bazaars, perhaps. One admires them and adores them; but one feels that their attraction cannot be made clear to others by words. Nor can it be by the camera. There are a thousand photographic views of Cairo offered for sale, but, with the exception of an attempt at the gateway of the Khan Khaleel, not one copy of these labyrinths, which is a significant fact. Their charm comes from color, and this can be represented by the painter's brush alone. But even the painter can render it only in bits. From a selfish point of view we might perhaps be glad that there is one spot left on this earth whose characteristic aspect cannot be reproduced, either upon the wall or the pictured page, whose shimmering vistas must remain a purely personal memory.

The absence of “significant fact[s]” from copies of Cairo’s labyrinths, along with the assertion that painters can render the city “only in bits,” produces a sense of ambivalence and highly subjective perception that was wholly absent from Woolson’s description of Charleston. The “two long avenues that meet and shake hands three miles out” in the American city, “and then blend into a lovely country road, shaded with moss-draped live-oaks,” was a confident presentation of “significant facts” about an unproblematic, uninterrogated view. In Cairo, though, the impression made on the traveler was a “purely personal memory,” one that did not align with the totalizing view of Charleston. Of Cairo’s labyrinths, Woolson declared that those who viewed them “cannot make others know” the “fantastic vision” they produce, yet her piece on Charleston clearly aimed to make us know what that city and its surroundings look like.

Woolson, like Twain, spent a good deal of energy describing the pyramids of Gizeh. At first, she seemed reluctant to write about them, since they were so familiar, having been “pictured to us so constantly in paintings, drawings, engravings, and photographs.” This excess of representations of the pyramids contributed to the traveler’s sense that they are “as familiar as a neighboring hill.” The effect was that “one

views them at first more with recognition than surprise. ‘There they are! How natural!’

And this long familiarity makes one shrink from arranging phrases about them.”

However, as Woolson looked at the pyramids in a more prolonged way, this sense of familiarity dissipated:

when we are in actual fact under them, when we can touch them, our easy acquaintance vanishes, and we suddenly perceive that we have never comprehended them in the least. The strange geometrical walls effect a spiritual change in us; they free us from ourselves for a moment, and unconsciously we look back across the past to which they belong, and into the future, of which they are a part much more than we are, as unmindful of our own little cares and occupations, and even our own small lives, as though we had never been chained to them. It is but a fleeting second, perhaps, that this mental emancipation lasts, but it is a second worth having!

Not only has the familiar been transformed into the strange, but the contemplation of the “strange geometrical walls” has induced a “suspension of perception” (Crary’s term) that temporarily frees the viewer in space and time. The realization that she has “never comprehended [the pyramids] in the least” led, for Woolson, not to discomfort but to a brief “mental emancipation”; her disintegrative vision catalyzed an unbinding of the self.

In *American Women Regionalists* (1992), Fetterley and Pryse classified Woolson as a local-color writer, noting that such a designation “implies a literary analogy to painters of so-called ‘genre’ scenes” and requires a story delivered by “a narrator defined as superior to and outside the region of the fiction” (xi-xii). Although Fetterley and Pryse acknowledged local color’s affinity with the visual arts—through the often-derogated genre painting—their classification of Woolson as a local colorist had little to do with the visual, save for the suggestion of an outsider’s “perspective” of an unfamiliar place. As the foregoing analysis suggests, I would also consider Woolson a writer of local color, though for reasons related to visuality rather than to the problematic ethical implications of her work. While “Up the Ashley and Cooper” is a travelogue, it aligns closely with

the integrative vision of Stowe's regionalism in *Oldtown Folks*—but is strikingly different from the disintegrative visions of Woolson's own foreign travel writing. Designating *all* of her writing “local color,” then, without distinguishing between the very different styles associated with her foreign and domestic representations of local color, fails to do justice to the impact of late-nineteenth-century experiences of perceptual disjunction on American literary form. If we recognize that influence, we make possible a different set of associations; Woolson and Stowe are no longer simply “women regionalists” or figures to be pitted against one another (Woolson the exploitive local colorist versus Stowe the empathic regionalist), but rather part of a more complex system in which embodied human perception becomes a variable in literary classifications. Twain's and Woolson's foreign and domestic travel writings, along with Stowe's regionalism, reveal not the stark difference between regionalism and domestic local color, but rather their close alignment in visual terms.



## Chapter 2:

### George Washington Cable's "Paris in the swamps"

When French author Guy de Maupassant visited Tunis's Sadiki hospital, an institution that had housed mentally-ill male patients since the seventeenth century, he reacted with troubled ambivalence. Upon entering the asylum, Maupassant recalled in 1887, he "could scarcely dream of what made [him] want to go there." Sensing "a breath of unreason penetrating into [his] soul, a contagious and terrifying emanation," he left the Sadiki "full of pity, perhaps desire, for some of these hallucinating men" (Keller 23). Maupassant's recollections of North Africa set up two crucial frameworks for my reconsideration of George Washington Cable's work: the conflation of madness with a racialized "Orient," and the contours of the late-nineteenth-century discourse of contagion.

In his discussion of the overlapping practices of colonialism and psychiatry in nineteenth-century French North Africa, Robert Keller noted that for French travelers, "[the] North African insane represented an essential component of the Orientalist tableau—a picturesque symbol of the pathological strangeness of a civilization in decline, representing the frisson of moral transgression that these authors found so emblematic of the Muslim world" (23). The pathological dimension of this moral transgression authorized French intervention in the region. As Keller pointed out, French travelers' insistent portrayals of "the voyage into colonial space as a regressive journey away from civilization into a foreign universe of misery, filth, and infectious disorder" were, more often than not, vehicles for justifying "republican ideologies about the 'civilizing' project

of French imperial expansion” (22). Maupassant’s account of his journey to Tunisia, written at a “moment of expanding French authority in the Maghreb” (Keller 24), bears the conjoined imprint of imperialist ideology and Orientalist conventions that would have been familiar to readers by the end of the nineteenth century. Given the central contribution of Orientalist representations to the “rationalization of colonial rule” (Said 39), it is not surprising that Maupassant’s narrative falls into lockstep with Orientalist imagery and its concomitant political agenda. By the time Maupassant visited the Sadiki in the 1880s, the conflation between madness and the Orient had, as Keller has noted, “become a cliché in the accounts of Orientalist writers, artists, and physicians” (24).<sup>24</sup> The political and the pathological are not only compatible, but mutually reinforcing, properties.

It is striking that Maupassant’s narrative circled repeatedly back to his sense of tortured ambivalence in relation to the possibility that he might become infected by the Sadiki’s atmosphere of “unreason.” In doing so, Maupassant elided the distinction between the contamination of his body and that of his soul: he wished to distance himself from the lunatics’ diseased “breath,” but the perceived threat was to his soul, rather than his body. The madmen sparked a fear of contagion in the author, but also attraction and desire. Torn between policing the boundary between himself and “some of these hallucinating men” and surrendering to his desire to let that boundary dissolve, Maupassant’s description of the Sadiki both destabilized and eroticized the fragile

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<sup>24</sup> A widely recognized example in the fine arts is Eugene Delacroix’s *The Fanatics of Tangier* (1838); for a fuller discussion of the conflation between mental illness and racial otherness in the context of the general trend toward pathologizing difference in the nineteenth century, see Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

boundaries between self and other, body and soul, repulsion and attraction. The patients' "breath of unreason" was fraught with the inequalities of power.

Maupassant's account of his visit to a Tunisian mental hospital seems far removed from George Washington Cable's regionalist writing about New Orleans during the same decade. However, Cable's writing registered many of the same concerns as Maupassant's memoir. The American author mobilized the current, interrelated, and *international* discourses of contagion and human perception in his depictions of Creole culture. Cable's magazine writing, particularly his serialized novel *The Grandissimes* (1880) and the pair of essays "The Dance in Place Congo" and "Creole Slave Songs" (1886), speaks to a broader trend in illustrated American periodicals, in which travel narratives—particularly those about North Africa and the American South—both processed and produced racial difference through the trope of contagion and through verbal and visual representations of nervous afflictions. In what follows, I show that Cable's depictions of Congo Square engaged an international aesthetic framework by means of shared literary and visual-cultural preoccupations that transcended national boundaries and concerns. These preoccupations ultimately suggest:

(1) that both Cable and his illustrator for the *Century* essays, Edward Windsor Kemble, refashioned the raw materials of a particular moment in the early-nineteenth-century history of New Orleans—a history already replete with French influences—through the lens of a *contemporary* constellation of French representations of racial otherness that bore no direct connection to either American imperial efforts or Africanist cultural retentions;

(2) that American magazines, which were the primary forum for regionalist writing by Cable and others in the postbellum period, also became vehicles for the circulation of a strikingly modern aesthetic grammar—one that featured points of intersection among Orientalist imagery, emergent understandings of nervous disease, and theories of contagion in the literary, visual, and performing arts; and

(3) that, with the nature of such thematic resonances in mind, we might at some future date consider American regionalist fiction in relation to the broader contours of the international art market and post-bellum practices of image reproduction and circulation—in the context, in other words, of the unprecedented mobility, juxtapositions, and collisions of both art objects and aesthetic trends.<sup>25</sup>

The international aesthetic grammar to which magazine writing like North African travel narratives and Cable's Congo Square essays contributed showcases what Henry James identified as distinctively modern elements of late-nineteenth-century literary production. In his 1883 essay on Alphonse Daudet, in which he struggled to articulate precisely what made Daudet's fiction modern, James identified the intersection of "modern nerves" and human perception as key elements of *modernité*, the "barbarous substantive" Ernest Daudet used to describe his brother's work (ADC 229). For James, "modern" writers were those who attempted to render the unnerving, disintegrative

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<sup>25</sup> This is a project beyond the scope of this dissertation, towards which I can here only gesture. In *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), Brad Evans traces the objectification of literature in the late nineteenth century, along with its resulting status as "circulating culture" (16). By virtue of their "detachability," Evans claims, "literature and objects of art, by the ease of their movement across any number of imagined categorical boundaries, post the limits of the 'integrity' and 'wholeness' of anything we might want to call a culture" (14-15). I build upon this analysis of circulating culture by mapping its coordinates in a set of developing international and modern aesthetics.

pressures of the present-day world in composite pictorial form.<sup>26</sup> James remarked that modern literature captured the relationship between a “constantly more complicated” world (ADC 230) and physical or psychic states. This relationship was undergoing fundamental changes in light of evolving theorizations of the nature of sensory and perceptual experience, at the heart of which was the discourse of contagion.<sup>27</sup> Although James did not explicitly mention hysteria and neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion), these newly-discovered (or, to use James’ term, “newly-invented”) disorders lent embodied form to a modern world that assaulted the senses and nerves with distressing excesses of input. George Beard’s *American Nervousness* (1881) attributed the rapid multiplication of cases of neurasthenia to the diffusion of mental and somatic states “by the laws of psychical contagion” (188).<sup>28</sup> Half a decade earlier, Sir James Paget had introduced into medical discourse the term “neuromimesis” to describe the phenomenon of unconscious imitation of pathological symptoms that could be initiated merely by viewing, hearing, or reading about them (74). This “psychical contagion” engendered disintegration in various forms: it destabilized the senses and unsettled the boundaries between external forces and human consciousness, between self and other.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), Andrea Callen has also identified the complementarity of science and the arts as constitutive of modernity. The use of “graphic apparatus”—visual images such as illustrations and engravings—lent “modern authority” to “progressive scientific theories.” Likewise, “[a] scientific framework—whether technical, methodological, or thematic—was a sign of modernity in art” in the late nineteenth century” (1).

<sup>27</sup> As early as 1853, in his poem “The Scholar-Gipsy,” Matthew Arnold referred to the effects of modernity as a contagious “infection”: “this strange disease of modern life, / With its sick hurry, its divided aims...But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!/For strong the infection of our mental strife,/ Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest” (ll. 203-04, 221-23).

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172862>

<sup>28</sup> In *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (1991), Tom Lutz considers the persistence of the peculiarly American character of neurasthenia into the early twentieth century.

<sup>29</sup> The notion of contagion was central not only to ideas about pathological transmission, but also to theories about the development of affect: “Every human emotion appears to be transmissible by contagion; and to be also more often so developed than it is solitarily evolved.” Frances Power Cobbe, “The Education of the Emotions.” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* 47.4 (April 1888): 547. In

In his suggestive formulation of what was modern in literature, James also returned repeatedly to the vivid, insistently visual language employed by Daudet and other French authors, including Guy de Maupassant, Prosper Mérimée, and Edmond and Jules de Goncourt.<sup>30</sup> James wrote that Daudet was most concerned with the “sensible” world, as opposed to the moral or the metaphysical, and that “life is, immensely, a matter of surface, and if our emotions in general are interesting, the *form* of those emotions has the merit of being the most definite thing about them” (230). Daudet’s tendency to translate emotions into sensible form and to “resolve [his] discoveries into pictorial form” represented “the latest and most composite things” (ADC 229). This literary compositeness referred to writers’ pictorial sensibilities: as James put it, “if [Daudet] paints with a pen he writes with a brush” (ADC 229).<sup>31</sup> I propose that Cable’s magazine writing and Kemble’s illustrations enacted this same compositing visual turn, transmuting literary subjects into pictorial form while simultaneously engaging theories about

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“Epidemic Entertainments: Disease and Popular Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century America,” *American Literary History* 14.4 (2002): 625-52, Nancy Tomes has shown how the discourse of contagion has been mobilized to serve cultural agendas and to express anxiety about “economic interdependence and racial mixing” (626). Tuberculosis, for instance, was the “master disease” of the early twentieth century for several reasons, despite the fact that TB was on the decline: it “helped to popularize the new germ theory of disease”; it “became typecast as a disease of the ‘other’” and thus instilled a fear of racial and socioeconomic mixing; and it “served well as a vehicle for pushing a wide range of societal reforms aimed at easing the dislocations of urbanization and industrialization” (631). See also Priscilla Wald, “Communicable Americanism: Contagion, Geographic Fictions, and the Sociological Legacy of Robert E. Park,” *ALH* 14.4 (2002): 653-85, for a discussion of the role of contagion in sociological work on immigration and assimilation.

<sup>30</sup> One critic applied epileptic movement to literary production, accusing the de Goncourts of aiming only to perfect their style: “Jules dies prematurely from disease of the spinal marrow worn out by this literary epilepsy, this convulsive effort after refinement of style and rarity of epithet.” G. Monod, “Contemporary Life and Thought in France,” *Littell’s Living Age* 178.2299 (1888): 183.

<sup>31</sup> “The languages of science and medicine,” Callen suggests, “provided the artist with a new vocabulary of visual signs to modernize conventional pictorial codes and give art new representational powers” (*The Spectacular Body* 3).

“modern nerves” and contagious transmission that permeated *fin-de-siècle* representations of sensory experience.<sup>32</sup>

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American periodicals generally, and Cable’s periodical writing specifically, partook of these modern sensibilities. This literature functioned not only as a conservative force of national cohesion, but also as a crucible in American writing for what James pinpointed as the “new sense” of *modernité* among French authors. Cable’s *Century* essays and his novel *The Grandissimes* epitomized tensions that pervaded American magazines during this period: between an ethnographic impulse and the lure of contemporary aesthetics; between the integrative, containing function of literary preservationism and the contagious, *disintegrative*, boundary-violating excess of epileptic movement. Attending to local particularities in Cable’s essays, and magazine writing more broadly, produces not nostalgic elegy but an uncanny sense of composite alterity—one in which geographically- and temporally-displaced markers of exoticism are detached from nationalist or imperialist agendas and circulate internationally as aesthetic commodities. In other words, the fusion of local histories and international aesthetics gives rise to *modernité* in James’s sense—the rendering of disintegrative sensory experience in composite visual form—which, in turn, constitutes both a new dimension of the anti-elegiac character of Cable’s regionalism and a new interpretive framework for the regionalist interests of American magazines in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In Cable’s “Paris in the swamps”—to borrow a phrase from twentieth-century decorative painter Joel Lockhart Dyer’s description of his

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<sup>32</sup> As Athena Vrettos has observed, neuromimesis “gained increasing attention in the 1880s, fed by some of the same concerns about suggestibility that appeared in medical and legal debates about insanity, hypnosis, and newly emerging theories of crowd psychology.” Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1995): 83-84.

native New Orleans (Sexton and Delehanty 5)—we see regionalist aesthetics, not only regionalist ideologies, performing the dislocations of modernity.



1. Nervous maladies as “fashionable entertainment”: from Paris to the pages of American magazines

In his 1886 essay “Creole Slave Songs,” New Orleans regionalist George Washington Cable likened his study of these early-nineteenth-century songs to the archaeological efforts of “sappers and miners,” assuring his *Century* readership that “as well as the present writer can know, all [the examples] given here are genuine antiques” (823). In both “Creole Slave Songs” and its companion piece “The Dance in Place Congo,” Cable framed the slaves’ songs and dances at Congo Square not as products of syncretism—the sort of aesthetic cross-pollination Joseph Roach has compellingly mapped as a “circum-Atlantic event” (65-66)—but rather as evidence of Africanist cultural retentions. In the mid-twentieth century, Melville Herskovits accepted Cable’s self-professed role as a collector of vanishing forms, rather than a creator of new ones; Herskovits described Cable’s writings as “[o]ne of the richest stores of data pertaining to Negro custom,” and further asserted that Cable’s work possessed “special significance for research into the ethnography of United States Negroes” (246). More recently still, Gavin Jones has read Cable as a source for Africanist survivals in African-American oral traditions and averred that Herskovits’ assessment of Cable’s 1880 novel *The Grandissimes* as a “valid document” (Herskovits 246) of Africanist traditions “holds true for Cable’s two essays in ethnography” published in the *Century* (Jones 248).

Cable’s tendency to frame his own work as offering transparent access to Afro-Creole source material, in conjunction with the seemingly tidy historical parallelism he constructs between post-Louisiana Purchase New Orleans and the post-Civil War South,<sup>1</sup> has both fueled these ethnographic readings and made his local color writing compatible

with several clusters of criticism about American regionalism over the past several decades. Once considered a primarily elegiac genre, a form that responded to postbellum transformations and anxieties by embalming the anti-modern elements of vanishing local cultures, regionalist writing came to the fore in the 1990s as a mode that seemed newly central to literature's participation in the cultural project of reconciliation in the aftermath of the Civil War. Richard Brodhead's assertion that regionalism's "public function was not just to mourn lost cultures but to purvey a certain story of contemporary cultures and of the relations among them: to tell local cultures into a history of their supersession by a modern order now risen to national dominance" (121) sums up a now-familiar reading of Cable's fiction.<sup>33</sup>

Such nation-focused assessments of regionalism have given rise to another wave of interest in situating American regionalist writing in transnational frameworks. Hsuan Hsu's case study of Sarah Orne Jewett emphasizes "how global restructuring produces and transforms regions in concrete and material ways" (53); Philip Joseph contends that regionalism "presents us with many models of local community that are incompatible with a globalized world" (3); and Jennifer Greeson explores how Cable's short fiction "worked to engage and to validate US intervention" (510) in the postbellum South. These efforts to situate literary regionalism in a postnational framework have tended, like the earlier appraisals of the genre's nationalist agendas, to focus on the ways that regionalism is either implicated in the material realities of American expansionism or resistant to its ideological imperatives. Hsu's reading of Jewett in an international

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Brodhead, Amy Kaplan, and Eric Sundquist proposed various ways in which regionalist writing served the related agendas of national reintegration and expansionism in the postbellum era. See Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002) and "Nation, Region, and Empire," *Columbia History of the American Novel* (2009), ed. Emory Elliott et al., 241-66; Sundquist, "Realism and Regionalism," *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), ed. Emory Elliott et al., 501-24.

context reveals the local place as “a forum for resisting and critiquing nation-states and world systems” (62), while Greeson asserts that Cable’s work serves a “proto-imperial pedagogical function” (510). Brad Evans has resisted the notion that literary regionalism was about local places at all, identifying the genre instead as a particular “dynamic of circulation,” the movement of aesthetic commodities bound up in a “transnational network of distribution” (776-77).

Despite claims by Cable and his critics about his work’s ethnographic authenticity, Cable’s magazine writing was clearly indebted to the international popularity of a new kind of performer in the late-nineteenth-century Parisian cabaret: the *chanteuse épileptique* or Epileptic Singer, whose performance style imitated the bodily contortions induced by an epileptic seizure. “The illness of our age is hysteria,” journalist Jules de Claretie wrote in 1881. “One encounters it everywhere... It is not only enclosed within the gray walls of the Salpêtrière; this singular neurosis with its stupefying effects, it travels the streets and the world” (Micale 84). *Fin-de-siècle* American periodicals corroborated de Claretie’s declaration; by the late 1870s, the pages of publications like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic* reflected the influence not only of hysteria, but specifically of the *chanteuses épileptiques*.<sup>34</sup> Several components of the Epileptic Singers’ performance style, and the myriad representations of their physiques and body language in French popular culture, are relevant to a new understanding of both Cable’s essays and late-nineteenth-century American monthlies: the Singers’ mimicry of the gestural signifiers of hysteria and epilepsy; the conflation of epileptic movement and

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<sup>34</sup> Hysteria and epilepsy are no longer thought of as interchangeable terms; however, according to the late-nineteenth-century understanding of nervous pathology, the convulsive movements of the epileptic fit constituted “the first stage of the major hysterical attack, as it was codified by Charcot” (Gordon, “Epileptic Singers” 222).

exotic dance styles, particularly African dance; and the late-nineteenth-century belief that physical movement—and its attendant psychic states—was inherently contagious and thus easily transmitted from one person to another. The Congo Square dances appealed to Cable in the 1880s not because their “original African remnants had to disappear before Americans could embrace the square’s Africanism as important” (Widmer 74), but because the *contemporary* discourse of—and vogue for—“hysterical” performance styles gave him a fresh lens through which to imagine them, a way to revivify well-worn source materials. By embedding the gestural language of French cabaret performers in his depictions of eighteenth-century Afro-Creole slave dancers, Cable re-created Congo Square as a nexus of bodily and cultural dislocation. American magazine writers’ adaptation of epileptic movement to both travel narratives and local histories spawned a composite aesthetic—one that appealed to readers’ senses in ways that encouraged the contagious transmission of nervous movement.<sup>35</sup>

By the late 1870s, epileptic dance had become a textual, if not a somatic, pandemic with international reach. Daily newspapers and popular magazines allowed the Epileptic Singers to travel far beyond the walls of the cabaret—first to England, then to America. In July 1877, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* printed the following exchange, which pokes fun at the absurdity of “fashionable entertainments” inflected by medical pathologies, specifically nervous afflictions:

FASHIONABLE entertainments for the week—“Going to the Throat and Ear ball, Lady Mary?” “No, we are engaged to the Incurable Idiots.” “Then perhaps I may meet you at the Epileptic dance on Saturday?” “Oh yes, we are sure to be there. The Epileptic stewards are so delightful!” (2)

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<sup>35</sup> One might flesh out the understanding of the history of American minstrelsy by investigating the ways that it was inflected by European Orientalism (and vice versa).

In the months that followed, other US publications—the *Christian Secretary*; the *Philadelphia Medical Times*; San Francisco’s *Daily Evening Bulletin*—reprinted the same comic dialogue, each citing *Punch* as its original source. While none of the American publications reprinted or even referenced an image, in *Punch* the dialogue between Lady Mary and her companion appeared in the form of a caption for an illustration (Fig. 1). The image featured three couples engaged in separate conversations; their dress and demeanor mark their membership in polite society. In the context of gestural contagion, however, Lady Mary’s affection for the “delightful” Epileptic stewards takes on a new resonance: her unconscious mimicry of their contortions might unsettle the very foundations of the social stratification that undergirds her privilege. Priscilla Wald has proposed that contagion serves an integrative function by “offer[ing] a visceral way to imagine communal affiliations in national terms” (51). The *Punch* cartoon suggests the extent to which the vogue among the upper classes for epileptic dance—the disintegrative allure of abandoning one’s reason—both mediated the rigid rituals of polite society and threatened their annihilation.

In the mid-1870s, a new style of Parisian cabaret performance capitalized upon the pervasive fascination with hysteria as a nervous malady. Rae Beth Gordon has pinpointed 1875 as the year that marked the debut of the *chanteuses épileptiques*, whose performance style was modeled on the “tics, grimaces, contortions, and convulsive movements and gestures of epileptics and hysterics” (NR 621). The Singers’ rise to fame coincided with Jean-Martin Charcot’s commencement of his seminal studies of hypnosis and hysteria at the Salpêtrière and with a marked rise in cases of hysteria, suggesting that the Singers were both “feeding into and capitalizing on a cultural phenomenon which was



Fig. 1: Anonymous, *Fashionable Entertainments*. 1877. Illustration. *Punch* (23 June 1877).

just getting underway" (Gordon, ES 223). The Epileptic Singers were, in fact, both singers and dancers; as Gordon notes, the songs they performed included "Too Nervous," "I'm a Neurasthenic," and "La Parisienne épileptique" (FWS 270), meaning that their lyrics as well as their movements were self-consciously modeled on nervous afflictions. The Singers drew upon a variety of sources in developing their distinctive style, including iconic hysterical positions like splayed fingers and the arched back or *arc de cercle*, which was both a "widely recognized element of the visual iconography of hysteria" and "a repeatedly noted element in Polaire's [the most famous of the *chanteuses épileptiques*]

performances” (Jacobson-Konefall 7). They also modeled their movements on “exotic” dance styles, especially those from Spain and Africa, which featured prominently at international expositions in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and on the “eccentric” comic, whose performances emphasized out-of-control limbs. Parisian minstrel performers also directly influenced the pointed hairstyle often worn by the Singers.<sup>36</sup> Remarkably, the vogue for epileptic dance continued for several decades, as evidenced by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec’s 1895 poster depicting Polaire (Émilie Bouchard) performing such a dance (Fig. 2). Within a decade of the Epileptic Singers’ debut, their gestural language had also become a staple in the American repertoire of racialized aesthetics. An 1899 American lithograph advertising a “Tom show” loosely based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, presented Topsy as a black Polaire (Fig. 3): arms outstretched, hands contorted, feet splayed at odd angles, even yellow garments (though Topsy’s is considerably more disheveled).

This conflation of blackness with epileptic movement, evidenced in American visual culture at the turn of the twentieth century, cross-pollinated with aesthetic preoccupations in 1870s Paris. By the late 1870s, Parisian audiences eagerly sought out sensational displays of African dance. The Epileptic Singers capitalized on this enthusiasm by playing up (or inventing) the performers’ racialized features. Polaire wrote in her memoir that a manager at the Café des Ambassadeurs “adorned my rotundity to rival the Hottentot Venus” (93). The popular press reinforced this association between epileptic movement and racial alterity: Polaire was frequently caricatured as stereotypically African and/or Eastern, with frizzy hair, a disproportionately large mouth,

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<sup>36</sup> On the influence of the universal expositions and eccentric comics on the Epileptic Singers, see Rae Beth Gordon, “Fashion and the White Savage in the Parisian Music Hall” (2004) and “From Charcot to Charlot: Unconscious Imitation and Spectatorship in French Cabaret and Early Cinema” (2001).





nervous disease frequently intersected with markers of racial otherness.<sup>37</sup> Since both hysteria and blackness were linked to degeneracy and devolution, the “amalgam” of these tropes in the popular imagination “[inspired a fear of contagion: of gesture, of hysteria, of regression” (Gordon, NR 618).



**Fig. 4: C. Léandre, *La Femme-Torpille*.  
Illustration. *Les Monstres de la Société* 79 (4 Oct. 1902).**

The Epileptic Singers’ rise to fame coincided with a widespread fascination with the permeable boundaries between external influences and human consciousness. For instance, Charcot’s work on hypnosis and Pierre Janet’s on sensorimotor automatisms

<sup>37</sup> In *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (1985), Sander Gilman explores the confluent iconography associated with depictions of racial otherness, sexuality, and pathology. Gordon suggests that the black primitivism of the early twentieth century, exemplified by Josephine Baker, is the fullest expression of the conflation between African dance and pathology-as-performance (NR 648-50).

suggested that external forces could induce a range of physiological and psychic responses. Late-nineteenth-century physiologists and psychiatrists also theorized that *all* movement was contagious; that a spectator's instinct to imitate movement was unconscious and rooted in the central nervous system; and that "the more pronounced the movement, the more intense the spectator's internal repetition of it" (Gordon, ES 221). In the context of the massive popularity of the Epileptic Singers and African dance, the apparent communicability of exaggerated movements via unconscious neuromimesis sparked an anxiety that the range of gestures associated variously with hysteria, epilepsy, and African dance might "[spread] to all levels of Parisian society like a contagious malady" (Gordon, NR 640).<sup>38</sup> These notions about gestural contagion led to fears about atavism: if the affluent cabaret-goers of Paris should contract the "savage" movements of African dance, what would prevent them from descending to an earlier stage of evolution? At stake in the late 1870s was a potential epidemic of regressive epileptic dancing, enabled by the disintegration of boundaries between apparently discrete groups of bodies: spectator and performer, civilized European and savage African, normative self and racialized other. Yet fears of gestural contagion and regression did not stop Parisians from going to the cabaret—quite the opposite. The cabaret was a locus for abandon, a forum for voluntarily relinquishing one's hold on reason and escaping temporarily from the burdensome constraints of socially acceptable behavior. As Gustave Coquiot put it, The *raison d'être* of the *café-concert* is 'to do away with all decency. For most of the public, it is the Bicêtre asylum where their madness is free to express itself' (Gordon, ES 229). This desire to relinquish one's hold on reason, which

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<sup>38</sup> On the cultural and political uses of the trope of contagion from the late nineteenth century to the present, see Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008).

holds the promise of freeing oneself from social constraints, was what Maupassant expressed upon visiting the Sadiki hospital. As a mode of expression, the appeal of epileptic dance would seem to be based upon the comic power of the grotesque or carnivalesque to defuse the threat of contagion, with the loss of control and evolutionary regression that hysteria and epilepsy imply reassuring spectators of their own normalcy.<sup>39</sup> However, the words of Maupassant, Coquiot, and Cable (as we shall see) reveal that those very threats were instrumental to the popularity of madness as spectacle in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Perhaps it was ultimately the titillating, magnetic thrill of risk—the very real possibility of contagion—that drew Maupassant to the Sadiki, Coquiot to the cabaret, thousands of American readers to dialect literature, and Cable to Congo Square in New Orleans.<sup>40</sup>

The *Punch* caption's repeated printing in the US (“[t]he Epileptic stewards are so delightful!”) demonstrates that a taste for “epileptic” performance had made its way across both the Channel and the Atlantic within a few years of its 1875 debut in Paris. In the US, the longstanding and tenacious correlation between blackness and insanity—which had been used to justify slavery<sup>41</sup>—likely paved the way for the conflation

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<sup>39</sup> For a full discussion of this, especially in relation to Josephine Baker's twentieth-century performances, see Gordon, “Natural Rhythm.”

<sup>40</sup> Gavin Jones outlines the connection between dialect writing and contagion: “The nauseating effect of dialect literature arose from the fact that it ‘disinclines, or unfits, the reader for segregation,’ thought [T. C.] De Leon: the voices of grimy, diseased people have the power to enter the most refined ears. For another critic in *The Dial*, the ‘epidemic’ of dialect writing then raging with ‘unabated virulence’ in America was a contagious and corrupting influence that could destroy the education of the young mind... In addition to the disease of language rife among immigrants and the lower classes, there were curious strains of the virus operating *within* the dominant cultural group, undermining both its mental and its cultural health” (Jones, *Strange Talk* 70-71). Jones also draws the connection between contagion and nervous ailments, referring to the “nervous vocal culture” of Melville's *Billy Budd*, which demonstrates “the notion that nervous mental imbalance could manifest itself in plentiful, though implicitly pathological and meaningless language” (80).

<sup>41</sup> Sander Gilman documents instances in medical journals that “attempted to substantiate the association of blackness and madness by specifically identifying psychopathologies to which blacks alone were prey” and shows how “manifestations of blacks’ rejection of the institution of slavery were fitted into the medical model of insanity”—an argument that persisted long after abolition (*Difference and Pathology* 138-39).

between racial otherness and epileptic movement that soon surfaced in American magazines. The various intersections and confluences among nervous afflictions, racial and cultural otherness (especially in the form of Orientalist imagery), and exotic dance performances permeated American periodicals from about 1880 onward. Collectively, American magazines became a nexus for the circulation of a new style: a modern, Orientalist commodity that highlighted both the contagious power of epileptic dance and the transatlantic mobility of aesthetic trends. This periodical Orientalism was just as closely allied with the aesthetic endeavors that had advanced French imperialist interests earlier in the nineteenth century as it was with the current interests of US expansionism. The imperialist visions of postbellum magazines—especially as they aligned with the Orientalist visions of international travelers—represent the nineteenth-century counterpart of what Brian Edwards has identified as the “global flow of Orientalist discourse” in twentieth-century American representations of the Maghreb (2).<sup>42</sup> Edwards observes that “Americans who traveled to the Maghreb—whether physically or via books or visual representations—traveled through French frames: in literature, painting, maps, ethnography, histories and travel accounts” (2). This was true not only for travelers to the Maghreb: Alan Braddock has shown that Thomas Eakins “re-mapped the European orientalist-ethnographic approach of his French master, Jean-Leon Gérôme... by applying it to subjects around Philadelphia” (13). Eakins’ paintings of minstrels and chess players,

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<sup>42</sup> I see Cable’s *Century* essays as part of the phenomenon Timothy Marr describes in *The Cultural Roots of American Islamism* (2006) as the American appropriation of racialized images “to articulate local knowledges within a global context” (5). Exploring such appropriation has the potential, Marr argues, to “[offer] a critical history of cultural imagination that illuminates a more planetary perspective to a period of American Studies too often confined within concerns of the nation alone” (5).

Braddock argues, are “transposed versions of Gérôme’s pictures of Parisian street musicians and chess-playing Ottoman Turkish soldiers.”<sup>43</sup>

The travel writing that appeared in American periodicals in the 1880s—particularly quasi-ethnographic travelogues about North Africa and the American South—confirms this thematic and aesthetic coincidence with travelers’ “French frames” and Eakins’ transposition of Gérôme’s “orientalist-ethnographic approach.” American writers processed the strangeness of foreign cultures abroad, and African-American culture at home, through the overlapping lenses of easily-recognizable Orientalist visual cues and epileptic movement.<sup>44</sup> By invoking the relationship between France and its North African colonies, Cable and other writers for American periodicals certainly summoned the specter of US colonial expansion. However, we ought to reposition Cable as a writer working through the problems of his historical moment, geographical place, and literary genre in ways that were profoundly influenced by international aesthetic concerns. Cable, like Eakins, “recirculates racial difference as a timely, even chic, artistic subject—an aesthetic commodity of sorts” (Braddock 13). The encounter with that chic commodity carried with it the threat and thrill of contagion.

This convergence forms a heretofore unrecognized backdrop for Cable’s reinventions of the Congo Square dances. The imbrication of discourses of Orientalism, epileptic movement, and contagion is evident in Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s “A Day in

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Alan Braddock, *Rorotoko*, June 17, 2009

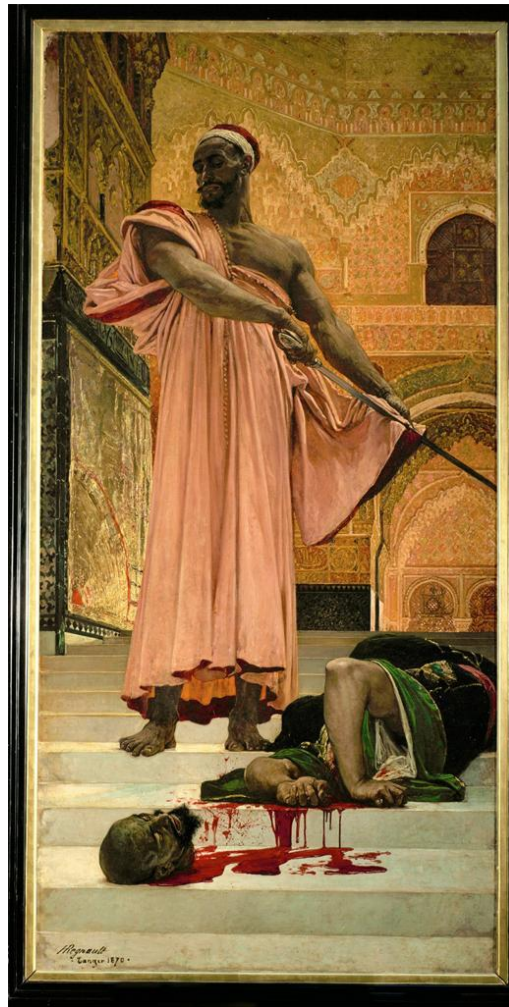
<

[http://www.rorotoko.com/index.php/article/alan\\_braddock\\_book\\_interview\\_thomas\\_eakins\\_cultures\\_modernity](http://www.rorotoko.com/index.php/article/alan_braddock_book_interview_thomas_eakins_cultures_modernity)>. Accessed July 19, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> The female hysterics photographed by Charcot “adopted poses which speak a classical language of eloquent gesture: the aristocratic visual language with its roots in Greek theatre and in Academic history painting” (Callen, *The Spectacular Body* 55). This helps to explain the compatibility of Orientalist imagery (Academic paintings) with hysterical/epileptic movement: these two modes were already fused in the photographs produced at the Salpêtrière.

Africa,” a travel account about a single day in Tangier. Aldrich concluded the first of his travelogue’s two installments by describing his visit to a Moorish café, where “a man of fabulous leanness...danced only from the hips upward, swaying his arms in the air as he contorted his body.” As the dance went on, “his eyes closed ecstatically, his head leaned far back, an epileptic foam came to his lips. From time to time one of the spectators jerked out a sharp ‘Jaleo!’ to encourage him; others of the audience beat the measure on the palms of their hands, and the tambourines kept up a dull thud” (250). Aldrich foregrounded both the performance’s resemblance to a nervous affliction—the “epileptic foam” that comes to the dancer’s lips, the unnatural contortions of his body—and the permeable boundaries between the performer and his responsive, participatory audience. In the second installment of “A Day in Africa,” Aldrich explicitly acknowledged the pictorial influence of French Orientalism in structuring his expectations about North Africa. Tangier was a “mine of wealth” that begs for (artistic) exploitation, but it is more suited to the painter’s talents than to the writer’s: French painters like Henri Regnault “have taught us how rich [Tangier] is” (353). When Aldrich visited a Moorish court and witnessed a prisoner brought into the courtyard to receive punishment, he was acutely conscious of how Regnault’s *Summary Judgment Under the Moorish Kings of Granada* (1870; Fig. 5) had shaped his expectations: “I expected nothing but to see his head snipped off before we could get out of the place. A vision of that splash of blood on the white marble stairs in Regnault’s picture danced before my eyes” (353-54). Not only iconic French Orientalist images, but also contagious modern nerves, conditioned the ways that Aldrich “mined” North African riches. This composite visualization of fine-

arts influences and the vogue for epileptic movement also conditioned Cable's reinvention of Congo Square.



**Fig. 5: Henri Regnault, *Summary Judgment Under the Moorish Kings of Granada*. 1870. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.**

Aldrich was far from alone in marshaling the emergent language of epileptic movement to describe unfamiliar aesthetic forms. Contemporaneous accounts of travel to the Near East, such as Theodore Child's "Constantinople" (1888) and Mrs. A. B. Mellish's "The Dancing Dervishes of Constantinople" (1880), presented Eastern

religiosity as “entertaining spectacle” (Mellish 574)—specifically, epileptic entertainment—and often underscored its affinities with African-American cultural forms. Child’s account of a prayer meeting in Constantinople detailed how readings from the Koran quickly escalated into a collective expression of religious ecstasy, complete with the dervishes’ “swaying and howling” and “violent gymnastic exercises” (88). As the scene neared its climax, “from time to time, one of the spectators, hypnotized by the sound and the rhythmic movement, stepped into the inclosure and joined the ranks... The faces of the dervishes grew convulsed, epileptic, illuminated with strange smiles” (88). In the hall where Mellish’s “dancing dervishes” performed their “nervously excited” dance, “one could readily imagine oneself in a ballroom, where a waltz of Strauss was to be danced” (574). “The music,” she observes, “was itself of a wonderful, curious, barbaric character... There was the same distinctly marked cadence and accent that one hears in the negro songs; and involuntarily, one found the body swaying and the head keeping time to these Oriental measures” (574).<sup>45</sup> Mellish described a rhythmic experience that might have been a Straussian waltz, were it not an intoxicating composite of “negro song” and “Oriental” rhythms. Child’s “hypnotized” spectators joined the dance, and Mellish’s audience involuntarily swayed in time with the music: both encounters with the contagious nature of “nervously excited” movement threaten the detachment of spectators and readers alike.

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<sup>45</sup> Despite one writer’s claim that “those dancers . . . who copy the excesses of the Bal Mabille or indulge in theatrical poses are in favor neither in Europe nor in America” and that “[q]uiet and unobtrusive dancing, with the feet close to the floor, is alone permitted in the best *salons*” (“Fashionable Dances,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 14.19 [May 1881]: 290-91), what found currency in American magazines was the “semi-intoxication” induced in one reviewer by the exhibition at the Paris Salon of John Singer Sargent’s 1882 painting *‘El Jaleo’—The Dance of the Gypsies* (“‘El Jaleo’—the Dance of the Gypsies,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 15.44 [Nov. 1882]: 699).



Descriptions of epileptic dance on US soil extended the race-contagion-frenzied movement nexus to African-American culture.<sup>46</sup> “Voudou Worship in the South” (1895) described a culturally-hybrid dance of initiation, over which a king and queen presided “in accordance with the traditions borrowed from Africa, varied at times by Creole customs and others of European origin” (35). The candidate exhibits an “excess of frenzy”; he “becomes convulsed . . . and finally falls into a state of hysteria.” Each of the dancers “begins to experience convulsions through the superior portion of the body, the head and shoulders. A work of dislocation seems to be going on.” The dancers’ chants “are repeated in chorus by the onlookers,” and eventually a “general delirium” ensued in which both dancers and onlookers are “deprived of reason”: “[a] nervous tremor dominates everybody. No one escapes its power” (35). “Religious Epidemics” referenced an instance of collective religious ecstasy in eighteenth-century Scotland, in which “a whole congregation was seized with violent excitement, evinced by shouting, by violent agitations of the body, clapping of the hands, beating of the breasts, by shakings and by trembling, by faintings and convulsions.” The author emphasizes the difference in scope and scale between this religious ecstasy and its modern American counterpart a century later: a “blaze of religious enthusiasm” in the western US “travelled like electricity,” so that “a series of remarkable involuntary convulsive movements” were “felt almost instantaneously in every part of Tennessee and Kentucky.” Those affected by the “distorting [of] their bodies in various ways” and “convulsive fits of dancing”

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Gayarré delivered his denunciation of Cable’s essay “The Freedman’s Case in Equity” in the terms of epilepsy: “Mr. Cable delights in raving promulgations of new and startling principles, in the utterances of tempestuous expressions against his supposed antagonists, however respectable they may be for intellect and virtue. But his most violent denunciations, in his epileptic fits of periodical indignation at the condition of our prisons and of the tortured negro, are generally accompanied by velvety reticences to escape from too perilous responsibilities.” Gayarré, “Mr. Cable’s *Freedman’s Case in Equity*,” *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, 11 Jan 1885, p. 8, and 18 Jan 1885, p. 8. Rpt. in *The Louisiana Book: Selections from the Literature of the State*, ed. Thomas M’Caleb (New Orleans: R. F. Straughan, 1894): 198-99.

eventually lost all control of themselves, as they “continued to act from *necessity* the curious character which they had begun from *choice*,” and the involuntary movements “soon extended to the spectators” (289-90; emphasis in original).<sup>47</sup> The proliferation and circulation of the tropes of race, hysteria, and contagion in American periodicals is an analogue for this nearly instantaneous transmission of epileptic movement over a broad geographical area. As a writer for *Frank Leslie’s* pointed out, popular dance was a means of tracking the circulation of style, “a remarkable instance of the rapidity with which a fashion spreads over the world” (“National and Typical” 299). American periodicals circulated the notion that exposure to epileptic movement sparks disintegration: the erosion of self-control, the dissolution of the rational mind’s sway over the body. As Maupassant might have put it, what affects the body also affects the soul.

It has been tempting to read American periodicals of the postbellum period as conservative forces that simultaneously commodified and papered over sectional differences in the service of constructing a nationalist identity.<sup>48</sup> Features like the *Century’s* popular Civil War series provide compelling evidence for such a reading. An 1886 editorial about the projected memorial to General Grant, for instance, made an explicit argument for both nationalism and protectionism in American art: the memorial’s architect should be an American, not a foreigner; furthermore, “[n]o feeling of local prejudice or pride” should influence the selection of an artist (“Who Shall Make the Monument?” 954). Yet the same issue of the *Century* that called for the exclusion of both “the pressure of local feeling” and the influence of foreign aesthetics from the

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<sup>47</sup> Epidemics of frenetic dance had long been referenced in the context of religious fervor (e.g., St. Vitus’s dance); however, the attachment of the language of nervousness and epileptic fits to frenzied dance emerges in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>48</sup> See Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850–1910* (1997); and Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (1996).

projected memorial to Grant also contained Cable's "Creole Slave Songs," in which—as the next section will show—both local materials and foreign aesthetics feature prominently in ways that resist assimilation to the projects of US nationalism and expansionism. Cable's regionalism is legible in those contexts, but we should also consider his work in relation to dervishes' "genuflexions [*sic*], prostrations, and grimaces" (Mellish 574), the splash of blood on the staircase in Regnault's *Summary Judgment*, and the electric spread of religious hysteria, all of which danced before the eyes of the readers of American illustrated monthlies.

## 2. The “terrible delights” of Cable’s Congo Square

In the view of many commentators, Congo Square appealed to “Africanist Francophiles” (Widmer 77) such as Cable and Lafcadio Hearn because it represented vanishing aspects of African culture. By Cable’s day, sanctioned, communal slave dances had indeed disappeared from the Square: city officials suppressed such organized performances in 1835, though they continued covertly and sporadically into Reconstruction.<sup>49</sup> As a result, Cable most likely had no firsthand experience of the Congo Square dances and had to rely instead on a range of sources with varied reliability—antebellum travel books, his acquaintances’ music collections, and eyewitness testimony, including a morally-outraged diary entry by Benjamin Latrobe, the architect of the U.S. Capitol, who stumbled upon a slave dance while in New Orleans to oversee construction of the waterworks he had designed.<sup>50</sup> Cable’s project was to write the history of Congo Square for the *Century* through this uneven, highly mediated, and thoroughly subjective group of representations. Formal aspects of “The Dance in Place Congo” and “Creole Slave Songs” invite an ethnographic reading: detailed descriptions of the dances performed by Afro-Creole slaves at Congo Square, musical scores for a number of the slave songs, original translations of the songs’ lyrics by Cable and Lafcadio Hearn, and Kemble’s illustrations. Yet Cable’s vision was decidedly not an ethnographic one. Contagious, hysterical movement drove Cable’s essays as he injected Polaire into Congo Square, mapping the Epileptic Singer of 1875 onto the Afro-Creole

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<sup>49</sup> For the performance history of Congo Square, see Jason Berry, “African Cultural Memory in New Orleans Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 8.1 (1988): 3-12; Barbara Glass, *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (2006); Jerah Johnson, *Congo Square in New Orleans* (1995); and Joseph Roach, “Deep Skin: Reconstructing Congo Square,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, eds. Elam and Krasner (2001).

<sup>50</sup> See Latrobe’s journal entry “Congo Square” (1819), rpt. in *The Journals of Benjamin Latrobe, 1799–1820: From Philadelphia to New Orleans*, ed. Edward C. Carter II et al. (1980).

slave of 1800. This was Cable's transfiguration—as opposed to mere preservation—of Africanist cultural survivals, in the highly visual language of the current vogue for contagious movement. A potent tension energized Cable's *Century* essays, between an accumulation of details that strive for ethnographic accuracy, and an alternate register—the “barbarous” register of *modernité*—in which the epileptic dancing at the Square threatened to evacuate performers, firsthand spectators, and even readers of their reason.

In “The Dance in Place Congo,” the conflation between African dance and epileptic movement offered the commingled threat and allure of gestural contagion. Cable carefully fashioned his *Century* readers as spectators by appealing to multiple senses, particularly by urging us to visualize the performance he describes. “Fancy the picture,” Cable wrote: “The pack of dark, tattered figures touched off every here and there with the bright colors of a Madras *tignon*. The squatting, cross-legged musicians. The low-roofed, embowered town in front, with here and there a spire lifting a finger of feeble remonstrance; the flat, grassy plain stretching around and behind, dotted with black stumps” (523). The likeness the scene bears to a “picture”—a neatly arranged progression from foreground to background—provides an orderly, linear contrast to the improvisational quality and contagious potential of the dance. Cable turns his attention to a dancer, “[y]onder glistening black Hercules, who plants one foot forward, lifts his head and bare, shining chest, and rolls out the song from a mouth and throat like a cavern”:

See his play of restrained enthusiasm catch from one bystander to another. They swing and bow to right and left, in slow time to the piercing treble of the Congo women . . . Hear that bare foot slap the ground! one sudden stroke only, as if it were the foot of a stag. The musicians warm up at the sound. A smiting of breasts with open hands begins slowly and becomes vigorous. The women's voices rise to a tremulous intensity. . . .

See! Yonder brisk and sinewy fellow has taken one short, nervy step into the ring, chanting with rising energy. Now he takes another, and stands and sings and looks

here and there, rising upon his broad toes and sinking and rising again, with what wonderful lightness! He, too, is a candio [chief], and by the three long rays of tattooing on either side of his face, a Kiamba. The music has got into his feet.

Will they dance to that measure? Wait! (523)

Cable's insistence on the sensory power and immediacy of this scene—the likeness it bears to a “picture”; the vivid descriptive language and strings of questions, sentence fragments, and exclamations—emphasized the improvised quality of the slave dance. While most of “The Dance in Place Congo” is in the past tense, Cable shifts into the present and levels imperatives at his reader to convey the contagious quality of the dancers' movements. The dance and song, and by extension Cable's narrative, have lives and momentum of their own: neither the dancers nor Cable seem to know quite where they will end up. The “wild strain” of the music “catches” from one dancer to another, just as the strain of a virus might; it is communicable not only among the dancers, but between dancers and bystanders, intimating that the music might “get into” the reader's feet as well. Like Maupassant at the Tunisian asylum, Cable is at the mercy of this fast and furious description. This was not Cable's longing for the Africanist culture of the past, but his insistence on its persistence into the present, its inherent compatibility with the current vogue for contagion. Cable made spectators of his readers, delivering the threat and thrill of contagion into their homes via the periodical's printed page.

As the dance featuring the “black Hercules” continued to crescendo in intensity, so too did the effects of the slaves' “catching” movements:

A sudden frenzy seizes the musicians. The measure quickens, the swaying, attitudinizing crowd starts into extra activity, the female voices grow sharp and staccato, and suddenly the dance is the furious Bamboula. Now for the frantic leaps! Now for frenzy! Another pair are [sic] in the ring! The man wears a belt of little bells, or, as a substitute, little tin vials of shot, “bram-bram sonnette!” And still another couple enters the circle. What wild—what terrible delight! The ecstasy rises to madness; one—two—three of the dancers fall—bloucoutoum! boum!—with foam

on their lips and are dragged out by arms and legs from under the tumultuous feet of crowding newcomers. The musicians know no fatigue; still the dance rages on—“Quand patate la cuite na va mange li!” And all to that one nonsense line meaning only, “When that ’tater’s cooked don’t you eat it up!” (523)

The detail concerning whether the dancer wears “a belt of little bells” or its substitute, “tin vials of shot,” is one Cable likely drew from his source texts. However, this hyperspecific detail jarringly collides with the disintegrative effects of contagious movement. As the “ecstasy rises to madness,” the dancers’ frenzied movements culminate in the “nonsense line” that Cable dutifully translates, their extreme bodily agitation effecting epileptic symptoms (as dancers collapse “with foam on their lips”) and effecting the song’s disintegration into verbal nonsense. Cable made it explicit that the slaves’ convulsive movements were highly communicable: “The rhythm stretches out heathenish and ragged. The quick contagion is caught by a few in the crowd, who take it up with spirited smiting of the bare sole upon the ground, and of open hands upon the thighs” (525). Thus, what one might have seen, or even succumbed to, at Congo Square on a Sunday afternoon was “a frightful triumph of body over mind” (525)—not to mention the triumph of nonsense over language.<sup>51</sup> At the moment of surrendering the mind to the body, madness and ecstasy, nonsense and meaning are interdependent terms. The communicability of epileptic gesture, combined with Cable’s cultivation of sensory attunement in his readers, enabled the *Century*’s transmission of the “terrible delights” of Congo Square. While seeming to *describe* the neuromimetic quality of the dance, Cable’s prose may in fact *induce* the disintegrative movements that lead to the breakdown of rational thought and self-control.

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<sup>51</sup> As Gilman comments, “the most elementally frightening possibility is loss of control over the self, and loss of control is associated with the loss of language and thought” (*Difference and Pathology* 23). The hysterical attack codified by Charcot included the utterance of meaningless language (Callen, *The Spectacular Body* 57).

In “Creole Slave Songs,” likewise, there is a tension between the sense of temporal and geographic distance conferred by ethnographic detail and the compression of time and space that results from Cable’s envisioning his historical subjects as *chanteuses épileptiques*. “[W]e began this chapter,” he wrote insistently, “in order to speak of songs that bear more distinctly than anything yet quoted the features of the true lay or historical narrative song, commemorating pointedly and in detail some important episode in the history of the community” (813). However, the section on the role of song and dance in the rituals of voodoo worship escapes the bounds of Cable’s self-described intent to inventory the features of historically relevant songs. Once again shifting the narrative from the past into the present tense, Cable tells us that the postulant desiring initiation “dances frantically in the middle of the ring, only pausing from time to time to receive heavy alcoholic draughts in great haste and return more wildly to his leapings and writhings until he falls in convulsions” (818). As the dance continues,

[t]he contortions of the upper part of the body, especially of the neck and shoulders, are such as threaten to dislocate them. The queen shakes the box [containing a snake] and tinkles its bells, the rum-bottle gurgles, the chant alternates between king and chorus—

“Eh! eh! Bomba, honc! honc!\*

Canga bafio tay,

Canga moon day lay,

Canga do keelah,

Canga li——”

There are swooning and ravings, nervous trembling beyond control, incessant writhings and turnings, tearing of garments, even biting of the flesh—every imaginable invention of the devil.

\* “Hen! hen!” in St. Méry’s spelling of it for French pronunciation. As he further describes the sound in a foot-note, it must have been a horrid grunt. (818-19)

Cable’s supplementary note places the voodoo dance squarely in the past and in a preservationist mode: the sound Cable describes as a “horrid grunt” is a relic, a historical



curiosity. By pointing to the difference between his own and Saint-Méry's pronunciations, Cable also signals his accurate transcription of the cadences of Creole speech. But once again, the language of epileptic movement ruptures this attempt to confine the participants' "nervous trembling beyond control" to the past, and the voodoo dancers writhe into Cable's present. Perhaps signaling his own ambivalence about the surrender of the mind to the body that dances like the bamboula and the voodoo catalyze, Cable construed them as simultaneously relegated to the past and occurring in real time, as the slippage in verb tense between his text and footnote suggests.

Edward Windsor Kemble's illustrations for "The Dance in Place Congo" and "Creole Slave Songs" also evoked this slippage between ethnographic detail and the modern aesthetics that attach to epileptic disintegration. By the time he contracted with the *Century* to illustrate Cable's "ethnographic" essays, the New York-based artist Edward Windsor Kemble was known as the man who illustrated Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Kemble, who began his career with contributions to various American magazines and worked primarily in the mode of caricature, recalled in a 1930 memoir that although he had "never been further south than Sandy Hook," his "Negro Jim, drawn from a white schoolboy, with face unblackened, started something in [his] career." By the mid-1880s, Kemble had been retained to produce illustrations exclusively for the *Century*, primarily as accompaniments to pieces by Southern writers like Cable and Thomas Nelson Page. "I was established as a delineator of the South," Kemble recalled, "the Negro being my specialty, and, as I have mentioned, I had never been South at all . . . Then I told [*Century* editor] Mr. Gilder that it was high time for me to go and see what the real article looked like" (Kemble N. pag.).

Gilder sent Kemble to the Cotton States Exposition in New Orleans in 1885 with the aim of completing illustrations to accompany a pair of essays by Cable on the traditions of song and dance at Congo Square.

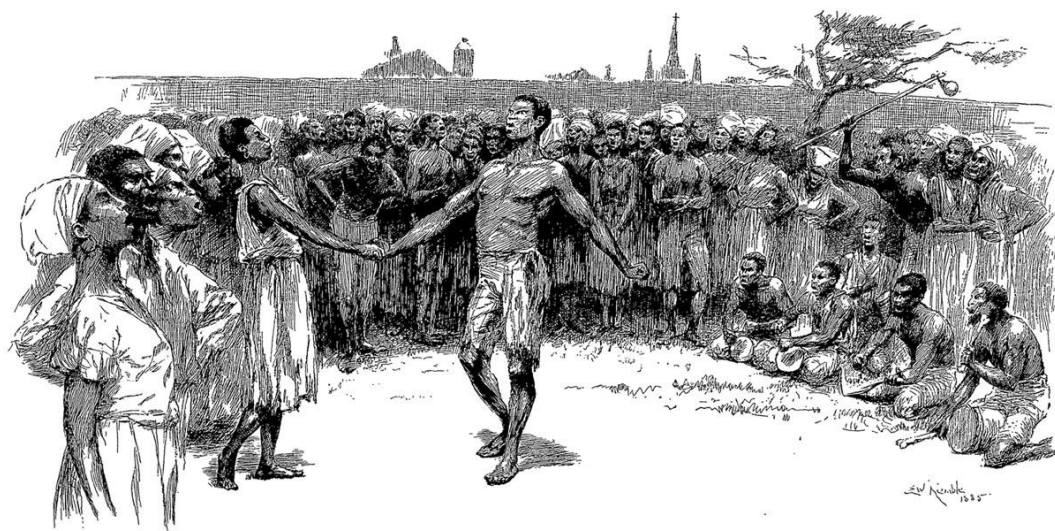
Some critics, including Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, have taken for granted the illustrative quality of Kemble's images—their continuity with Cable's text. According to Southern and Wright, Cable “so successfully evoked the scenes of the Place Congo dancing that artist Kemble was able to draw the commissioned pictures by transforming Cable's prose descriptions into visual images”; they describe Kemble's depiction of the bamboula as “a direct throwback to Africa” (34). The epileptic energy of Cable's writing, however, reveals the dissonances and disjunctions between his text and Kemble's illustrations, rather than their cohesion or mutual reinforcement. While Kemble has carefully reproduced traditional African musical instruments, these “throwbacks” are *formally* routed through the visual codes of French Orientalist depictions of North Africa. The dissonance between Kemble's illustrations and Cable's text results from their investment in divergent yet complementary modes of representation—Kemble's aesthetically-restrained illustrations present the Congo Square dances as a neatly packaged Orientalist commodity relegated safely to the past, while Cable draws his *Century* readers into the ring, exposing them to the “quick contagion” of convulsive movement. Taken together, Cable's text and Kemble's images represent a Jamesian composite: Cable's essays are pictorial, commanding his readers to visualize (and internalize) the disintegrative elements of the Congo Square dances through the contemporary discourses of epileptic movement and contagion; Kemble's illustrations evoke the restrained form and imperialist flavor of Jean-Leon Gérôme's canvases. The

dissonance between these modes lies at the heart of the sensibility of *modernité*, which is, paradoxically, both synthetic and disintegrative.

Kemble's "The Bamboula" (Fig. 6), one of his illustrations for Cable's *Century* essays, is a case in point. Occupying a full page opposite Cable's description of the bamboula in "The Dance in Place Congo," Kemble's illustration betrays no trace of the "frightful triumph of body over mind" that Cable contends is the bamboula's central feature. For Cable, the bamboula demanded "fierce and frantic dancing": "So we must picture it now," he wrote, "if we still fancy ourselves spectators on Congo Plains. The bamboula still roars and rattles, twangs, contorts, and tumbles in terrible earnest, while we stand and talk" (525). Yet Kemble has created a depiction of a performance that is nothing if not restrained. While Cable paradoxically insisted that "[o]nly the music deserved to survive, and does survive—coin snatched out of the mire" (525), Kemble's bamboula is tightly controlled, static; it barely suggests movement, let alone epileptic movement. The illustration's profusion of vertical strokes contains the crowd, blending their bodies and garments into a single, immovable unit.<sup>52</sup> There is no hint here of either the epileptic improvisation of Cable's dancers or the stereotypical high-stepping dances popularized by blackface minstrelsy.<sup>53</sup> The central focus of Kemble's image is the neoclassical perfection of the lead male dancer—Cable's "glistening black Hercules"—whose outstretched arms and lifted chest reflect the light, setting him apart from the onlookers.

<sup>52</sup> Timelessness is a familiar trope of Orientalist art: "Time stands still in Gerome's [*The Snake Charmer*]," writes Nochlin in "The Imaginary Orient" (291).

<sup>53</sup> This is surprising, given that Kemble typically worked in the mode of caricature; one might have expected his dancing slaves to resemble the central figure in Winslow Homer's *Our Jolly Cook* from Prang's Civil War lithograph series *Campaign Sketches* (1863).



THE BAMBOULA.

Fig. 6: Edward Windsor Kemble, *The Bamboula*. 1885. Illustration. *Century Illustrated Magazine* 31.4 (Feb. 1886).



THE VOODOO DANCE.

Fig. 7: Edward Windsor Kemble, *The Voodoo Dance*. 1885. Illustration. *Century Illustrated Magazine* 31.6 (Apr. 1886).

Just as Aldrich's "A Day in Africa" envisioned the Maghreb through a French Orientalist lens, Kemble's bamboula—like Eakins' Philadelphia subjects—reflected the visual codes embedded in the work of French Orientalist painters like Gérôme. In both "The Bamboula" and "The Voodoo Dance" (Fig. 7), Kemble stages an elaborate scene that makes the viewer of the illustration, rather than the spectators *within* the image, a privileged observer. The semicircular arrangement of both dancers and crowd provides maximum visual access; this orientation of Kemble's figures is closely aligned with Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer* (c. 1870; Fig. 8) and *The Dance of the Almeh* (1863; Fig. 9). As Linda Nochlin has written of *The Snake Charmer*: "We are not, as we so often are in Impressionist works of this period—works like Manet's or Degas's *Café Concerts*, for example, which are set in Paris—invited to identify with the audience...Our gaze is meant to include both the spectacle and its spectators as objects of picturesque delectation" (290). Gérôme's almeh, like Kemble's bamboula dancer, is posed to provide the painting's viewer—rather than the observers *within* the painting—with the best view of her supple torso. Though subtler than that of Gérôme's almeh, Kemble's dancer nonetheless possesses an erotic appeal, reinforced by Cable's description: "Sweat streams from the black brows, down the shining black necks and throats, upon the men's bared chests, and into dark, unstayed bosoms" (526). While Kemble's illustration places the performers at a safe distance from *Century* readers (there is ample white space at the bottom of the page), Cable's text collapses that distance, tapping into the contagious potential of the modern, epileptic bamboula.



Fig. 8: Jean-Leon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*. c. 1870. Oil on canvas. Sterling and Francine Art Museum, Williamstown.



Fig. 9: Jean-Leon Gérôme, *The Dance of the Almeh*. 1863. Oil on panel. Dayton Art Institute.

Although this Orientalist aesthetic inflected by the gestural language of nervous disease found its most potent expression in American illustrated monthlies, it also took root in other forms.<sup>54</sup> A massive two-volume folio set of photogravures of Gérôme's paintings, for instance, edited by the art critic Edward Strahan, highlights how readily viewers and critics associated Orientalist imagery with epileptic dance. In his preface to *The Dance of the Almeh*, Strahan superimposed the contagious nature of epileptic dancing onto Gérôme's Orientalist vision, just as Cable and other magazine writers superimposed it onto diverse groups of bodies: Congo Square dancers, whirling dervishes, African-American churchgoers. Hasne, as Strahan identifies the dancer pictured, begins with "slow and measured" choreography, but the increasing tempo of the music gradually induces "the incredible inflexions of her whole body, a sort of dislocation of the hips." Her "contortions" gradually acquire "a wilder, more feverish character":

Arrived at last at the paroxysm of this rhymed epilepsy, so to speak, her whole figure seemed to give way, and she sank on her knees, where she still executed new figures of her balancing, more strange, more erotic, and more picturesque even than the preceding ones. She certainly exhibited an infinite grace in the manner in which she seemed to succumb and abandon herself to these nervous convulsions: it was the suppleness of the serpent joined to the grace of the gazelle.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Late-nineteenth-century advancements in image reproduction furthered the currents of artistic exchange between the US and Europe and contributed to the ways that writers and illustrators became conversant in the visual conventions of European paintings. The wide circulation and availability of fine-arts reproductions in various forms—such as *cartes de visite*, cabinet cards, and museum-style photographic proofs—contributed to the development of an American Orientalist aesthetic mode inflected by the gestural language of nervous disease. As Hélène Lafont-Coutourier *et al.* have detailed in *Gérôme & Goupil: Art and Enterprise* (2000), reproductions of Gerome's paintings circulated widely in various formats thanks to the artist's partnership with the publishing firm Goupil & Co. As early as 1867, Emile Zola lamented that the Gérôme-Goupil alliance had degraded the painter's artistic integrity: "Mr Gérôme obviously works for Goupil. He paints a picture for it to be photographed and printed and sold by the thousand" (Lafont-Coutourier 13).

<sup>55</sup> Callen notes that nineteenth-century literature and art were preoccupied with the "paroxystic aspects of [female] sexual pleasure" (*The Spectacular Body* 57).

Strahan's description of Hasne's "nervous convulsions" is an erotically-charged hybrid: Cable's epileptic bamboula enmeshed with Kemble's pictorial homage to Gérôme, recalling Lorrain's description of Polaire's "Salome-like face." The preface speculates that Hasne's unbridled movements and the contagious rhythms of the music will eventually infect the spectators: "if we wait long enough, we may see [the convulsive dance] manifest among these swarthy warriors of the picture." Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the potent intersection of epileptic movement and race was a common thread that bound together aesthetic modes widely dispersed in space and time —French painters' depictions of North Africa during the years of France's colonial expansion; racialized caricatures of Polaire, the most recognizable of the Epileptic Singers; travel accounts and regionalist writing in American periodicals. The wide circulation and transatlantic mobility of fine-arts reproductions, illustrations, and literary texts fostered this remarkable interpenetration of the literary and visual arts, allowing the movements of the *chanteuses épileptiques* to inflect (or infect) the bamboula at Congo Square.

Over the course of Strahan's commentary, Gérôme's painting metamorphoses from a discrete representation of a past event into a window onto a performance that is not yet finished. If we continue to look, the perspective may shift, and the image may move beyond its own frame to reveal something entirely different. This sense of the agency of the image places limits on the powers of the artist: it seems not to matter what Gérôme intended, for the almeh's dance is still contagious, and thus still happening. This is, in part, what Cable expressed in "Creole Slave Songs" and "The Dance in Place Congo": the gestural contagion that found expression in his style makes his work open-ended, always in process, never complete. Each new reader is potentially a new victim,



or beneficiary, of the contagious movements he describes. At the same time, the creator of the narrative or the image experiences a loss of control—not only the loss of control induced by exposure to contagion, but also a loss of control over his own work.

### 3. The “machine-like tune-beat” of *The Grandissimes*

Cable’s style in the early installments of *The Grandissimes* (1880)—the first of which presented a masquerade ball, a bewildering spectacle that obliquely introduces us to many of the novel’s key characters—did not win favor with critics. One reviewer commented: “We began to read this book with the feeling that the style was defective. Certainly some disturbing element touched the author’s pen in the early chapters.”<sup>56</sup> However, the sensory disorientation of the opening chapter, suffused with the “disturbing element” identified by the reviewer, instantiate a particular sensory register for the novel—one that sets the stage for the later dances at Congo Square. The dialogue is “delightful nonsense” (6); musicians, “with disheveled locks, streaming brows and furious bows, strike, draw, drive, scatter from the anguished violins a never-ending rout of screaming harmonies” amidst an “unwearied whirl and flash of gauze and light and color” (3). By emphasizing the primacy of sensory experience, Cable draws the reader into his text as a privileged observer. After several pages of describing the *bal masqué*, Cable writes: “But all this is an outside view; let us draw nearer and see what chance may discover to us behind [those] masks” (3).

Terry Castle has described the eighteenth-century masquerade as a “search after perfect freedom—a state of intoxication, ecstasy, and free-floating sensual pleasure,” which “exhibited a kinship, however distant, with those rituals of possession and collective frenzy found in traditional societies . . . In its most fervent stages the masquerade held a similarly labile and convulsive power. With its scenes of manic, impetuous play, the masquerade often seemed to contemporaries to induce a kind of

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<sup>56</sup> Review of *The Grandissimes*. *The Independent ... Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* (1848-1921), 32.1661 (30 Sept 1880): 11.

hallucinatory state” (53). Quoting Roger Caillois, Castle went on to assert that the masquerade can “destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind,” culminating in a “spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness” (53). The masquerade is an apt opening for Cable’s novel because it, like the epileptic dance, is both intensely appealing to the senses and a threat to human cognition. “Now, sir,” thinks Honoré Grandissime to himself as he departs the ball, “we’ll return to our senses.” Cable’s narrator retorts: “‘Now I’ll put my feathers on again,’ says the plucked bird” (7). We, like Honoré, may think we are leaving the *bal masqué* behind, when in fact being drawn into the “unwearied whirl” of the masquerade is a first step towards the contagion of the soul.

In *The Grandissimes* (1880), as in the *Century* essays, Cable’s Congo Square was the locus of regressive, “barbaric pastimes” (189) that registered the rhythmic movements of black bodies as contagious epileptic convulsions:

On a grassy plain under the ramparts, the performers of these hideous discords sat upon the ground facing each other, and in their midst the dancers danced. They gyrated in couples, a few at a time, throwing their bodies into the most startling attitudes and the wildest contortions, while the whole company of black lookers-on, incited by the tones of the weird music and the posturing of the dancers, swayed and writhed in passionate sympathy, beating their breasts, palms and thighs in time with the bones and drums, and at frequent intervals lifting, in that wild African unison no more to be described than forgotten, the unutterable songs of the Babouille and Counjaille dances, with their ejaculatory burdens of “Aie! Aie! Voudou Magnan!” and “Aie Calinda! Dancé Calinda!” The volume of sound rose and fell with the augmentation or diminution of the dancers’ extravagances. Now a fresh man, young and supple, bounding into the ring, revived the flagging rattlers, thumpers, drummers and trumpeters; now a wearied dancer, finding his strength going, gathered all his force at the cry of “Dancé zisqu’a mort!” rallied to grand finale and with one magnificent antic, fell, foaming at the mouth. (189)

Just as in “The Dance in Place Congo,” Cable juxtaposed the “hideous discords” and “wildest contortions” with the erotic appeal of the “young and supple” man who revives

the dance—taking no notice of the apparent contradiction. Cable specified a “whole company of black lookers-on” who “[writhe] in passionate sympathy,” describing a physical response to the dancing in a way that evoked the possibility for gestural contagion—the transmission of the writhing and swaying not only to the spectators within the text, but also to the readers Cable has carefully conditioned into receptivity. Cable wants his readers to beat *their* palms in time with the bones and drums, and to writhe in passionate sympathy—even if that means falling back a rung or two on the evolutionary ladder.

Even the naïvely earnest German immigrant Joseph Frowenfeld—who was the novel’s moral compass, and who ventriloquized Cable’s views on race—succumbs to the “machine-like tune-beat” of Congo Square, much as his parents and siblings succumbed to the yellow fever shortly following their arrival in New Orleans. Joseph sits in his closed apothecary shop, and the night air carries to him the faraway strains of an African song and dance at Congo Square:

Faintly audible to the apothecary of the rue Royale through that deserted stillness which is yet the marked peculiarity of New Orleans streets by night, came from a neighboring slave-yard the monotonous chant and machine-like tune-beat of an African dance. There our lately met marchande (albeit she was but a guest, fortified against the street-watch with her master’s written “pass”) led the ancient Calinda dance and that well-known song of derision, in whose ever-multiplying stanzas the helpless satire of a feeble race still continues to celebrate the personal failings of each newly prominent figure among the dominant caste. (95)

Some indeterminate amount of time later, Frowenfeld becomes aware of being “brain-weary,” nearly suffocated by “an atmosphere of hints, allusions, faint unspoken admissions, ill-concealed antipathies, unfinished speeches, mistaken identities and whisperings of hidden strife” (96). This atmosphere, laden with mystery, confusion, and interruptions, recalls the *bal masqué*, where “[t]he very air seems to breathe, to sigh, to

laugh” (3). Striving to “close his ear” to these troubling, intangible influences, Frowenfeld realizes that Congo Square has penetrated his consciousness in a way that resonates with a hypnotic trance:

The cathedral clock struck twelve and was answered again from the convent tower; and as the notes died away he suddenly became aware that the weird, drowsy throb of the African song and dance had been swinging drowsily in his brain for an unknown lapse of time. (96)

Under the auditory influence of the performance at Congo Square, Frowenfeld behaves like a patient under hypnosis, experiencing a state of reduced self-awareness that might render him especially receptive to suggestion.<sup>57</sup>

In his description of the effects of the African song and dance, Cable raises the specter of contagion in a way that opens up the possibility for African song and dance to transgress racial boundaries. Although Frowenfeld is not physically present at the performance and does not “catch” the bodily movements of the dances, the “monotonous chant and machine-like tune-beat” find their way to him, surreptitiously “infecting” his consciousness.<sup>58</sup> Although the Congo Square performance has no immediately disastrous consequences within the text, it raises questions about the nature of attention, the ways

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<sup>57</sup> See Callen on the relationship between hysteria and hypnosis: “Hypnosis was used by Charcot for his study and demonstration of the various hysterical states,” since he “found that under hypnosis hysterical symptoms could be produced and relieved” (*The Spectacular Body* 54). An 1880 book review in the eclectic magazine *Littell's Living Age* summarizes the popular understanding of the hypnotic trance that would have been concurrent with *The Grandissimes*: “The condition of the patient is then the same, so far as the reception of sensory impressions is concerned, as that of a man whose attention is absorbed or distracted; he sees sights, hears sounds, etc., without knowing that he sees or hears them, and he cannot afterwards recollect the impressions that were made.” G. J. Romanes, “Hypnotism.” Review of Dr. Rudolf Heidenhain’s *Der sogenaunte thierische Magnetismus*, *Littell's Living Age* 147 (October 1880): 241.

<sup>58</sup> It is also significant that this nighttime gathering of slaves is most likely an unsanctioned one. The Sunday afternoon dances at Congo Square did not receive the city council’s official approval until 1817, in legislation which, as Barbara S. Glass has noted in *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), “limited gatherings of slaves, especially for dancing, and forced them into a public place, where they could be monitored” (93). Given that this particular performance occurs at night and that the occasion for the dance is to satirize Honoré Grandissime (a powerful white Creole), the scene also taps into the fear of slave rebellions that helped to catalyze the controlled weekly celebrations at Congo Square.

that human attention makes people susceptible to manipulation, and the implications of such questions not only for the hypnotist, but for the artist. In *Time and Free Will* (1889), Henri Bergson considered the connection between artistic expression and the consciousness of one who sees, reads, or hears that expression:

In seeing these images pass before our eyes we in our turn experience the feeling which was, so to speak, their emotional equivalent: but we should never realize these images so strongly without the regular movements of the rhythm by which our soul is lulled into self-forgetfulness, and, as in a dream, thinks and sees with the poet. The plastic arts obtain an effect of the same kind by the fixity which they suddenly impose upon life, and which a physical contagion carries over to the attention of the spectator. (15)

Bergson's formulation of the relationship between artist and audience is a modern composite in the Jamesian sense: images and text affect us by means of "physical contagion," but fusing those images and text with "rhythm" heightens the spectator's emotional response. Cable's treatment of Frowenfeld's absorption suggests that an author, like a musical performer or plastic artist, can "lull" the reader's soul into a state of forgetfulness and heightened receptivity. In order for an author to harness his readers' attention, to induce in us a dreamlike state, the necessary supplement for the writer's words is rhythm—"the rhythm by which our soul is lulled into self-forgetfulness."

Cable's prose addressed an ideal reader who "thinks and sees with the poet," in Bergson's phrase, and he employed rhythm to emphasize key moments in the text. Cable often addressed his readers as though they are not readers at all, but rather characters in his novel: "But if you can command your powers of attention, despite those children who are shouting Creole French and sliding down the rails of the front stair, turn the eye to the laughing squadron of beautiful girls, which every few minutes, at an end of the veranda, appears, wheels and disappears, and you note, as it were by flashes, the characteristics of

face and figure that mark the Louisianaises in the perfection of the new-blown flower” (162).<sup>59</sup> Both this inclusive mode of narration and Cable’s use of rhythm draw his readers into the text. Clemence, an enslaved street vendor who is a major force in the dances at Congo Square, gives an impromptu dance performance accompanied by a clerk at Frowenfeld’s shop:

Raoul began to sing and Clemence instantly to pace and turn, posture, bow, respond to the song, start, swing, straighten, stamp, wheel, lift her hand, stoop, twist, walk, whirl, tip-toe with crossed ankles, smite her palms, march, circle, leap—an endless improvisation of rhythmic motion to this modulated responsive chant. (306)

Cable does not merely describe Clemence’s movements; his words enact the rhythm of those movements on the page. “[P]ace and turn, posture, bow, respond to the song” can be read in poetic meter, as a set of three anapestic feet. The string of infinitives forces Cable’s reader to slow down and attend to his words, not only to their meaning but to the sounds of which they are composed. While Clemence’s dance may be improvisatory, Cable’s language is carefully calculated: the alliteration of “start, swing, straighten, stamp” and “twist, walk, whirl”; the nearly exclusive deployment of monosyllabic words; the narrowing of focus on particular parts of Clemence’s body—all recall the “machine-like tune-beat” that infiltrated Frowenfeld’s consciousness, producing the “drowsy throb” that swung “drowsily” in his brain.

Clemence’s contagious performances and Frowenfeld’s shop window, which “was fast growing to be a place of art exposition” (113), speak to Cable’s regionalist aesthetic. Frowenfeld’s window showcased handicrafts and bric-a-brac, “articles for

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<sup>59</sup> Cable manages his readers’ vision, in particular, severing our sense of detachment by deploying inclusive narrative techniques—a strategy he would also use in his later essays for the *Century*. The phrase “as we see” peppers the narrative (45); “Do not look for [the Grandissime mansion] now,” the narrator commands, “it is quite gone” (158).

simple sale or mere transient exhibition” (114). These items included “tremulous little bunches of flowers, proudly stated to have been made entirely of the bones of the ordinary catfish; others, large and spreading, the sight of which would make any botanist fall down ‘and die as mad as the wild waves be,’ whose ticketed merit was that they were composed exclusively of materials produced upon Creole soil” and “the siege of Troy, in ordinary ink, done entirely with the pen, the labor of twenty years, by ‘a citizen of New Orleans’” (114).

The articles displayed in Frowenfeld’s window were “local” in the sense that they were forged of Creole raw materials by natives of New Orleans. However, as his re-creation of the Congo Square dances in both the *Century* essays and *The Grandissimes* reveals, this bric-a-brac does not represent Cable’s regionalist aesthetic. His conception of the local was in fact a hybrid mode that fused local artifacts and histories with contemporary and international aesthetic trends. The affinities of Cable’s regional materials with the disintegrative form of epileptic dance fly in the face of understandings of regionalism as an integrative genre—as contributing to national cohesion or preserving the past. Cable’s regionalism, his reinvention of the Congo Square dances through the lens of composite visuality, aligns his work with Jamesian *modernité*.



### Chapter 3:

#### Landscape Painting and the Visual Scale of American Regionalism

To do little things instead of big *may* be a derogation; a great deal will depend upon the way the little things are done. Besides, no work of art is absolutely little. (Henry James, *Picture and Text* 77)

We tend to think of literary regionalism as a genre characterized by restraint in both scope and scale—as a mode that fixates on minutiae like the oddities of dialect and other quirks of isolated local places. Regionalist writers’ conspicuous emphasis on minute details has been construed as significant because it produces what Sandra Zagarell has referred to as a “fantasy of authenticity” (643)—a seeming transparency of representation and the illusion of unmediated access to otherwise inaccessible rural people and customs.<sup>60</sup> Highly detailed features of regionalist texts, such as the (presumably) faithful transcription of dialect, functioned as “a sign of the authentically local. Such typographic accentuation enhanced regionalist literature’s reputation for successfully transposing exotic local cultures into print, to be consumed in the realm of the imagination, through reading” (650). A regionalist text’s status as an apparently authentic document of local culture, then, seems to rest on such minutiae as variations in spelling, punctuation, and syntax, as well as on “careful, thick descriptions of the rhythms of rural life and provincial communities” (Foote, *Regional Fictions* 5).

Regionalism, in addition to being yoked to such nuances, has frequently been described by twentieth-century critics as both aesthetically and canonically diminutive. Critics, and even regionalist writers themselves, have construed the genre as being of a

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<sup>60</sup> According to Zagarell, things considered inauthentic in postbellum America included “the modern, the manufactured, the commercial, the urban, and, increasingly, the foreign” (“Troubling Regionalism” 643).

humbler scale than other sorts of literature, especially in relation to realism; as Raymond Williams has suggested, “regional” has often been invoked as “a limiting judgment” (265). Louis Renza has cited Sarah Orne Jewett as a prime example of literary critics’ consignment of the genre of regionalism “to the ambiguous status of ‘minor literature’” (xxv).<sup>61</sup> Nineteenth-century commentators on Jewett’s work also remarked frequently upon her interest in the minor and fragmentary. A reviewer of *Country By-Ways* (1881) provides a representative example: “Here are the observation of minor incidents, the catching of effects produced by side lights, the rediscovery of the familiar, the looking at a landscape from under one’s arm. Miss Jewett herself seems sure only of catching and holding some flitting moment of life, some fragment of experience which has demanded her sympathy” (“The Light Literature of Travel” 420-21).<sup>62</sup>

Regionalism’s insistence on minutiae may explain its correspondence with what Steven Conn has referred to as “object-based epistemologies” (4), although Bill Brown has also shown the limits of such a correspondence in Jewett’s fiction: “even as Jewett participates in the logic of a new ‘object-based epistemology,’ where physical things attach people to place, she dramatizes the limits of any such materialism” (197).

Regionalist writing also participates in what Zagarell referred to as “the aesthetic of the cult of the object”—a “commercially inflected” mentality by which regionalist texts

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<sup>61</sup> Part of Renza’s project, however, is that Jewett’s story “exhibited a self-defining and even perverse process of *becoming* minor literature” (xxviii)—in other words, that the “minorness” of “A White Heron” is not solely something inflicted on it by twentieth-century criticism, but also something Jewett explored and embedded in her writing.

<sup>62</sup> This reviewer, assuming that the sketches included in *Country By-Ways* are direct transcriptions of Jewett’s experiences with her neighbors, also comments on her limited geographical scope: “Has not Miss Jewett visited all her neighbors, and would not a longer flight of travel give her new types?” (421). The hallmarks of Jewett’s style, according to late-nineteenth-century reviewers, were effortlessness, lack of artifice, prosaic detail, “conscientious fidelity” to real scenes of New England life (“Recent Literature,” *Atlantic Monthly* 39.236 [June 1877]: 759), small scale, and an “unstrained command of materials” (“Recent Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly* 54.323 [Sep. 1884]: 713).

suggest that the “essence” of regional cultures is available for possession in the form of “detachable mementos” (653, 639).<sup>63</sup> The compatibility of regionalism with consumable objects also resonates with what John Sears has identified as the “touristic habit of consuming scenery as a series of views, a habit which would be reinforced later on by the stereoscope and the kodak” (Sears 51). According to Susan Stewart, the drama of “miniaturization” often plays out “in a timelessness that is tableau-like, an arrangement defined by the ‘picturesque’ rather than by history” (64). Miniaturization has the capacity “to create an ‘other’ time, a type of transcendent time which negates change and the flux of lived reality” (Stewart 65)—a description that might double as an elegiac reading of the postbellum regionalist sketch.

Late-nineteenth-century regionalism is more readily compatible with a materialist epistemology, or with Stewart’s analysis of the miniature, than with the expansive vision and apparently endless horizons of mid- to late-nineteenth-century representations of the American landscape. In its large scale and allegorical qualities, the panoramic landscape that dominated American art in the nineteenth century would seem to be the aesthetic opposite of a regionalist text. However, extensive landscape descriptions featured prominently in the work of such regionalists as Washington Irving, Sarah Orne Jewett,

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<sup>63</sup> Zagarell gives as an example of the cult of the object the cat o’ nine tails that appears on the cover of *Deephaven*, which “typif[ies] Deephaven’s naturalness, the appeal of which has much to do with Maine’s seeming immunity to commodity capitalism” (639). Yet, at the same time, the cat o’ nine tails is both removed from the scene of its “naturalness” and symbolic “of the collector’s mentality that intensified with postbellum capitalism and coordinated with the commodification of ‘authentic’ Americana (Zagarell 649). An 1878 article in *Appleton’s* by Ella Church entitled “Collectanea” describes one (thoroughly international) form a tasteful art collection might take: “The collection comprises two India preserve jars, darkly, deeply, beautifully blue; a three-story vase ditto, which is liberally filled with ‘cat tails,’ that are supposed to give a decidedly Japanese flavoring....” (qtd. in McClaugherty, “Household Art” 8). This lends another dimension to Zagarell’s reading of the cat-tails: they have an international (specifically Eastern) flavor, despite their being a memento of this specific local place. This object is simultaneously local and international, evoking both the nostalgia for an American locality and the vogue for Eastern decorative commodities.

and especially Mary Murfree. These three authors made use of the conventions of landscape representation in very different ways. Irving—with a few notable exceptions—was firmly entrenched in the Hudson River School style of panoramic landscape and the visual mode that Alan Wallach has called the “panoptic sublime”: a “dizzying sense of having suddenly come into possession of a terrain stretching as far as the eye could see” (83). Jewett’s work inverted micro- and macrocosmic visual scales, revealing not only the expansive potential of minutiae but also the minifying possibilities of expansive vision; her characters’ relationships to the landscape revealed panoramic views as limiting and tiny pieces of the landscape as capable of expanding human experience. Murfree’s landscapes demonstrated inversion of a different sort: a reversal between foreground and background, which reversed the relative significance of what would be classified in the visual arts as figure and ground. My primary objective in this chapter is to show that, despite the apparent oddness of the panoramic landscape as a vehicle for regionalism, all of these authors engaged landscape as an aesthetic problem in ways that relate to inversions of scale, whether of the micro- and macrocosmic or of foreground and background.

Landscape in the visual arts is a significant category of analysis for Irving, Murfree, and Jewett not only because they align with the history of vision and visual technologies that Crary has outlined, but also because contemporary critics deemed them both highly pictorial writers and associated their work with specific painterly techniques. Jewett’s writing was incessantly likened to the delicate, charming watercolor landscapes that attained great popularity at the end of the century: works that took as their subject “bits” of landscape and were described as small, restful, and quaint. Murfree’s work, on

the other hand, was repeatedly described as “vigorous” and masculine (even after her identity as a woman writer was revealed); her style of depicting the Tennessee mountains was associated with the bold strokes and large scale of oil painting, rather than with the breathy brushstrokes and translucent washes of the watercolor.

In the work of Irving, Jewett, and Murfree, expansive views of the local landscape highlight that the aesthetics of the panorama and the miniature were not mutually exclusive; rather, they bled into or gave rise to one another.<sup>64</sup> Murfree’s landscape descriptions convey what Carol Armstrong has characterized as a “hallucinatory indeterminacy of scale” in Cézanne’s landscape painting (48), thereby anticipating the sort of aesthetic experimentation we now associate with Cézanne’s work: in particular, the disruption of classical perspective and of the proper relationships between figure and ground, foreground and background. These are the same qualities Crary has identified as epitomizing “suspensions of perception”—the visual engagement of the world as a “process of becoming” (301), rather than as a fixed, integrated visual field. More so than Irving’s or Jewett’s work, Murfree’s writing also called attention to its own surface through excessive description of landscape. These inversions and indeterminacies, the flirtation with abstraction, problematize an understanding of regionalist writing as simply a subset of realism. Following Pam Morris’s definition of realist literary modes as “those that, broadly speaking, present themselves as corresponding to the world as it is, using language predominantly as a means of communication rather than verbal display, and

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<sup>64</sup> Susan Stewart has suggested that the primary effect of the “writing of miniaturization” is much the same as the effect of the panorama as outlined by Angela Miller and John Sears: the creation of distance between observer and observed. “‘Correctness of design’ and ‘accuracy of representation,’” Stewart writes, quoting Solomon Grildig’s introduction to *The Miniature: A Periodical Paper* (1804), “are devices of distance, of ‘proper perspective,’ the perspective of the bourgeois subject. If they are especially appropriate to the ‘lesser theatre of life,’ it is because they allow the reader to disengage herself from the field of representation as a transcendent subject” (*On Longing* 45).

offering rational, secular explanations for all the happenings of the world so represented,” and that foster “our ability to communicate reasonably accurately with each other about the world and ourselves” (9-10), it becomes clear that Jewett and especially Murfree departed from this realist paradigm in significant ways. When the subjective nature of perception produces disruptions of scale and unsettles “the weight of visual detail” (Bader 192) upon which works of regionalism typically depend, there is no “reasonably accurate” communication that creates a collective reality—a “common vision,” as Edwin Cady might have termed it. One can only attempt to communicate the impress of the world upon one’s own consciousness.

1. The panoptic view: American landscape art and Washington Irving's sketches

Regionalism's inability or refusal to, as Jewett once phrased it, "achieve something in another line which runs much higher," would seem to render it aesthetically and ideologically incompatible with the expansive, large-scale representations of the American landscape that dominated the fine arts during the nineteenth century. Angela Miller explains that, between roughly 1840 and 1875, "American landscape imagery achieved its classic formulation" (207).<sup>65</sup> By midcentury, expansive views of the natural landscape—perspectives that "signaled separation and distance, as well as the aesthetic and economic control of nature" (Miller 214)—were prevalent in American painting. The elevated vantage points of many compositions by Hudson River School painters, for instance, provided "the aesthetic and emotional distance" that "enables the observer to take in a large stretch of open country and remain outside of nature, master of what he surveys" (Sears 54). Regionalism, in its embrace of the minute specifics of place, seems initially to operate in a different register, rejecting such detached, distancing tendencies of the panoramic landscape.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> European art (especially the work of Claude Lorrain, the seventeenth-century French painter after whom the Claude glass was named) was critical to the nationalization of American landscape representation during the early- to mid-nineteenth-century. In particular, the American landscape tradition drew influence from Claude's "middle landscape," in which "viewers of nature sought neither wildness nor tameness, but a middle ground between the two." Claude's compositions progressed "from a foreground framed by trees, to a middle-ground space where Arcadian shepherds frolic, to a background of distant vistas and visionary prospects." See *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, eds. Angela L. Miller, Janet C. Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts. (Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2008: 259). Representations of the middle landscape "all told a single tale: the triumph of civilization over wilderness" (259).

<sup>66</sup> There is considerable overlap in assessments of the ideological functions of regionalist literature and the roughly contemporaneous tradition of landscape painting. Generally speaking, nineteenth-century landscape painting functioned as a vehicle for national and universal themes, as opposed to local and particular ones. In the years preceding the Civil War, American painters rendered the landscape "increasingly in national terms," glossing over "economic, racial, and sectional differences" and subsuming them into a reverence for Nature that simultaneously projected the fantasy of a unified nation (*American Encounters* 241). At midcentury, landscape painters effected the "conversion of local places and events into sites of collective importance. As sectional differences intensified in the decades before the Civil War,

Thomas Cole's painting *The Oxbow* (1836; Fig. 10), which depicted the Connecticut Valley from Mount Holyoke, is now considered an originary Hudson River School landscape that epitomizes what Alan Wallach has referred to as the "grafting of panoramic convention onto landscape" (82).<sup>67</sup> While a "panoramic" mode of vision has now been thoroughly naturalized in landscape views, Cole's rendering of landscape in *The Oxbow* (which is, I shall argue, a close visual analogue for Washington Irving's landscape descriptions in *The Sketch Book*) benefits from a general understanding of the panorama as a historically-specific technology of vision. Panorama paintings were generally exhibited in rotundas designed especially for that purpose; spectators would climb a tower in the rotunda's center to reach a viewing platform (Wallach 82). The viewing platform, as Wallach notes, "was positioned in such a way that the painting's horizon-line roughly coincided with the spectator's eye-level, which meant that spectators experienced a sensation of looking down at the scene" (82-83). In the panoramic visual mode, "the world is presented as a form of totality" in which the spectator seems "to preside over all visibility" (Wallach 83). There is nothing inherently "natural" about panoramic vision; it is not synonymous with a view that merely

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artists, writers, and intellectuals attempted to imagine a version of the landscape untouched by regional tensions" (*American Encounters* 259). This echoes the argument made by Brodhead, Kaplan, Sundquist et al. about the ways that regionalist narratives were put to nationalist uses in the postbellum period—as part of the collective, restorative act of "imbuing [local vistas] with shared national values" (*American Encounters* 259). Miller notes that "the national landscape, synthesized out of discrete parts, became a construct capable of answering the call for native themes without becoming mired in place-specific associations. The creators of the national landscape—painters, writers, and critics—steered a course threatened by the anarchy of localism, on the one hand, and the tyranny of the imperial center on the other" ("Everywhere and Nowhere" 208). While the binary Miller sets up between "two forms of landscape—the one aesthetically and ideologically constructed, the other experientially wrought and shaped by a resistance to public mythologies" (221) is problematic, both landscape paintings and regionalist literature required viewers and/or readers to negotiate a complex, shifting set of tensions between conceptions of the national and the local.

<sup>67</sup> John K. Howat has referred to *The Oxbow* as "one of the earliest statements of an identifiably American landscape painting tradition" (*American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987: 125).



encompasses an “expansive” or “broad” lateral area. Rather, panoramic vision results from the carefully-calibrated production of “not only a spectacle but a spectator with a particular relation to reality” (Wallach 83).



**Fig 10: Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*. 1836. Oil on canvas. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

Cole’s painting, which positioned the viewer at an ideal vantage point from which to take in an immense amount of visual information, certainly qualifies as panoramic. That visual information, moreover, is directional: it guides the viewer’s eye both horizontally and from foreground to background. A number of art historians have noted that *The Oxbow* can be read from left to right, as a telos of national progress.<sup>68</sup> Cole’s

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<sup>68</sup> See, for instance, William Cronon, “Telling Tales on Canvas: Landscapes of Frontier Change,” *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992); and the first chapter of Angela Miller’s *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993).

painting, as Sears has observed, “juxtaposes the sublime and the beautiful” (56); in doing so, it charts a neat, linear progression from the threatening clouds and wild forest on the left side of the canvas, to the cultivated land that lines the river to the right, beyond which rolling hills fade gradually into the distance—in other words, from wilderness to civilization to the promise of future expansion and national development.<sup>69</sup> Visually, however, there is also a compelling sense of movement from right to left. The storm clouds, along with the wilderness, appear to recede, gradually being replaced by the idyllic pastoral landscape that occupies the right half of the canvas. It is almost as though the dark clouds and sublime mountaintop are receding only because they are being pushed aside by the cultivated land on the other side of the river. There is nothing overtly threatening about the forward march of human progress in *The Oxbow*; indeed, Cole seems to appreciate the aesthetic merits of both untouched nature and the human cultivation of the once-wild land. However, as Matthew Baigell has observed, Cole expressed—both in his series of paintings *The Course of Empire* (1833-36) and in various writings—concerns about the threat posed to national stability by the excesses of materialism and a disrespect for the divine in untamed nature.<sup>70</sup> *The Oxbow* thus “was probably not meant as an optimistic statement of rural contentment but as a desperate plea to recover such contentment through a renewed contract with God” (Baigell 54).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> On linearity in panoramic landscape compositions, Sears notes: “A river valley lent itself particularly well to panoramic experience and description because the river furnished a linear element along which a series of scenes could be viewed either from the river itself, as the tourist moved along it by boat, or from an elevated point above the river. The Connecticut Valley was one of the first places in the United States to be appreciated in these panoramic terms” (52).

<sup>70</sup> “I cannot express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes [uncontrolled nature] is quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made destitute, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation” (Cole’s “Essay on American Scenery” [1835], qtd. in Cronon 42).

<sup>71</sup> Baigell and others have observed that the marks on the hillside in the background of *The Oxbow* appear to spell “Noah” in Hebrew; viewed upside-down, they appear to spell “Shaddai” (Almighty). This has been interpreted as Cole’s expression of reverence for the presence of God in nature. Elsewhere, Baigell and

As Sears has asserted, however, “[t]he panorama was also very well suited to capturing the epic qualities of America because of its large scale and capacity to document the details of vast landscapes” (52).

Wallach draws a useful distinction between the panoramic view and the *panoptic* view, pointing out that Jeremy Bentham’s invention of the panopticon was nearly contemporaneous with the emergence of the panorama. The panoptic view “was panoramic in the everyday sense of that term because it covered the entire lateral circuit of visibility; but it was also intensive or telescopic because it aspired to control every element within the visual field” (Wallach 83). This contribution of telescopic detail to the relationship between vision and power is what distinguishes the panoptic from the panoramic mode.<sup>72</sup> The viewer’s sense of control over the scene represented in *The Oxbow* is produced by an extremely wide angle of vision (between 85 and 90 degrees, Wallach notes, rather than the 55-degree angle of vision of the naked human eye), in combination with the minute details Cole includes—the flock of birds that echo the shape of the river’s meander, for example; the detailing on the ferns at the lower left corner of the canvas. Cole’s juxtaposition of two very different landscapes, combined with his utilization of both an impossibly broad angle of vision and telescopic details, produces “both a feeling of panoramic breadth and a feeling of imminent split or breakdown”—what Wallach aptly describes as a “cacophony of vision” (90).

James Fenimore Cooper’s writing emblemizes the American landscape tradition instantiated by Cole’s *The Oxbow*. In *The Pioneers*, Cooper presented us with a

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Allen Kaufman have suggested that *The Oxbow* expresses anti-industrial sentiment. “Thomas Cole’s *The Oxbow*: A Critique of American Civilization,” *Arts* 55 (Jan. 1981): 136-39.

<sup>72</sup> In *A Tramp Abroad*, Twain literalizes the panoptic view, alternating between viewing a panoramic landscape with the naked eye and with a telescope.

landscape rendered in the simultaneously extensive and intensive panoptic mode: from a hill, “the eye might embrace, in one view, thousands and tens of thousands of acres, that were yet tenanted only by the beasts of the forest.” The description of this same view telescopes first to a “rapid little stream,” then still further to “the limestones that lined its bottom” (48). In this case, Cooper’s description gives us access to a detail inaccessible to the naked eye’s “embrace” from its hilltop—an intimacy of distance. In another instance, “it was the boundless forests that covered the hills in the distance, one over the other, that most attracted the gaze of Miss Temple” (215). The Judge’s description of his experience atop the summit of a mountain he thereafter calls Mount Vision—“for the sight that there met my eyes seemed to me as the deceptions of a dream”—expressed in no uncertain terms the panoptic sublime. From that vantage point, which the Judge described as an “elevated observatory,” a literalization of the panoramic viewing platform, one could see only “boundless forest except where the lake lay, like a mirror of glass...nothing but mountains rising behind mountains.” This view induced “a mingled feeling of pleasure and desolation” (239)—an affective response that aligns with Cole’s representation of the Oxbow and with the panoptic sublime.<sup>73</sup>

In *The Pioneers*, Cooper also drew upon the circular panorama as a visual technology in Natty Bumppo’s description of a favorite spot in the Catskills: “There’s a

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<sup>73</sup> Brander Matthews correlated Cooper’s use of the panoptic view to his expansive narratives: “For the free movement of his figures and for the proper expansion of his story Cooper needed a broad region and a widening vista. He excelled in conveying the suggestion of vastness and limitless space and of depicting the human beings proper to these great reaches of land and water—the two elements he ruled; and he was equally at home on the rolling waves of the prairie and on the green and irregular hillocks of the ocean.” “The Centenary of James Fenimore Cooper,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 38.5 (Sep. 1889): 797. In *Homeward Bound: Or, The Chase, A Tale of the Sea* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), Cooper explicitly referenced the panorama and its sublime qualities; Eve Effingham issues an imperative to her companion aboard a ship during a major Atlantic storm to “forget the danger, and admire the sublimity of this terrific panorama” (Vol. I: 276).

place in them hills that I used to climb to when I wanted to see the carryings on of the world.” When Edwards asked what one can see from that place, Natty replied:

“Creation,” said Natty, dropping the end of his rod into the water, and sweeping one hand around him in a circle, “all creation, lad...The [Susquehanna] river was in sight for seventy miles, looking like a curled shaving under my feet, though it was eight long miles to its banks. I saw the hills in the Hampshire grants, the highlands of the river, and all that God had done, or man could do, as far as eye could reach—you know that the Indians named me for my sight, lad....” (300)

Unlike the Judge, Natty was not ambivalent about the visual experience afforded by Mount Vision: “If being the best part of a mile in the air and having men’s farms and houses at your feet, with rivers looking like ribbons, and mountains bigger than the ‘Vision seeming to be hay-stacks of green grass under you, gives any satisfaction to a man, I can recommend the spot” (300).

Washington Irving’s sketches also have much in common with the visual idiom of *The Oxbow*—perhaps unexpectedly so, since Cole’s sweeping, panoramic vision seems quite distinct from the more limited visual metaphor of the “sketch,” to which Kristie Hamilton refers as a “brief, open form” (1). Hamilton also notes, however, that an “aesthetic of fragmentation” took shape both “within and around” the genre of the sketch, thus revealing “the disruptions within modernization that the novel smoothed over with coherence and closure” (8-9). The unfinished, preparatory, off-the-cuff resonances of the sketch are by no means diametrically opposed to the polished, expansive, yet telescopically-detailed panorama. “To sketch American regions,” Hamilton writes, was “to provide compelling proof of the nation’s pastoral foundations” (66). Cole’s rendering of the Oxbow and Irving’s sketches both participate in what Hamilton calls “pastoral mythologizing,” which imparted an “imagined stability” to a nation undergoing massive social and cultural change (69). The panorama and the sketch overlap not only

ideologically, but aesthetically as well. As Jonathan Crary noted in *Techniques of the Observer*, the “circular or semicircular panorama painting clearly broke with the localized point of view of perspective painting or the camera obscura” (113), and as Hamilton has argued, this newly mobile model of perception was “articulated in the literary sketches of the same period” (138). Despite the obvious disparity in scale between the sketch and the panorama, these forms shared fundamental concerns rooted in the changing nature of perception.<sup>74</sup>

The themes of Irving’s stories—creating mythic narratives of national progress, expressing ambivalence about those same narratives, exploring the relationship between the unique, isolated place and the nation—resonate with those expressed in *The Oxbow*.<sup>75</sup> Irving’s sketches, too, were replete with panoptic views of the picturesque landscape. In “Rip Van Winkle,” for instance, Rip surveyed the Hudson from

a green knoll, covered with mountain herbage, that crowned the brow of a precipice. From an opening between the trees he could overlook all the lower country for many a mile of rich woodland. He saw at a distance the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course, with the reflection of a purple cloud, or the sail of a lagging bark here and there sleeping on its glassy bosom, and at last losing itself in the blue highlands. (30)

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<sup>74</sup> Hamilton continues: “the literary sketch plays an intermediary ideological and historical role within the cultural processes that were already replacing the centered, idealized observer of a stable, objectively known world with a decentered (transient), observing subject of flitting images and fleeting moments. Through its conceptual relationship with contemporaneous discourses of vision and visual apparatuses, the genre contributed to the transformation of perception and subjectivity” (138).

<sup>75</sup> Sears comments that “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” were “adaptations of German folk tales, but Irving tied them so effectively to American settings that they became lodged securely in both the American literary tradition and in the touristic imagination” (61). The settings of “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” suggest the emergent popularity of landscape tourism in the US beginning in the 1820s. Wallach notes: “During the 1820s landscape tourism began to take shape in the United States as an important form of middle-class leisure, with Mount Holyoke as one of its major sites. Other major sites included Niagara Falls, the Catskill Mountains in the vicinity of the Catskill Mountain House (opened in 1825), and the White Mountain routes leading to Mount Washington... Literature and imagery provided the necessary context for tourism, lending significance to such activities as visiting Kaaterskill Falls... These activities can be understood as part of the tourist’s quest for authenticity and identity” (81).

Here, Rip presided over an apparently endless landscape; rather than losing sight of the Hudson, the Hudson lost *itself* in the highlands. This “sovereign gaze,” as Foucault might dub it, is an instance of what Kristie Hamilton has described as an early nineteenth-century preoccupation with rural land as the “mythological scene of national stability” (Hamilton 65).<sup>76</sup> Irving constructed a comforting vision of Arcadian repose in this expansive view of the Hudson; elsewhere, he transposed the possession of mastery and control over the distant view to a personified version of the Catskill Mountains, which were “seen away to the west of the river swelling up to noble height and lording it over the surrounding country” (26). These views of the majestic Hudson and surrounding environs are juxtaposed with sublime scenery, such as the ravine where “[t]he rocks presented a high impenetrable wall over which the torrent came tumbling in a sheet of feathery foam, and fell into a broad deep basin black from the shadows of the surrounding forest” (34)—much like the jarring juxtaposition of the sublime and the beautiful in *The Oxbow*.

The mythic quality of the natural landscape in “Rip Van Winkle” positions it as an unchanging backdrop that highlights the metamorphosis of the human world. The Catskills were “fairy mountains,” and the human additions to the surrounding land were unproblematically enmeshed with the natural features of the landscape.<sup>77</sup> The houses’ “shingle roofs gleam among the trees, just where the blue tints of the upland melt away into the fresh green of the nearer landscape” (26). When Rip wakes up, he finds himself

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<sup>76</sup> “Rip Van Winkle” does not make an unproblematic claim on such stability—the story conveys anxiety about whether the revolution has brought about any substantive changes.

<sup>77</sup> This parallels Karen Georgi’s notion of “natural domestication”: in Asher Durand’s *View of Dover Plain, Dutchess [sic] Country, New York* (1848), “the land appears to be naturally domesticated, a pastoral plain with no overt signs of cultivation, but yet available for man’s use. The human and natural elements blend together with no apparent boundaries.” See “Defining Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-Century American Critical Discourse: Or, Should Art ‘Deal in Wares the Age Has Need of?’” (*Oxford Art Journal* 29.2 [2006]: 233).

in the midst of bewildering changes, yet the landscape remains untouched: “Strange names were over the doors—strange faces at the windows—everything was strange . . . There stood the Kaatskill mountains—there ran the Hudson at a distance—there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been” (34-5). It is this unchanged and unchanging landscape that assures Rip he has awoken in the same place, if not in the same era. The changes wrought by humans have produced no effect on the natural world; somehow, the Catskills and the Hudson remain unsullied constants amid historical change and political upheaval.

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is also set in an unchanging landscape, an “enchanted region” marked by “listless repose” (294) and subject to the “witching influence of the air” (294-95). According to Irving’s narrator, both the landscape and the people who inhabit Sleepy Hollow are frozen in time, passed over by the present moment:

I mention this spot with all possible laud; for it is in such little retired Dutch valleys, found here and there embosomed in the great state of New York, that population, manners, and customs, remain fixed, while the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant changes in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved. They are like those little nooks of still water, which border a rapid stream, where we may see the straw and bubble rising quietly at anchor, or slowly revolving in their mimic harbour, undisturbed by the rush of the passing current. Though many years have elapsed since I trod the drowsy shades of Sleepy Hollow, yet I question whether I should not still find the same trees and the same families vegetating in its sheltered bosom. (295)

In both stories, Irving crafted a tranquil, unchanging, Arcadian landscape that is both enchanted—“full of fable” (“Rip Van Winkle” 40)—and nurturing; Irving’s Hudson River valley is markedly maternal, as evidenced by references to the Hudson’s “glassy bosom,” Sleepy Hollow’s “sheltered bosom,” and the villages “embosomed in the great state of New York.” One might read this as a stereotypical example of elegiac local



color—as an obsessive wish to beat back change: in “Rip Van Winkle,” the human landscape changes while the natural landscape is constant; in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” both seem ossified. However, Irving’s repeated personification of various aspects of his landscapes’ rivers and villages—his reduction of rivers and villages to bosoms—gestures toward the inversion of scale that finds fuller expression in Jewett’s writing.

While Cooper’s writing was rife with unproblematic panoramas and Irving’s sketches merely hinted at the tension between expansive and telescopic views, their use of landscape set the stage for those inversions through their experiments with panoptic vistas. Cooper’s panoptic view was not merely panoramic; it incorporated both a broad visual field (Natty Bumppo’s “far as eye could reach”) and the telescopic, hyperdetailed mode of vision (the limestone that lined the bottom of the stream). Because panoptic vision accommodates both the minute detail and the panoramic view, it provides the raw materials for the inversions of scale that we find in Jewett’s work. Her writing departed in crucial ways from the Hudson River School-esque treatment of landscape in Cooper and Irving, but we might read her as building upon—or re-forming to suit her purposes—the visual mode they embraced.

## 2. Jewett's inversions of visual scale

Henry James famously described Jewett's body of work as "a beautiful little quantum of achievement" ("Mr. and Mrs. James T. Fields" 174). While there has been considerable debate about what James meant by this phrase,<sup>78</sup> his use of the diminutive was neither restricted to Jewett nor, in all probability, intended to minimize her accomplishment. James wrote of Alphonse Daudet, an author he admired immensely, in similar terms:

In writing of [Daudet] some time ago, in another place, I so far lost my head as to remark, with levity, that he was "a great little novelist." The diminutive epithet then, I must now say, was nothing more than a term of endearment, the result of an irresistible impulse to express a sense of personal fondness. This kind of feeling is difficult to utter in English, and the utterance of it, so far as this is possible, is not thought consistent with the dignity of a critic. If we were talking in French, nothing would be simpler than to say that Alphonse Daudet is adorable, and have done with it. But this resource is denied me, and I must arrive at my meaning by a series of circumlocutions. (ADC 228)

James' comments about Daudet—and, by extension, Jewett—suggest that the diminutive may in fact wield an emotive power that is not available through other, more hyperbolic, forms of language.

More recent critics of Jewett have continued to align her work with "microcosmic" frames of reference but have also noted her tendency to invert microcosmic and macrocosmic scales. Laurie Shannon has found Jewett's writing compatible with the qualities of French *intimiste* painting, suggesting that Jewett shares intimism's fundamental devotions: the "avoidance of the sententious and grandiose in favor of a microcosmic frame"; "the pursuit of a spare perfection"; and the depiction of "meditative interiors" (227-32). Shannon describes Jewett's literary mode as a

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<sup>78</sup> See Laurie Shannon, "'The Country of Our Friendship': Jewett's Intimist Art," *American Literature* 71.2 (June 1999): 227-62.

“‘narrowing’ of the gaze,” which in turn “contracts the field of vision to a sphere deemed manipulable by the mind” (228). This reduction or restriction of scope, the confinement of one’s attention to a limited scale, and the privileging of a microcosmic frame of reference are qualities we have come to expect from regionalist or local color writing. However, Shannon observes that Jewett inverts “micro- and macrocosmic forms,” an inversion of scale epitomized by Jewett’s use of the phrase “the country of our friendship” (228).

Jewett’s inversions of micro- and macrocosmic visual scales in relation to landscape suggest that we should understand her work as both an evolution and a break from Irving and Cooper’s panoptic visions. Jewett used landscape as a primary form for exploring the possibilities of such inversions, in particular their ability to articulate the complex interrelations of locally-specific attributes and broader worldviews. Jewett’s inversion of micro- and macrocosmic visual scales, along with her interest in the interplay between local place and landscape representation, are exemplified by a seemingly minor detail in *Pointed Firs*: a set of curtains. The narrator accompanies her friend Mrs. Todd on a visit to the latter’s mother, Mrs. Blackett, who lives on the “neighborless and remote” Green Island. Despite her geographic and social isolation, “Mrs. Blackett was one who knew the uses of a parlor,” and who insistently paid “tribute to Society” by keeping her parlor appropriately furnished for receiving guests. Mrs. Blackett “loomed larger than ever in the little old-fashioned best room,” we are told,

with its few good pieces of furniture and pictures of national interest. The green paper curtains were stamped with conventional landscapes of a foreign order, — castles on inaccessible crags, and lovely lakes with steep wooded shores; under-foot the treasured carpet was covered thick with home-made rugs. There were empty glass lamps and crystallized bouquets of grass and some fine shells on the narrow mantelpiece. (42)

The “lovely lakes with steep wooded shores” recall both the view from Mount Vision in *The Pioneers*, in which “boundless forest” was interrupted only by a lake “like a mirror of glass,” and the “many a mile of rich woodland” Rip could see from his perch on the knoll. The landscapes stamped on the curtains evoke the panoptic sublime; the “castles on inaccessible crags,” in particular, suggest a panoramic view that is bound up with power, available only to a select few pairs of eyes.

Jewett’s presentation of Mrs. Blackett’s curtains represented her rejection of the romantic, nationalist landscape tradition that drives Cooper, Irving, and Cole. By miniaturizing these landscapes and placing them on a set of curtains in a room she clearly does not like, Jewett diminished the narratives of such panoptic views and suggests the failure of the kind of visual mode favored by the Hudson River School painters. The parlor’s formality and artifice discomfited Jewett’s narrator, who experienced a surge of relief when Mrs. Blackett invited her into the kitchen: “[t]he best room was too suggestive of serious occasions, and the shades were all pulled down to shut out the summer light and air” (42).<sup>79</sup> For Jewett, deep meaning, interpersonal connection, and permanence were only to be found in modest and natural things; the microscopic scale, not the panoptic view, wields power.

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<sup>79</sup> This violent distaste for “best rooms” recurs throughout Jewett’s work. In *Deephaven*, the narrator says: “Of one of the front rooms, ‘the best chamber,’ we stood rather in dread. It is very remarkable that there seem to be no ghost-stories connected with any part of the house, particularly this. We are neither of us nervous; but there is certainly something dismal about the room...The carpet was most singularly colored with dark reds and indescribable grays and browns, and the pattern, after a whole summer’s study, could never be followed with one’s eye” (15). The “best parlor” is similarly sinister: “The best parlor we also rarely used, because all the portraits which hung there had for some unaccountable reason taken a violent dislike to us, and followed us suspiciously with their eyes. The furniture was stately and very uncomfortable, and there was something about the room which suggested an invisible funeral” (15-16). Having been invited into Elijah Tilley’s best room in *Pointed Firs*, the narrator again expresses a preference for the kitchen: “The best room seemed to me a much sadder and more empty place than the kitchen; its conventionalities lacked the simple perfection of the humbler room and failed on the side of poor ambition; it was only when one remembered that patient saving, and what high respect for society in the abstract go to such furnishing that the little parlor was interesting at all” (130).

Mrs. Blackett's curtains foreground several sets of tensions that are both significant in *Pointed Firs* and relevant to the issue of visual scale in regionalism more generally. In their literal miniaturization of the expansive landscape, the curtains point to a tension between the panoramic view and the telescopic view or focused detail. The miniaturized landscapes invert large and small, shrinking a landscape into a tiny, commercially-reproducible image; they also invert exterior and interior, bringing the natural (and foreign) landscape into play as an instance of what Kristin Hoganson calls "the rise of foreignness itself as a decorating objective" (65). Therefore, the curtains also participate in creating a sense of tension between the national and the foreign; they are patterned with Irving-esque landscapes, yet Jewett specified that they are "of a foreign order." The local seems conspicuously absent from Mrs. Blackett's best room, which was an uneasy hybrid of foreign and national elements: pictures of "national interest" and miniaturized foreign landscapes on the curtains (though they are "conventional" enough that they resonate with Irving and Cole as well). There are other places in Jewett's writing where international influences exert—or have exerted in the past—a salutary effect on her characters, particularly the culturally-broadening influence of the international shipping trade.<sup>80</sup> The curtains, however, fetishize foreign representations evacuated of any real substance. Jewett thereby set up a contrast between the parlor's commodification of foreignness for the purpose of creating exotic interiors and the genuine cosmopolitan spirit engendered by the now-defunct shipping trade.

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<sup>80</sup> As Captain Littlepage says in *Pointed Firs*: "I view it, in addition, that a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up to its own affairs, and gets no knowledge of the outside world except from a cheap, unprincipled newspaper. In the old days, a good part o' the best men knew a hundred ports and something of the way folks lived in them. They saw the world for themselves, and like's not their wives and children saw it with them"; they "could see outside the battle for town clerk here in Dunnet; they got some sense o' proportion" (19-20).

In addition to inverting micro- and macrocosmic, interior and exterior, Jewett used Mrs. Blackett's curtains to highlight her exploration of the relationships between landscapes and the characters who populated or visited them. What is the point, Jewett seems to have wondered, of having miniaturized foreign landscapes supplant the local landscape that lies just beyond the window? Mrs. Blackett's parlor in general, and her curtains in particular, placed things at a remove, privileging convention over substance and substituting simulacra for real things (or real intimacies). Rather than seeing foreign sights for themselves, Dunnet residents now shut themselves up in their best rooms with commercial reproductions of those landscapes. Karen Halttunen has commented that nineteenth-century parlor rituals were, at least in part, an attempt "to ensure perfect sincerity in the society of the middle-class parlor" as a reaction to "the hypocrisy [the arbiters of genteel conduct] saw operating in the marketplaces and streets of the city" (xvi). Kristie Hamilton has pointed out that "[a]s the urban middle classes evolved, the identifying 'sincerity' that characterized parlor relations was gradually refined into more and more formal rituals that signified class membership, until, by midcentury, parlor ritual itself was accepted as a replacement for 'heart to heart intimacy' because it 'smooth[ed] social intercourse of the urban middle classes'" (65; quoting Halttunen 167). Jewett objected to Mrs. Blackett's "best room" for precisely this reason: it is a poor substitute for true intimacy among people, upon which she places a high premium. In Jewett's work, the empty social rituals epitomized by Mrs. Blackett's best room cannot cultivate such intimacy: that happens in the informal setting of the kitchen.

The language of diminution also saturated the assessments of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics of Jewett's work. Fred Pattee dubbed Jewett "a writer of little

books and short stories, the painter of a few subjects in a provincial little area” (*History of American Literature Since 1870* 234). An 1877 reviewer of *Deephaven* praised the book’s “fresh and delicate quality,” as well as its appeal to a “gentle reader”: this “pretty little book . . . must, we think, find favor with those who appreciate the simple treatment of the near-at-hand quaint and picturesque” (“Recent Literature” 759). Bookending this review of Jewett’s novel are reviews of books about foreign travel, the language and tone of which make the microcosmic scale of *Deephaven* all the more evident. The grand, sweeping scale of D. Mackenzie Wallace’s travel account of Russia and meditations on the “Eastern Question” referred to Russia’s “vast untamed country” (757) and compared Russian serfdom to American slavery; Eugene Schuyler’s *Turkistan* confronted its reader with “a mass of historical and ethnical information” (760). In *Deephaven*, by contrast, “[b]its of New England landscape and characteristic marine effects scattered throughout these studies of life vividly localize them, and the talk of the people is rendered with a delicious fidelity” (759). Jewett’s descriptions, furthermore, were “touched with a hand that holds itself far from every trick of exaggeration, and that subtly delights in the very tint and form of reality” (759). By highlighting the travel accounts’ broad geographical scale and sociopolitical relevance, the review foregrounded the miniaturizing tendency of Jewett’s work, throwing her “bits” of local color into sharp relief.

Based on these qualities, it makes sense that many nineteenth-century reviews of Jewett’s work connected her style with the watercolor painting, which made great gains in popularity in the last few decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>81</sup> Watercolors, like Jewett’s writing, were frequently described as sketchy, simple, fresh, informal, intimate, delicate, quaint, domestic, small, and charming; paradoxically, these qualities, despite

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<sup>81</sup> See Cleveland, chapter 5.

bring framed as aesthetic limitations, were generally construed as virtues in Jewett's work. In 1882, a reviewer for the *Atlantic* drew an explicit link between Jewett's writing and watercolor painting—specifically the watercolor landscape: “Miss Jewett's sketches have all the value and interest of delicately executed watercolor landscapes; they are restful, they are truthful, and no one is ever asked to expend criticism upon them, but to take them with their necessary limitations as household pleasures” (“The Light Literature of Travel” 421). Jewett's *A Marsh Island* was hailed as “delightfully refreshing,” and the landscape it depicts as “charmingly natural and vivid... The whole book, one said to [Jewett], is an exquisite water-color, with no heavy daubs of fiery tint nor depths of black; just fair, sweet, transparent colors, laid on with the daintiest of brushes” (“The Bookshelf” 224). Horace Scudder wrote in the *Atlantic*: “The sketches which [Mr. Dale, the character who is a painter] brought away were studies in this quiet nature: they were figurative of ‘A Marsh Island’ itself, which is an episode in water-color” (Scudder 561). Scudder continued by commenting that it is not the characters themselves in *A Marsh Island*

upon which our attention is fixed; they but form a part of that succession of interiors and out-door scenes which pass before the eye in the pages of this book. Flemish pictures we were about to call them, but the refinement which belongs to Miss Jewett's work forbids such a characterization. We return to our own figure: they are water-color sketches, resting for their value not upon dramatic qualities or strong color, but upon their translucency, their pure tone, their singleness of effect.<sup>82</sup> (561)

In her review of American women's literature, Helen Gray Cone agreed: “Without vigorous movement, [Jewett's] sketches and stories have always an individual, delicate picturesqueness, the quality of a small, clear watercolor” (927). The translucent pigments

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<sup>82</sup> The comparison to Flemish pictures seems more appropriate to Irving's work than to Jewett's. In “Rip Van Winkle,” Irving writes: “The whole group [of Dutch strangers] reminded Rip of the figures in an old Flemish painting, in the parlour of Dominie Van Schaick the village parson, and which had been brought over from Holland at the time of the settlement” (32).



of the watercolor landscape translated into an assumed transparency of literary representation: paradoxically, because of its perceived aesthetic limitations, Jewett's writing was hailed as realistic, truthful, and faithful to her subjects.<sup>83</sup>

The small scale of the watercolor painting is evident in *Deephaven*. The narrator makes it clear that she will not expand the predetermined parameters of the story: "Perhaps you would like to know something about us, but I am not writing Kate's biography and my own, only telling you of one summer which we spent together" (24). In the last chapter of *Deephaven*, the narrator muses: "It is bewildering to know that this is the last chapter, and that it must not be long. I remember so many of our pleasures of which I have hardly said a word" (137). This statement gives the sense that the length of the narrative is somehow predetermined, that it has limits beyond which the narrator cannot stray; even the last chapter "must not be long," and she provides a rushed list of some of the omitted "pleasures" of *Deephaven*. By making it explicit that compression and omission are necessary elements of the narrative format, Jewett conferred on it a sense of small scale; the suggestiveness of the many unmentioned pleasures also echoes the sketchy quality of painted watercolors.

In addition to foregrounding the containment of the narrative, the narratorial statements in *Deephaven* are anticipatory ("Perhaps you would like to know") and conversational, which cultivates intimacy, another quality often attributed to watercolors, both between narrator and reader and among characters. Jewett filled *Deephaven* with the telling of stories, and one of the chief pleasures for the narrator and Kate was playing the part of "an entirely new and fresh audience" for the locals' "pet stories" (52),

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<sup>83</sup> Jewett's characters, according to one review, "talk idiomatically, with just a hint of dialect, which is hardly dialect at all and does not become a stumbling-block" ("Recent Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* 54.323 [Sep. 1884]: 713).

asking leading questions that unfailingly prompted anecdotes. This intimate, conversational tone is repeated in second-person addresses throughout *Deephaven*. “I should like you to see,” the narrator says, “with your own two eyes, Widow Ware and Miss Exper’ence Hull, two old sisters whose appearance we delighted in”; “Have you never seen faces that seemed old-fashioned?” (44): this cultivation of intimacy relies on references to the visual. In *Firs*, place breeds intimacy: Dunnet Landing was “attaching” (3), part of the “golden chain of love and dependence” that linked the scattered islands (97), and it is precisely the inversion of scale that allows for the cultivation of such intimacy: “When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person” (3). When the narrator and Mrs. Todd have a “fine view” of Green Island, what began as a panoramic view yields to minute, “attaching” details:

We were standing where there was a fine view of the harbor and its long stretches of shore all covered by the great army of pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing as if they waited to embark...Suddenly, as we looked, a gleam of golden sunshine struck the outer islands, and one of them shone out clear in the light, and revealed itself in a compelling way to our eyes. (30-31)

The sunburst that illuminates Green Island causes Mrs. Todd to look “across the bay with a face full of affection and interest”; “I know every rock an’ bush on it,” she says (31). As she talks about Green Island, Mrs. Todd mounts a rock, where she stands “grand and architectural, like a *caryatide* (31). The sunbeams illuminate the island; Mrs. Todd, referring to small landscape features, illuminated their meaning. In focusing on the faraway rocks of Green Island, she seems to expand, merging with the Dunnet rock upon which she stands.

Jewett's work came to be associated not only with narrative fragmentariness, but specifically with fragments of the Maine landscape. Perhaps reflecting the understanding of watercolor painting as a mode conducive to representing slivers of the natural landscape,<sup>84</sup> Jewett's writing was relentlessly described in terms of "bits." One reviewer asserted that "[n]othing could be better than the bits of landscape scattered throughout [*A Marsh Island*]" ("Miss Jewett's *A Marsh Island*" 64).<sup>85</sup> "There is not much story," a reviewer for the *Overland Monthly* claimed, "but one does not want much story, in Miss Jewett's books; they are transcripts of bits of life, not regularly constructed novels with plots and machinery... They are like a painter's outdoor studies" ("Summer Novels" 663). The language of such reviews reinforced the associations among watercolor, spontaneity, and "bits" of subject matter.

In aligning Jewett's work with the medium of watercolor painting, and particularly with the watercolor landscape, nineteenth-century reviews of her work enacted a peculiar paradox. Watercolors were regarded as both aesthetically innovative and aesthetically limited, uneasily straddling the line between small, decorative domestic objects and avant-garde painterly techniques. David Cleveland notes that watercolors, along with etchings and pastels, proliferated between 1880 and the turn of the century (226); watercolor was seen as a "more democratic art" than oil painting because its

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<sup>84</sup> As Henry James wrote of Daudet, "he does the little piece—*il fait le morceau*, as the French call it—with a facility all his own. No one has such an eye for a subject; such a perception of 'bits,' as the painters in water-colors say" (ADA 216-17). An 1882 review of an exhibition of watercolors and etchings by American artists commented: "One or two bits by Alden Weir make one regret that he devotes little time to water-colors, especially a certain sketch of a youth in a large straw hat; it is done in a happy burst of inspiration" ("Watercolor and Etching: An Exhibition which Honors American Artists," *New York Times* 28 Jan. 1882: 5). Another review of the Water-Color Society's annual exhibition in 1884 praised works such as Mary A. Wright's "A Sunset Bit" ("a pretty little trifle") and Frederick B. Schell's "Rural Bits from Nature" ("fresh, original, but a trifle too brilliant"). "The Water-Colors," *New York Times* 2 Feb 1884: 5.

<sup>85</sup> However, the same reviewer objects to the way in which the "bits" of landscape outstrip plot and character development: "It is, indeed, because the [scenery and settings] are so fine that one looks for something more important to happen than the eating of apples or the making of a pie" (64).

smaller scale and quicker execution made it much more affordable (232). The qualities associated with watercolor paintings around this time included small scale, a charming effect, and a “sketchy and atmospheric” style, as well as “intimacy, informality, simplicity, and inherent suggestiveness” (Cleveland 235). A review of the seventeenth annual exhibition of the New York Water-Color Society commented, for instance:

No wonder that people like water-colors; they are for the most part so cheerful and light-hearted, so brilliant, and apparently so easily done. The same person who admires the labor expended on an oil-painting will value a water-color for qualities directly the opposite, as if water-colors were specially intended to register passing phases of nature in landscape views and marines, to note pretty things, or report humorous and sportive scenes into which human beings and animals enter. (“The Water-Colors” 5)

Yet Cleveland has also identified the watercolor mode as a “nexus between radical art and popular appeal,” especially from 1878 on, as artists like Frank J. Currier and Winslow Homer began to make innovative and controversial submissions to the American Watercolor Society’s exhibitions (236).

Jewett’s reflections on her own work registered the aesthetic limitations of the “sketchy” watercolor style, rather than its more avant-garde dimension. The author, as well as her critics, was preoccupied with the issue of smallness in relation to her work, in terms of both her preference for the sketch and her contribution to the canon.<sup>86</sup> Jewett wrote to Horace Scudder in 1873: “I always write impulsively—very fast and without much plan” (Matthiessen 44). Referencing William Dean Howells’ criticism that she “did not make more of” her story “The Shore House,” Jewett continued:

But I don’t believe I could write a long story as he suggested, and you advise me in this last letter. In the first place I have no dramatic talent. The story would have no plot. I should have to fill it out with descriptions of character and meditations. It

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<sup>86</sup> As Michael Davitt Bell has queried: “And what about the bizarre but persistent critical interest in the *size* of Jewett’s place in the canon?” (“Gender and American Realism in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” in *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs*, ed. June Howard [New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.]

seems to me I can furnish the theatre, and show you the actors, and the scenery, and the audience, but there is never any play!...I am certain I could not write one of the usual magazine stories. If the editors will take the sketchy kind and people like to read them, is not it as well to do that and do it successfully as to make hopeless efforts to achieve something in another line which runs much higher? (Matthiessen 45-46).

The view Jewett expressed here both construed her own “sketchy” work as fundamentally lacking the dramatic action of the “usual magazine stories” and characterized that kind of writing as residing in another “line” than her own—a line that is aesthetically “higher” due to its display of “dramatic talent.”<sup>87</sup>

Exemplifying Jewett’s preoccupation with the relative size of her literary accomplishments is a letter she wrote to Annie Fields on 12 October 1890: “I do so like [Charles Egbert] Craddock, who takes time, who is lost to sight, to memory dear, and writes a good big Harper’s story.” Jewett, referring to herself in the third person, claims that while she writes, her “French ancestry comes to the fore, and makes her nibble all round her stories like a mouse. They used to be as long as yardsticks, they are now as long as spools, and they will soon be the size of old-fashioned peppermints” (*Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* 81). Jewett’s own assessment of her work process and product not only raised the question of scale, but framed her “nibbling” and “peppermints” in contrast to Murfree’s “good big” stories—implying that there was a correlation between Murfree’s being “lost to sight” and her ability to write a “good big Harper’s story.”

Jewett’s assessment of Murfree as “lost to sight” echoed what many critics interpreted as

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<sup>87</sup> Jewett’s view of her writing as “sketchy” is significant, since the sketch was one of the signal forms of the nineteenth century in both the literary and visual arts. Kristie Hamilton has described the sketch as a “suggestive yet incomplete” form (*America’s Sketchbook* 6) that was, “by definition, in-process and unfinished, a record of scenes as yet unmediated by artifice” (66)—thus highlighting the mutual interdependence of diminution, incompleteness, and directness of readerly access to regionalists writers’ raw materials. In the fine arts, too, the plein-air sketch was perceived prior to the nineteenth century as a merely preparatory form—a study that would ultimately engender a finished studio picture—rather than as a finished product, an end in itself. For these reasons, literary sketches and small-scale watercolors came to be correlated with qualities such as freshness and spontaneity.

Murfree's excessive attachment to the visual. Bill Brown has pointed out that Jewett's choice of the peppermint as a descriptor fit with her tendency to privilege the senses of taste and smell over that of sight: "Rather than concluding with the image of a fragile object that one admires always from a slight distance, [Jewett] offers an object that must be consumed physically, and not so much seen as touched and tasted—the sense of taste, like that of smell, in fact denying size as an important determinant, giving access to something like what Bachelard calls the vastness of the miniature. As the peppermint in your mouth gets smaller and smaller, the taste gets bigger" (221; n.10). For Jewett, the incorporation of smells and tastes was a more intimate process than that of sight; experiencing phenomena through these senses also opened up the possibility of inverting micro- and macrocosmic scales—conveying not only the vastness of the miniature but the miniaturization of the vast.

The human attachments which formed Jewett's primary interest and objects of inversion are both facilitated by and reflected in the natural landscape of *Pointed Firs*. "There was something about the coast town of Dunnet Landing," Jewett's narrator mused on her approach to the shore, "that made it seem more attractive than other maritime villages of eastern Maine. Perhaps it was the simple fact of acquaintance with that neighborhood which made it so attaching, and gave such interest to the rocky shore and dark woods, and the few houses which seemed to be securely wedged and tree-nailed in among the ledges by the Landing" (3). The prevailing sense conveyed by these opening sentences is one of attachment, security, and (literal) rootedness; the human additions to the landscape, the houses, are "securely wedged and tree-nailed in"; the area's specialness lies in an ineffable "attaching" quality. The "rocky shore and dark woods"

seem initially threatening, but Jewett quickly defuses any potential threat in her description of the tree-nailed houses—an image that suggests the beneficial interconnectedness of human and natural environments, or what Karen Georgi calls “natural domestication” (233).

Jewett explored the relationship between landscapes and human intimacies throughout *Pointed Firs*. At the novel’s opening, Jewett positioned both the natural and human landscapes of Dunnet Landing as unchanging facets of the Maine coastline: “a lover of Dunnet Landing returned to find the unchanged shores of the pointed firs, the same quaintness of the village with its elaborate conventionalities: all that mixture of remoteness and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization of which her childish dreams had told” (3). Jewett’s disdain for such “childish certainty” was evident in the narrator’s thoughts during her walk with William on Green Island:

At the end [of a large piece of rock], near the woods, we could climb up on it and look down all over the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in,—that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give. (47-8)

This seemingly unbounded view prompted William to comment proudly, “There ain’t no such view in the world, I expect,” and though the narrator “hastened to speak [a] heartfelt tribute of praise” and “loved to have him value his native heath,” she also found it “impossible not to feel as if an untraveled boy had spoken” (48). Mrs. Todd’s comment that William, her brother, “never had mother’s snap and power o’ seein’ things just as they be” (50) further undermined William’s observations about the landscape of Dunnet Landing. While Jewett’s narrator regarded William’s view of the landscape as insular, she also experienced it as seductive; on the approach to Green Island, she reflected that

“one could not help wishing to be a citizen of such a complete and tiny continent and home of fisherfolk” (40). Though she found fault with William’s perspective, the narrator (and, by extension, Jewett) also found its sense of inverted completeness compelling. This suggests an ambivalence about the significance of the landscape, as the narrator both desired to share William’s perspective and to distance herself from it. In this instance, Jewett critiqued as narrow and limited the expansive, Cole-esque view. This apparently unbounded perspective may be accompanied and undercut by a bound worldview; Jewett encoded her assessment of Dunnet Landing’s cultural losses into this exchange that centers on issues of vision and landscape.

Elsewhere in *Pointed Firs*, Jewett continued this oscillation between the expansive, un-hedged-in view and the extreme close-up. Not surprisingly, she linked the far-off horizon with seamanship: “At sea there is nothing to be seen close by, and this has its counterpart in a sailor’s character, in the large and brave and patient traits that are developed” (50-1). Elsewhere in the narrative, particularly in the narrator’s conversations with Captain Littlepage and Elijah Tilley, the broad horizons of seamanship were linked with cosmopolitanism, the expansion of the community’s cultural horizons. Captain Littlepage bemoaned the decline of the shipping trade, reflecting that it widened people’s horizons not only geographically, but also intellectually and experientially. William’s eye may not have been hedged in from his vantage point atop Green Island, but the narrator’s own perspective and her exchanges with former seafarers make it clear that the “tiny continent” of Dunnet Landing is diminished, a shadow of its former cosmopolitan self (albeit an appealing shadow).



Though she sometimes romanticizes broad horizons, Jewett tends to jettison them in favor of close-up views. After describing the “far-off look that sought the horizon” (50) in the eyes of Mrs. Todd’s mother in an old daguerreotype, the narrator and Mrs. Todd walked to a “lonely place . . . above some rocky cliffs where the deep sea broke with a great noise, though the wind was down and the water looked quiet a little way from shore” (51). Jewett then progressively contracts this expansive view to focus on details nearer at hand: “Among the grass grew such pennyroyal as the rest of the world could not provide. There was a fine fragrance in the air as we gathered it sprig by sprig and stepped along carefully, and Mrs. Todd pressed her aromatic nosegay between her hands and offered it to me again and again” (51). Jewett begins with the view to which seafaring families are accustomed—they “are always watching for distant sails or the first loom of the land” (51)—and proceeds to describe a Maine seascape from atop a cliff, the pennyroyal that grows there, and finally the uses to which that pennyroyal is put. The pennyroyal nosegay is proffered between Mrs. Todd and the narrator, who muses, “I felt that we were friends now since she had brought me to this place” (51). It is the exchange of pennyroyal, a tangible part of the natural landscape, rather than the seascape view, that creates this bond. It is also significant that the pennyroyal is a locally specific plant; Mrs. Todd proclaims that “there’s no such pennyr’yal as this in the state of Maine. It’s the right pattern of the plant, and all the rest I ever see is but an imitation” (51). It is not any pennyroyal, but the only *real* pennyroyal, that translates into a sense of intimacy between the two women. Having one’s view hedged in can, in short, be a good thing: the minute can also contain multitudes, forge connections, yield up the real.

While Jewett idealizes the broad horizons of the seafarer, her idyllic descriptions of Maine landscapes are also associated with disconnected men. One day, “[t]he early morning breeze was still blowing, and the warm, sunshiny air was of some ethereal northern sort, with a cool freshness as it came over new-fallen snow. The world was filled with a fragrance of fir-balsam and the faintest flavor of seaweed from the ledges, bare and brown at low tide in the little harbor” (94). Immediately following this moment, however, the narrator sees “William Blackett’s escaping sail already far from land,” and she observes that “Captain Littlepage was sitting behind his closed window as I passed by, watching for some one who never came. I tried to speak to him, but he did not see me. There was a patient look on the old man’s face, as if the world were a great mistake and he had nobody with whom to speak his own language or find companionship” (94). These sentences, which end the chapter, deflate the perfection of the morning scenery and its sense of expansiveness (the world was filled with the scent of fir-balsam) by associating it with William’s insularity and Captain Littlepage’s lack of touch with reality. The situations of these two isolated men contrast markedly with the connections forged between the narrator and Mrs. Todd, and with the “constant interest and intercourse that had linked the far island and these scattered farms into a golden chain of love and dependence” (97). As he gazes out over the landscape, Captain Littlepage quotes *Paradise Lost*—“A happy, rural seat of various views”—yet for him, those various views fail to translate into mutual affection or to coalesce into any coherent, meaningful whole. Thus, Jewett’s engagement with the landscape of Dunnet Landing is more complex than her initial description of its “unchanged shores” suggests. Jewett’s strategy of visual inversion in relation to the landscape is expressed by this statement in

*Pointed Firs*: “When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person” (3).

Jewett’s use of landscape in *A Marsh Island*, which did not convey scalar inversion, contrasts markedly with her later, more sophisticated writing. Classical perspective undergirded both Jewett’s landscape descriptions and Mr. Dale’s paintings of the local landscape. Visitors to Jewett’s “pleasant Sussex County town,” for instance, “saw a familiar row of willows and a foreground of pasture, broken here and there by gray rocks, while beyond a tide river the marshes seemed to stretch away to the end of the world (3). Here we have a view with a clear foreground (willows, pasture), middle ground (tide river) and background, which resonates with Cole’s and Cooper’s panopticism: the “end of the world” seems within the field of vision. Another instance of this panoptic vision occurred when Mr. Dale

...looked along delightful vistas between their rows [of fruit trees], and when he had followed the hillside a short distance he discovered, as he turned to look behind him, a view of the farmhouse roofs and chimneys against the willows, with a far distance of shore and sea and clouds beyond, which appeared to him of inestimable beauty and value (65).

Again, Jewett has framed an unproblematic progression from foreground to middle ground to background, and it is this conventional perspective that the painter lauds as beautiful and valuable.

A wide, low country stretched away northward and eastward, with some pale blue hills on its horizon. The marshes looked as if the land had been raveled out into the sea, for the tide creeks and inlets were brimful of water, and some gulls were flashing their wings in the sunlight, as if they were rejoiced at the sight of the sinking and conquered shore. The far-away dunes of white sand were bewildering to look at, and their shadows were purple even at that distance. One might be thankful that he had risen early that morning, and had climbed a hill to see the world. (66)

The “raveling” of the land into the sea presents an intriguing visual possibility, but it is not developed further; neither is the sense of bewilderment induced by the dunes. Jewett backs away from any exploration of sensory disorientation, instead furnishing us once again with an unproblematic experience of a panoramic view (if not an unproblematic view): the climbing of a hill to see the world.

At one point in *A Marsh Island*, Jewett opens up the possibility for inversion of scale, yet does not pursue it: as Mr. Dale approaches the Owens’ homestead, we learn that “[t]he nearer he approached, the more picturesque and enticing he thought the farm” (11). In other words, as he comes closer, more details become visually available, and those details both make this “image” more picturesque and produce a sense of pleasure; ultimately, for instance, he can see that “a straight plume of smoke was going up from one of the chimneys, most supper-like in its suggestion” (11). The continuation of a classical approach to landscape description is evident in *A Marsh Island* and its critical reception. Reviews of *A Marsh Island* pinpointed the book’s use of foregrounds and backgrounds as one of its virtues and praised in particular the use of landscapes as backgrounds. “Perhaps the chief charm of [*A Marsh Island*],” wrote one reviewer, “is its serene atmosphere, the delightful description of foregrounds and backgrounds, of cloud and water and meadowland, in which the pleasant little pastoral drama is played” (“Recent Fiction” 12). Another reviewer referenced the landscape descriptions in *A Marsh Island* as “the background against which the figures stand” (“A Marsh Island” 191).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Scalar inversion is not wholly absent from Jewett’s early work, however, if one does not focus exclusively on landscape. For instance, in *Deephaven*, the narrator and Kate manage to take an intense interest in “what to other eyes is unflavored dullness”: “It is wonderful, the romance and tragedy and adventure which one may find in a quiet, old-fashioned country town” (37). The two visitors discover—or

In the last pages of *Pointed Firs*, by contrast, Jewett reverses the assumption that physical proximity, being close to something in the foreground, yields more visual information. From the hill near the schoolhouse, the narrator takes her final look at Dunnet Landing and Green Island before boarding the steamer, and she catches her last glimpse of Mrs. Todd. “At such a distance,” the narrator reflects,

one can feel the large, positive qualities that control a character. Close at hand, Mrs. Todd seemed able and warm-hearted and quite absorbed in her bustling industries, but her distant figure looked mateless and appealing, with something about it that was strangely self-possessed and mysterious. (138)

The fact that Mrs. Todd appears “strangely self-possessed and mysterious” suggests that there is something sacrificed in proximity, which reveals Mrs. Todd’s ableness and warm-heartedness and absorption in her cultivation of herbs but conceals other “large, positive qualities” that are essential to her character. While these qualities remain sketchy for Jewett’s reader, it is clear that the narrator experiences them, and that her sense of increased knowledge of Mrs. Todd in this way is a direct result of the increased physical distance between them. Unlike Mr. Dale’s approach to the farm, which provides him with an increase in visual data, the narrator’s distance from Mrs. Todd gives her *more* information about her friend, not less. When Mrs. Todd brings the narrator to Green Island, distance is no barrier to precise vision; from “far at sea,” Mrs. Todd can identify her mother’s crops, and even discerns that “Mother’s late potatoes looks backward; ain’t had enough rain so far” (36-37). This telescopic vision is aided by memory and an emotional attachment to the landscape under observation.

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create—grand narratives in a town in which, following the catastrophic decline of the shipping trade, “[t]here was no excitement about anything” (55).

### 3. Murfree's moons

In his commentary on Mary Murfree's collection of stories *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1885), Richard Cary notes: "Everyone has had his little joke about 'Mary's moon,' as her mother dubbed it; but most reviewers condemn it as a meretricious stage prop" (48). A persistent criticism of Murfree's writing has been that she, as one nineteenth-century reviewer put it, "works her moon too hard" ("Recent American Fiction" 123)—that her lengthy descriptions of the Tennessee mountains are distracting and irrelevant. What such commentators implied—or stated outright—was that Murfree was a one-trick pony who, in Isabella Harris's words, "lugs in description by the ears...because she has never recovered from the awe of a summer visitor at the scenery around her" (Cary 46). Others have rationalized Murfree's landscape digressions by claiming "that the descriptions are somehow relevant to the story—that they serve thematically or symbolically to further plot, develop character, or establish a mood" (Marshall 64). Yet Murfree's mountainous landscapes and atmospheric effects rarely revealed characters' interiority or set a tone that relates in any meaningful way to plot. The sheer frequency and repetitiveness of her landscape descriptions—their "cloying profusion," as one reviewer phrased it ("Talk about New Books" 842)—exceed and impede the imperatives of narrative.

In what follows, I reframe this contested aspect of Murfree's style by asserting that she was not "lost to sight," to borrow Jewett's phrase, but was envisioning and representing landscape in a visual idiom her previous critics have overlooked. To one particularly disgruntled critic's complaint that Murfree's writing is "full of sound and color but signifying nothing of importance" ("Talk about New Books" 843), I would

reply that her renderings of landscape were in fact literary expressions of destabilized visual fields that aligned with shifting understandings of perception in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and that prefigured Paul Cézanne's radical experiments with scale, perspective, and color in landscape painting. In his critical biography of Murfree, Cary commented that "the microcosm that Mary Murfree carved out of the living rock of Tennessee was an incongruous composite" (37). This incongruity arose, in part, from inversions of visual scale in her landscape descriptions: not the inversion of micro- and macrocosmic scales as in Jewett's work, but instead the reversal of foregrounds and backgrounds. Mary's moons, mists, and mountains, which should remain relegated to the background, disconcertingly take over her prose's foreground, while her characters recede into the distance.

Murfree also crafted distorted relationships between foreground and background elements *within* her landscape representations, thereby creating a destabilized and disorienting visual field. For this reason, Murfree's is most productively understood not only within the generic fold of regionalism, I want to suggest, but also in the context of nineteenth-century visual technologies as constitutive elements of literary form. In "Drifting Down Lost Creek," Murfree writes:

The great red sun dropped slowly behind the purple mountains; and the full golden moon rose above the corn-field that lay on the eastern slope, and hung there between the dark woods on either hand; and the blades caught the light, and tossed with burnished flashes into the night; and the great ghastly trees assumed a ghostly whiteness; and the mystic writing laid on the landscape below had the aspect of an uninterpreted portent. (46)

The "mystic writing" of Murfree's landscapes, what none of her prior critics have discerned, is their scalar inversion, their flattening effect, their occasional play with abstraction—all aesthetic moves that Cézanne would develop to their fullest potential in

his late landscape paintings. Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics have rightly recognized Murfree's work as pictorial and attempted to make sense of her writing by aligning it with familiar painterly genres and techniques—such as chiaroscuro, oil painting, Rembrandesque tableaux, and impressionism.<sup>89</sup> However, Murfree's landscapes are best understood as literary expressions of inverted figure and ground on both formal and thematic levels.

Murfree does, indeed, work her moon hard. Part of what reviewers were responding to in Murfree's writing, I believe, was their expectation that landscape function as a "ground"—a subordinate backdrop to character and plot development. In his discussion of predominant technologies of vision and "constructions of optical experience" throughout the nineteenth century, Jonathan Crary expresses the problem of figure and ground through the viewing experiences associated with the panorama and the stereoscope. "What is lost in both panorama and stereoscope," he writes, "is the possibility not only of a classical figure/ground relationship, but also of consistent and coherent relations of distance between image and observer" (*S of P* 295). While the panorama permanently activates peripheral vision, Crary points out, the stereoscope

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<sup>89</sup> Rather than aligning with what Henry James' character Locksley describes in *A Landscape Painter* (1866) as the "brightness and freshness" of "a clever English water-color" (25), Murfree's work was frequently described in terms of the techniques and effects of oil painting. In "Recent English and American Fiction" (*Atlantic Monthly* 69.415 [May 1892]), a reviewer comments: "Whoever has read 'In the 'Stranger People's' Country' attentively—and the book demands close attention—has seen a succession of masterly paintings, and is almost as much impressed by color, by light and shade, as if his very organs of sight had rested upon canvas and pigments" (694-95). Murfree's writing was compared in particular to the work of painters who were known for their use of chiaroscuro. An 1884 review ("An American Story Writer," *Atlantic Monthly* 54.321 [July 1884]) describes a scene from the story "Old Sledge at the Settlement" as "highly imaginative, yet as realistically graphic as one of Spagnoletto's paintings. Indeed, we are constantly reminded of the pictorial art by the effects which Mr. Craddock evolves from the use of words, from his sense of color and his keen vision of the significant traits in his physical surroundings" (132). An 1889 commentator on the differences between the serial and book forms of *The Despot of Broomsedge Cove* asserts: "The scenes which will linger longest in the memory are those that involve several persons, like those at the forge, at Eli Strobe's, and that wonderful Rembrandt interior of the barn where the vigilantes meet. It is in such scenes that Miss Murfree shows her marvelous capacity for what, to borrow from another art, we must call her light and shade" ("Recent American Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* 64.381 [July 1889]: 122).



excludes the periphery—it is all figure, no ground. Henri Maldiney commented that Cézanne’s work evinced another sort of incoherence, “an inversion and contamination of near and far...The sky collapses along with the earth in a whirling. Man is no longer a center and space not a place. There is no longer a *there*” (Crary, *SP* 340). By dwelling on landscapes at such length, Murfree’s prose reverses—or, in Maldiney’s formulation, contaminates—the “correct” *formal* proportion between character and landscape, figure and ground. One reviewer proclaimed that “there are too many of these descriptive digressions. It is nothing else than by consummate skill that the thread of the story is not snapped in twain a hundred times. The scenic effects are so real, so panoramic, that the figures, the actors, might be dwarfed, even obscured, at times” (“Not Namby-Pamby” 5). With few exceptions, Murfree’s mountaineers were types, as Richard Cary has noted—not merely types, but “[a] massed background of types” (54). Her writing creates and explores a liminal space in which man is present but not quite a “center”; landscape functions only partially and inconsistently as setting, objective correlative, or symbol. In addition, critics frequently (and, I would argue, mistakenly) described her landscapes as “panoramic.”

In the eight stories that comprise *In the Tennessee Mountains*, the moon appears sixty-eight times. The moon surfaces in nearly all Murfree’s novels and stories; it is protean, taking the form of a “golden chalice” (LC 25), a “silver globe” (OSS 89), or a “yellow suffusion” (SPC 345). Murfree’s prolonged descriptions of both lunar splendors and mountainous landscapes, which are not uncommonly paragraphs or even pages long, disrupt the development of plot and character, which often seem like the neglected

stepchildren of her prose. In the first chapter of *The Prophet of the Great Smoky*

*Mountains* (1885), for instance, Murfree juxtaposes a sunset view with an interior scene:

The sun, its yellow blaze burned out, and now a sphere of smouldering fire, was dropping down behind Chilhowee, royally purple, richly dark. Wings were in the air and every instinct was homeward. An eagle, with a shadow skurrying [sic] through the valley like some forlorn Icarus that might not soar, swept high over the landscape. Above all rose the great “bald,” still splendidly illumined with the red glamour of the sunset, and holding its uncovered head so loftily against the sky that it might seem it had bared its brow before the majesty of heaven.

When the “men folks,” great, gaunt, bearded, jeans-clad fellows, stood in the shed-room and gazed at the splintered door upon the floor, it was difficult to judge what was the prevailing sentiment, so dawdling, so uncommunicative, so inexpressive of gesture, were they. (30)

The object at which the “men folks” gazed is not, as one might suspect based on the preceding paragraph, the stupendous sunset, or the iconic soaring eagle, but rather a humble splintered door. This passage is representative of Murfree’s use of landscape, in that the descriptions of landscape and characters are separate rather than integrated; the shift from landscape description to character is abrupt; and if her characters are frequently “uncommunicative” and “inexpressive,” Murfree’s landscapes are anything but. Rapturous odes to the Great Smokies are often juxtaposed with such prosaic, cursory scenes.

The moon punctuates the plot and dialogue of this same chapter of *Prophet* in an odd, disjointed way. Murfree writes that “one might look out and see the new moon, in the similitude of a silver boat, sailing down the western skies, off the headlands of Chilhowee” (*PGSM* 31). One character makes the mistake of pausing “for a moment” following an outraged monologue, and the moon asserts itself again: “The moon, still in the similitude of a silver boat, swung at anchor in a deep indentation in the summit of Chilhowee that looked like some lonely pine-girt bay; what strange, mysterious fancies

did it land from its cargo of sentiments and superstitions and uncanny influences!” (33). The moon occasionally serves a practical, if hackneyed, purpose, such as when the barrel of a rifle that is to be used for a murder catches the moonlight (*PGSM* 34). More often, however, spellbound descriptions of the moon and landscape simply alternate with perfunctory displays of mountain dialect and the details of plot and character. The first chapter of *Prophet* concludes with the moon-boat, which “had weighed anchor at last, and dropped down behind the mountain summit, leaving the bay with a melancholy waning suffusion of light, and the night very dark” (34).

“Mary’s moons” are jarring in part because they bear only the most tenuous relationship to her characters’ inner lives. One of Murfree’s main authorial strategies is to underscore her characters’ lack of aesthetic appreciation for the splendors of her nocturnal scenes; one suspects they would not understand the terms in which she describes those scenes, either. Her novel *In the Clouds* (1886), presents such a disjunction: “All the world was sunk in gloom, till gradually a rayonnant heralding halo, of a pallid and lustrous green, appeared above the deeply purple summits; in its midst the yellow moon slowly revealed itself, and with a visible tremulousness rose solemnly into the ascendancy of the night” (57). The mountaineer Mink Lorey gathers from this scene not aesthetic pleasure or a sense of communion with nature, but rather a resolutely practical piece of information: “[The moon] was high in the sky when Mink Lorey rode along the wild mountain ways. More than once he looked up earnestly at it, not under the spell of lunar splendors, but with a prosaic calculation of the hour” (*ITC* 57). Murfree routinely highlights her characters’ disconnection from—or their inability to “read”—the natural landscape; this lack of alignment between landscape and character has the effect

of shoring up an alliance between narrator and reader. Murfree's overblown diction is juxtaposed here with a character whose "wild mountain ways" give him no means of comprehending the picture she has just painted. As Lorey's "wandering attention returned to those sterner heights close at hand," for instance, "their inexpressible gravity, their significant solemnity, which he could not apprehend, which baffled every instinct of his limited nature, smote upon him" (*ITC* 6). The misalignment of character and landscape both contributes to the disjointed feel of the narrative and creates a sense that one of Murfree's objectives is to communicate with an ideal reader who is capable of responding to her moon's aesthetic pull, unlike the mountaineer whose "limited nature" permits him only to use the moon to tell time.<sup>90</sup>

Murfree's critics have read her landscapes correctly only unwittingly, in their complaints about her style. Fred Pattee's virulent critique, for instance, encapsulated the frustrations many of her readers and reviewers have also articulated. Though he denigrated the quality of Murfree's work and mistakenly described her writing as impressionistic, Pattee recognized her formative role in a "new conception of landscape": "It was this impressionistic manner of presenting materials, this wild mountain haze over all things, this new conception of landscape, that made Charles Egbert Craddock so important a figure in the fiction of the 'eighties in America...the landscape is used

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<sup>90</sup> At moments like this, Murfree seems to set her characters off for detached inspection, making it clear that their perception is different from—and considerably less enlightened than—ours. This has contributed to Appalachian studies scholars' distaste for her work—as Emily Satterwhite notes, their relegation of Murfree to the "outsider" camp in the insider/outsider binary of regionalism. From "Drifting Down Lost Creek": [Evander] often turned and surveyed the vast landscape with a hard, callous glance of worldly utility. He saw only weather signs. The language of the mountains was a dead language. Oh, how should he read the poem that the opalescent mist traced in an illuminated text along the dark, gigantic growths of Pine Mountain!" (*ITM* 78). Cynthia Ware, in "Drifting Down Lost Creek," has slightly more insight: "She only experienced a vague, miserable wonder that she should have perceptions beyond [the other characters'] range of vision, should be susceptible of emotions which they could never share" (*ITM* 54).

symbolically, impressionistically; it becomes in reality the leading character in the tale, the ruling motif in the plot” (273). While the art critic Charles De Kay pronounced that there was little connection between the titles and content of Henry Muhrman’s watercolors (Cleveland 88), Pattee made the opposite claim for Murfree’s work:

In all of her fiction, materials come first. Her titles are usually expressed in terms of landscape: ‘T’other Mounting,’ ‘Lonesome Cove,’ ‘Sunrise Rock,’ ‘Chilhowee,’ ‘Harrison’s Cove,’ ‘Witch-Face Mountain’—the setting first and then the action...Manner—art, plot—is secondary. She begins with landscape, a landscape always in some vague extreme of beauty, or vastness, or wildness: she introduces characters to match, sometimes whole neighborhood clans, each individual minutely described—impressionistically—in terms of his uniqueness; and then rambles on and on until the reader loses himself in an atmosphere that at last is like nothing he has ever known before. She has created a new world and it all seems curiously real at first, and yet a second reading in cold blood is very apt to reveal an artificiality that is repellent. It is a trick of style we feel, not an actuality, that has captured us. (*Development of the American Short Story* 273)

Pattee, in his frustration, came closest of all Murfree’s commentators to capturing the pictorial spirit of her prose. She does privilege setting over action; she does create an “atmosphere” that is alien to the reader; and the realism of her prose is deceptive, for there is an artificiality, a “trick of style,” in her inversions. My recuperation of Murfree makes central the seeming artificiality of her radical use of landscape as foreground. “Miss Murfree’s uncouth, Anglo-Saxon, unpoetic mountaineers,” wrote one particularly offended reviewer of *The Despot of Broomsedge Cove*, “fail to fit into a landscape which, albeit native to them, becomes under her treatment of it purely personal and subjective” (“Talk about New Books” 842). Murfree’s characters fail to fit into the landscape because it is the landscape, not the people, who are three-dimensional, who occupy the foreground of her stories. And it is true that her treatment of landscape is “purely personal and subjective,” because that is precisely the result of registering the

inconstancies of perception. When it came to vision in the late nineteenth century, universality was no longer the point.

Murfree not only reversed the relative importance of character and landscape, but also “contaminated” classical perspective in her treatment of the relationship between foreground and background *within* her landscapes. “What infinite lengths of elastic distances,” Murfree writes in *Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*, “stretched between that quivering trumpet-flower by the fence and the azure heights which its scarlet horn might almost seem to cover” (30). The concept of “elastic distances” undermines what Crary describes as “consistent and coherent relations of distance between image and observer”; this elasticity opens up the possibility for spatial relationships among the various elements of Murfree’s landscape to change from moment to moment, thereby destabilizing the relationship between her “picture” and the viewer/reader. “Only by patiently looking at local areas of the [visual] field,” Crary writes, “does one begin to see its unknown texture, its strangeness, the unfathomable relations of one part of it to another, the uncertainty of how these local elements interact in a dynamic field” (*SP* 297). These “unfathomable relations” organize themselves in Murfree’s landscape, as if of their own accord; our perspective is initially one in which a single flower in the foreground occludes a mountain range in the background, but Murfree leaves this near-far relationship open and flexible, creating what Carol Armstrong calls a “hallucinatory indeterminacy of scale” (48). In addition to the “elastic distances,” the trumpet-flower “might almost seem” to block out the mountains—three layers of conditional remove from a definitive statement about the relationship between foreground and background.

The transformations and inconsistencies of the natural landscape that arise from the disjunctive nature of visual experience are thus an integral feature of Murfree's prose style. Specifically, the "hallucinatory" quality of scale in her landscape descriptions reveals indeterminacies of form, distance, and color, as well the shifting relations among these various elements of the visual field. "The dreary mists were gathering themselves together to coalesce in some uncomprehended symmetry of vaporous form," Murfree writes in *The Despot of Broomsedge Cove*. "Dissimilar, as of a different texture and an alien origin, was the vague gray haze, hardly discernible, rising from the dank earth, and suspended only a few feet above. Suddenly the sun smote it, and how it glistened, now amethystine, now pearly, now a gilded gauze!" (DBC 45). Nothing in this haze- and mist-cloaked landscape is solid or fixed; the only form is a nebulous one, a "vaporous form," the "symmetry" of which is incomprehensible. Murfree's writing tracks the various permutations of optical experience: the transformation of haze from amethystine (a favorite word of hers) to pearly to a "gilded gauze"; its disconcerting and mysterious "alien origin."

Viewed through this alternate lens of foreground-background inversion, Murfree's moons and landscapes become more than irrelevant digressions that hamper plot, and Cary's characterization of her work as an "incongruous composite" takes on a new resonance. A theme to which Murfree returns often, for example, concerns the limitations of the panoptic vision upon which landscape representation so often depends. At the beginning of *In the Clouds*, Murfree constructs a landscape that highlights these limitations:

...the varying tints were sublimated to blue in the distance; then through every charmed gradation of ethereal azure the ranges faded into the invisible spaces that we

wot not of. There was something strangely overwhelming in the stupendous expanse of the landscape. It abashed the widest liberties of fancy. Somehow it disconcerted all past experience, all previous prejudice, all credence in other conditions of life. The fact was visibly presented to the eye that the world is made of mountains. (2)

Here, the “invisible spaces” that exceed the range of human vision suggest is an awareness of space beyond the edges of this picture’s “frame,” an awareness that is not present in the panorama’s unproblematic embrace of periphery. The “stupendous expanse” of the landscape produces not a sense of mastery over the natural environment, but rather overwhelms and disconcerts the viewer. Yve-Alain Bois has commented that Cézanne’s work expresses “doubt about vision’s own capacity to give us access to depth” (34); the above passage from *In the Clouds* conveys a similar doubt. The last two sentences indicate that the direct experience of the landscape strips away preconditioned expectations of what a landscape *should* be—a panorama framed by a window, perhaps; an image in which the relationship among foreground, middle ground, and background is fixed—and instead conveys the destabilized perceptual experience of viewing a landscape in the present moment. The sensory experience produced by viewing this landscape runs contrary to rational thought, which is what makes sense of “past experience” and produces “credence in other conditions of life.” As Michael Leja has argued, some of Thomas Eakins’ paintings that have been hailed by art historians for their verisimilitude display, in fact, a “conflict between seeing and knowing” (68). Rational thought tells us that the world is not made of mountains; in suspending or “disconcerting” our perception, however, Murfree emphasizes a *visual* and experiential, rather than a rational, fact.

This dissonance between seeing and knowing recurs at the end of the very first paragraph of *The Despot of Broomsedge Cove*: “So august is this mountain scheme that it



fills all the visible world with its massive multitudinous presence; still stretching out into the dim blue distances an infinite perspective of peak and range and lateral spur, till one may hardly believe that the fancy does not juggle with the fact” (1). The perceptual experience of “infinite perspective” produces not a panoptic view, but rather a sense that “fact” and “fancy” are no longer fixed categories; when the world appears to be made of mountains, new visual data disrupts preconceived beliefs about what the world is supposed to look like.

Murfree’s work thus fits with the models of subjective experience developed in the 1880s-1890s, which suggested that “consciousness is not a seamless sphere where a world is fully self-present to a subject but rather a disjunct space in which contents move between zones of varying levels of clarity and awareness, vagueness and responsiveness” (Crary, *SP* 294). More so than Cézanne’s landscape paintings, Crary suggests, Murfree’s work demonstrates a “residual allegiance to older models of synthesis and structure,” but it also displays “internal disjunctions” that “engage the vacillations and the heterogeneous character of human perception” (*SP* 330). There are certainly times when classical perspective undergirds Murfree’s landscape descriptions; there are also moments when the concept of “elastic distance” alters, undermines, or reorganizes that fixed, stable perspective. There are instances of both modes of seeing in *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*: “As they [the Cayce family’s visitors] seated themselves around the table, more than one looked back over his shoulder at the open window, in which was framed, as motionless as a painted picture, the vast perspectives of the endless blue ranges and the great vaulted sky, not more blue, with all the broad, still, brilliant noontide upon it” (*PGSM* 20). This view, explicitly referred to several pages later as a

“great panorama” (23), adheres to classical pictorial perspective: the frozenness of the view, its framing by the window, and its “vast perspectives” all mark its kinship with the panoptic mode of the traditional panoramic landscape painting. This view possesses, to borrow Crary’s phrase, “a premade integrity” (*SP* 301)—it is not contingent upon the viewer’s powers of perception.

Likewise, in “Drifting Down Lost Creek,” Murfree presents a landscape in classical perspective:

[The melancholy pines] were laden with snow before [Cynthia] heard aught of [Evander]. Beneath them, instead of the dusky vistas the summer had explored, were long reaches of ghastly white undulations, whence the boles rose dark and drear. The Cumberland range, bleak and bare, with its leafless trees and frowning cliffs, stretched out long, parallel spurs, one above another, one beyond another, tier upon tier, till they appeared to meet in one distant level line somewhat grayer than the gray sky, somewhat more desolate of aspect than all the rest of the desolate world. (31)

The spurs that stretch out “one above another, one beyond another” indicate not only height but depth, receding toward a distant horizon. However, there are also landscapes that jettison this integrity and highlight the “internal disjunctions” that inhere in the image. “Twilight was slipping down on the Big Smoky,” Murfree writes; “Definiteness was annihilated, and distance a suggestion. Mountain forms lay darkened along the horizon, still flushed with the sunset. Eskaqua Cove had abysmal suggestions, and the ravines were vague glooms. Fireflies were aflicker in the woods. There might be a star, outpost of the night” (*PGSM* 59). Here, both form and distance are relative. We witness the collapse of definiteness into “suggestion,” a state of flux in which little is certain. Even the objects in this landscape are called into question (“there *might* be a star”).

These moments in which Murfree unsettles classical perspective are highlighted by their juxtaposition or combination with landscape descriptions that adhere to such

perspectival codes. Murfree refers repeatedly to parallelism and “symmetry” in her landscapes (as in the “uncomprehended symmetry of vaporous form” in *Broomsedge Cove*). In “Drifting Down Lost Creek,” she describes a “vast array of sunny parallel mountains, converging and converging, till they seemed to meet far away in one long, level line, so ideally blue that it looked less like earth than heaven” (7). In this same story, the “long, level line” of the horizon recurs, such as when one character “stood silently gazing at that long, level blue line, in which the converging mountains met,—so delicately azure, so ethereally suggestive, that it seemed to him like the Promised Land that Moses viewed” (*ITM* 15). Murfree frequently invokes the parallel aspects of her mountain ranges: in “The Dancin’ Party at Harrison’s Cove,” there are “parallel lines of mountains” (*ITM* 215), and in “Lost Creek,” the mountains appear as “parallel spurs” (31). Yet she also reveals the elusive and changeable nature of such neatly fixed forms under sustained observation. In “The ‘Harnt’ That Walks Chilhowee,” for example:

The panorama spread out before them showed misty and dreamy among the delicate spiral wreaths of smoke. But was that gossamer-like illusion, lying upon the far horizon, the magic of nicotian, or the vague presence of distant heights? As ridge after ridge came down from the sky in ever-graduating shades of intenser blue, Peter Giles might have told you that this parallel system of enchantment was only “the mountings:” [sic] that here was Foxy, and there was Big Injun, and still beyond was another, which he had “hearn tell ran sprang up into Virginny.” (*ITM* 284)

Murfree labels this view a panorama but immediately undercuts the sense of mastery and control associated with that mode. While the traditional panorama is illusionistic, Murfree reveals the panorama as itself an illusion: the distant forms that other, untutored eyes might recognize as simply “the mountings” are, under Murfree’s gaze, a “gossamer-like illusion.” The mountains are, to the eye, simply “ever-graduating shades” of color. Murfree’s oxymoronic phrase “parallel system of enchantment” encapsulates her

approach to landscape representation: elements of classical perspective tenaciously remain, but those elements are eroded, replaced, and modified by the enchantments of subjective perception. Murfree creates an anti-panoptic panorama, revising the form to reflect late-nineteenth-century models of subjectivity.

Another way that Murfree subverts the conventions of the traditional panorama is by stripping away its three-dimensional, *trompe l'oeil* quality, producing instead flattened landscape forms. In *Broomsedge Cove*, for instance,

Far away the gray mountains appeared akin to the dun cloud-masses they touched as if range and peak were piled one above the other almost to the zenith. Certain fascinating outlines of the distance, familiars of the fair weather, were withdrawn beneath this lowering sky, and strangely enough the landscape seemed still complete and real without them, as if they had been merely some fine illusions of hope, some figment of a poetic mood, painted in tender tints upon an inconstant horizon. Close at hand the heights loomed grim and darkly definite. (376)

The spatial relation between the mountains—“as if range and peak were piled one above the other”—creates a flattening effect, suggesting a two-dimensional picture plane rather than an illusionistic one that conveys depth in order to draw viewers into the scene. The phrase “inconstant horizon” sums up this distinction; in the three-dimensional landscape rendered in classical perspective, the horizon is the ultimate focal point to which our eyes are drawn—one that often carries symbolic significance, as it does in Cole’s *The Oxbow*. Murfree’s “sunny parallel mountains” that converge “till they seemed to meet far away in one long, level line” follow this model. In the flattened landscape, however, the horizon either disappears or is, to borrow Murfree’s term, “inconstant.” Depth of the visual field is re-established at the end of the above passage from *Broomsedge Cove* (if the heights can loom “close at hand,” there must be objects in the background), but the bulk of the

passage deals in indeterminate shapes: “certain fascinating outlines,” “fine illusions of hope,” “some figment of a poetic mood.”

“As Bret Harte depicts the rough life of the diggers,” one reviewer wrote, “so Miss Murfree paints that of Tennessee mountaineers...She uses a larger canvas and a broader point than any of her contemporaries. Animate and inanimate life is painted on a grander scale...she fills her pictures with life, and throws figures and incidents into strong relief against impressive backgrounds of wild mountain scenery” (“American Fiction” 531). The notion that Murfree’s mountain scenery was simply an “impressive background” for her “figures and incidents” is belied by her use of landscape. In “The ‘Harnt’ That Walks Chilhowee,” for instance, Murfree constructed the *landscape* as the three-dimensional element of the scene:

The moon’s idealizing glamour had left no trace of the uncouthness of the place which the daylight revealed; the little log house, the great overhanging chestnut-oaks, the jagged precipice before the door, the vague outlines of the distant ranges, all suffused with a magic sheen, might have seemed a stupendous alto-rilievo in silver repoussé. (*ITM* 305)

Murfree’s conceptualization of the mountains in terms of alto-rilievo and repoussé—techniques for producing designs in relief through chiseling stone or hammering metal, respectively—both imply that the mountainous landscape is three-dimensional, that it extends outward toward the viewer/reader, rather than creating an illusionistic sense of depth that draws us in toward a distant horizon. Carol Armstrong has discovered in Cézanne’s landscapes an “inversion of the old perspectival space of the painting-as-window, so that ‘central’ and ‘culminating points,’ of which there are as many as there are objects, push outward, toward us, rather than inward, toward a single vanishing point; the ‘horizon’ is here where we are, rather than at the back of or behind the painting” (56).

While some critics praised the highly visual nature of Murfree's prose,<sup>91</sup> most readers became impatient at the "arrest of action by the insertion of pauses and rests" ("Recent American Fiction" 123)—pauses and rests that were virtually always spent describing the natural landscape. If we follow the musical analogy posited by this reviewer of *Broomsedge Cove*, Murfree was regarded as composing pieces that were more silence than sound.<sup>92</sup> Another reviewer comments on the strain Murfree's style places upon the reader's attention, which "is likely to resolve itself into a series of less and less regretful skips through night-scenes, rain-storms, 'skies splendidly aflare,' and mountain-sides covered with 'a monotony of summer greenth,' in order to get at the real and human interests upon which these pretty things are huddled in cloying profusion." The reader's "mind grows fatigued with the constant jerks to which [Murfree's] manipulation of the picturesque subjects it" ("Talk About New Books" 842). For these dissatisfied reviewers, Murfree's depictions of the natural world produced, paradoxically, a loss of naturalness in terms of narrative. Ironically, while critics were perturbed by Murfree's subordination of the narrative energy of plot to the visual energy of "gorgeous but irrelevant scene-painting" ("Talk About New Books" 842), her representation of disintegrative vision often conveys a more "natural" perspective, from a physiological standpoint, than the carefully-calibrated panoptic views of Cooper and Irving.

The prevailing frustration with Murfree's predilection for "pauses and rests" indicates that her prose signaled the passage of time in ways that were unfamiliar to her

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<sup>91</sup> A reviewer of *The Despot of Broomsedge Cove*, for instance, praised Murfree's "power for painting" and "capacity for composition." See "Recent American Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1889): 123.

<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, this particular reviewer defends Murfree's frequent divergence from narrative into landscape descriptions: "Miss Murfree, it must be observed, does not often interrupt a swift movement; her pauses are between two separate movements, and she lingers over the setting of her picture when she is getting her figures into position" (123). The ambivalence about her style is a recurrent element of nineteenth-century reactions to Murfree's work.

contemporaries. “Many of the scenic pictures,” one critic complained, “are thrust into the action in such a way as to interrupt the movement of the story without in the least intensifying the effect,” and Murfree “forgets that her art is essentially dramatic” (“Recent Novels by Women” 266). Murfree’s stories were not without narrative progression, but that progression is non-linear, and the temporal dimension of Murfree’s landscapes expands and contracts in non-traditional ways to accommodate the unpredictable permutations of her visual fields. In *Broomsedge Cove*, Murfree demonstrated the inconstant and protean nature of visual *and* temporal experience in her description of a wintry forest and atmosphere:

[The leaves] were thickly massed on the ground now, and most of the boughs were bare and wintry, and swayed, black with moisture, against the clouds, that in their silent shifting illustrated an infinite gradation of neutral tints between pearl and purple. Yet they seemed still, these clouds, so imperceptibly did each evolution develop from the previous presentments of vapor. (376)

While she begins, simply enough, with markers of the season—masses of fallen leaves, bare tree limbs—Murfree also paints a picture that is both still and continually shifting in imperceptible or barely perceptible ways. The “infinite gradation” of color points to the imperceptible transitions from one color to the next, and the clouds’ “silent shifting” produces both a sense of stillness—a landscape tableau frozen in time and space—and a sense of constant evolution. Time, in Murfree’s prose, is sometimes stretched out, sometimes compressed; this results in a general sense of temporal flattening that interferes with a reader’s apprehension of narrative progression. Leja writes of Eakins’ *The Champion Single Sculls* (1871) that because Eakins incorporated details that diverge from realism in an attempt to “enhance narration and convey information,” viewers must “imagine the time of the painting as simultaneously slowed and accelerated” (63). While

Murfree's departures from realism do not "enhance narration" in the sense of advancing plot, the disruption of time occurs in her work as well.

It is largely through her use of color that Murfree creates a visual field that simultaneously encompasses both fixity and ceaseless change. In *In the "Stranger People's" Country*, she describes a barley field "of a delicate, fluctuating green, with those fine undulations like quicksilver running over it." She continues: "Sometimes the shadow of a cloud came, a thing swiftly scudding and noiseless too, and the green, hitherto held in indefinite solution, was precipitated into a pure emerald tint" (196). The indefiniteness of the field's "fluctuating" tints is transformed, for a moment at least, into a single, pure color. Elsewhere, however, Murfree describes the opposite process, the impossibility of such purity: "...enmeshed elusive enchantments of color, which vanished before the steady gaze seeking to grade them as blue or amber or green, and to fix their status in the spectrum. A strange pause seemed to hold the world. Only the pines breathed faintly" (*SPC* 65). This may be Murfree's most outright expression of the effects of sustained looking that Crary describes; the "steady gaze" that seeks to assign colors to their rightful places in the spectrum—to "fix" them—is destined to fail, for that very gaze is what both creates and sustains the "enmeshed elusive enchantments of color." The urge to classify what one sees catalyzes an act of vanishing, an evaporation, and produces a picture that is more Cézannean than Claudéan. While the colors are elusive, however, "a strange pause seemed to hold the world." This enmeshment of fluidity and fixity resonates with Crary's assertion that Cézanne's late work (from the 1890s onward) "is a radical rethinking of the nature of *synthesis*," where synthesis signifies "the rhythmic coexistence of radically heterogeneous and temporally dispersed



elements” (*SP* 297). The visual idiom of Murfree’s writing, like that of Cézanne’s late landscapes but to a lesser degree, entails not “holding together the contents of the perceived world,” but rather “seeks to enter into its ceaseless moments of destabilization.” The sustained gaze “crosses over not into reverie or dissociation but into a more intensive re-creation of a subjective interface with the world” (*SP* 297). Within this emergent perceptual system, a strange pause can hold the world while, at the same time, any attempt to impose stasis on the fluctuations of color is unsuccessful.

Yve-Alain Bois has noted that in the work of Cézanne and others, “it is up to color to supplement the insufficiencies of linear perspective”—to create depth and allay the viewer’s anxiety at the collapse of distance (34). In *In the Clouds*, we experience such an act of chromatic supplementation: “The white summits of the mountains were imposed against [the sky] with a distinctness that nullified distance; even down their slopes, beyond the limits of the snowfall, the polychromatic vestiges of autumn were visible, with no crudity of color in these sharp contrasts, but with a soft blending of effect” (155). One would expect this idealized picture—snow-capped mountains imposed against a “luminously blue” sky—to produce a sense of relative distance. Paradoxically, however, the distinct imposition of mountains upon sky is precisely what “nullified distance.” Color then takes over, compensating for (or at least supplementing) the instability of distance, the refusal of the three-dimensional illusionism conferred by classical perspective. The nullification of distance suggests a two-dimensional picture, an embrace of the image as a flat surface—the mountains are imposed on the sky much like paper cutouts.

The distinction that art historians have drawn between vision and touch provides a useful framework for the labored prose in which Murfree delivers her landscape descriptions, especially in relation to Irving's panoptic landscapes. As Susan Sidlauskas explains, "transparency has been conceived historically as the inheritance of the classical tradition (that which delivered easily recognizable things), whereas [opacity] came to stand for modernity—that is, the kind of painting that called attention to itself rather than to the thing depicted" (107).<sup>93</sup> Richard Shiff gives Cézanne's London *Bathers* (ca. 1894-1905) as an example of a composition that privileges touch: "the smaller elements of Cézanne's great composition retain a sense of fragmented touch because they fail to blend into the order of panoramic vision" (144; Fig. 11). Bridget Alsdorf has noted that Cézanne's compositions "threaten to overpower the referentiality of his forms at times" (320). Certain elements of Cézanne's canvas, in other words, do not adhere to "proper" perspective and/or proportion, thus rendering traces of the painter's method hypervisible.

Bois's assertion that color "supplement[s] the insufficiencies of linear perspective" on Cézanne's canvases might easily be applied to Murfree's habit of waxing poetic about the palette of the mountains, but there are also times when vision fails utterly and other senses must compensate. The result is that assumed differences in color are narratively processed as differences in density, form, or mass: color becomes tangible and is felt as much as seen: "The summit line of the distant mountains was indistinguishable in the gloom. The landscape was all benighted. The presence of invisible trees close at hand was perceptible only to some fine sense of the differing degrees of density in the

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<sup>93</sup> There are complications and challenges to this neat historical binarism—see, for instance, Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in Hal Foster, ed. *Vision and Visuality* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988): 3-23. For instance: "Thus the abstraction of artistic form from any substantive content, which is part of the clichéd history of twentieth-century modernism, was already prepared by the perspectival revolution five centuries earlier" (8-9).

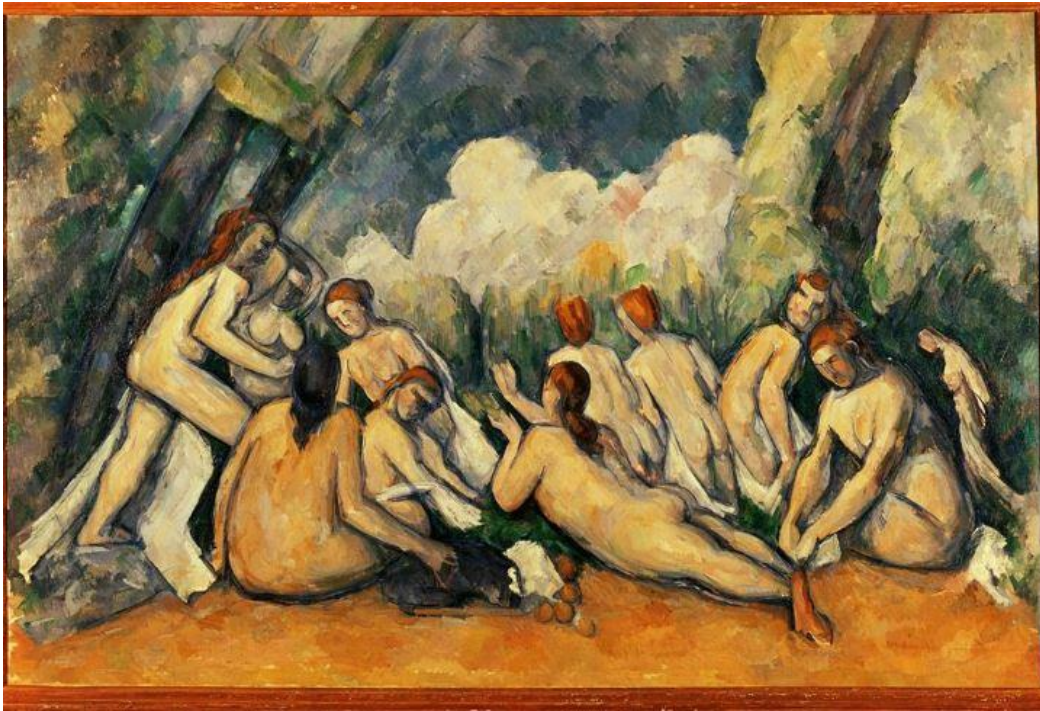


Fig. 11: Paul Cézanne, *Large Bathers II*. ca. 1894-1905. Oil on canvas. Great Britain, National Gallery.

blackness” (*ITC* 203). Reviewers noted Murfree’s tendency to render tangible the intangible aspects of the natural world; for instance, a review of *The Young Mountaineers* (a young adults’ book) comments that “[t]he mists in ‘Way Down in Poor Valley’ talk to us like living creatures and become tangible” (“The Young Mountaineers” 301). Similarly, *In the Clouds* once again delivers qualities of color and light in the tangible terms of touch: “A red cow shambled along at a clumsy run amidst the pervasive duskiness, that was rather felt than seen” (323). Shiff has written that “[w]hen we allude to pictures as if consisting of touches, we enter a dense metaphorical field between vision and touch, eye and hand” (134); Murfree’s synaesthetic, palpable color straddles that same boundary. The invisible elements of the landscape are among those that “fail to

blend into the order of panoramic vision” (Shiff 144). At such moments, Murfree deconstructs optical experience, only to reconstruct it as tactile experience.

The opacity of Murfree’s prose stems from her reversal of foreground (character) and background (landscape), as well as from her repetition of landscape elements in a way that approaches abstraction. On both counts, nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentaries reflected a sense of Murfree’s writing as a labored surface—a collection of literary “touches.” While Murfree was hailed by some critics for her realistic portrayal of the Tennessee mountains, the oft-expressed frustration of readers and reviewers at the frequency and length of those landscape descriptions also points to this opaque quality in her writing. Much as a Cézanne composition resisted illusionism through paintwork, making itself known as a collection of “touches” upon canvas rather than a window onto something beyond itself, Murfree’s recurrent, repetitive descriptions of the natural environment challenged the limits of literary transparency. While some of Murfree’s devotees (and occasionally Murfree herself) cleaved to the notion that her landscapes opened onto something beyond themselves—a character’s interiority, a meditation on the harsh life of the mountaineers—“Murfree’s moon” was less a setting or background than a prolonged enactment of the opacity of representation, a demonstration of the capacity of literary “touches” to disrupt narrative. Through repetition, artifice, and the accumulation of generalities (and moons), Murfree’s landscapes retain their materiality as *descriptions* of landscapes—as word-paintings.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> In “Interpreting Cézanne: Immanence in Gertrude Stein’s First Landscape Play, *Lend a Hand or Four Religions* (*Modernism/modernity* 19.1 [Jan. 2012]: 73-93), Linda Voris argues that Gertrude Stein, who claimed to be writing under the sign of Cézanne, imitated the style of his late landscapes in order to convey “a palpable quality of immanence in which events can appear to transpire in the play with an eerie suspension of time” (75). This suggests another point of connection between Murfree and the genealogy of modernism.

Henry James argued that “[t]o do little things instead of big *may* be a derogation” (*Picture and Text* 77). Despite regionalism’s reputation for doing little things, I have tried to show that the use of panoramic and panoptic conventions by writers such as Cooper and Irving set the stage for Jewett’s and Murfree’s inversions of visual scale. Jewett’s inversions of micro- and macrocosmic scales deflate the power invested in broad views by the panoptic mode of vision; Murfree’s inversion of foregrounds and backgrounds resonate with perceptual distortions and provide a glimpse into Cézanne’s method in his late landscapes. Michael Leja writes of Eakins that his “efforts to make illusionistic painting a vehicle for nonapparent truths often led him away from mimesis toward semiotic adventurousness” (75). Jewett and Murfree, too, mobilized complex discourses of vision to convey “nonapparent truths” through literary form.

For the past several decades, the problem of vision has itself been “nonapparent” to critics of regionalism and local color writing. Our tendency to focus on the nation has prevented us from recognizing nineteenth-century local color’s interrelations with “the dynamic reciprocity of perceptual fixation and disintegration” (Crary, *SP* 332). Shifting our focus to the mutually-constitutive modes of integrative and disintegrative vision further complicates both this focus on the nation and any attempt to attribute a fly-in-amber quality to local color writing. The visual bent of late-nineteenth-century local color both drew from and, in all probability, contributed to the internationally-circulating aesthetic preoccupations of *modernité*. While some nineteenth-century critics may have dismissed such preoccupations as “full of sound and color but signifying nothing of importance,” as one reviewer wrote of Mary Murfree, local colorists’ appeals to their readers’ senses—especially, but not exclusively, sight—reveal both the genre’s stylistic

affinities with modernist visual and performing arts and its responses to the pressures of modernity. The centrifugal pull and rootedness of integrative vision strained for the containment of those disorienting pressures, while the centripetal force of disintegrative vision pointed the way toward American literary modernism.

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